

December 24, 2009
Scarboro United Church
Calgary AB
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Tonight we do not focus on the gifts we will receive in the morning, wonderful as they may be. Tonight we focus on the gift we were given over 2000 years ago. With a newborn's cry a light shines in the darkness of oppressive empire and oppressive religious authorities. This significant yet small light is not a new light but a door which opens into the darkness of our present life. Slowly at first and then with sudden intensity as light floods into the darkest corners of our lives. Light which has shone since the dawn of creation. Light shining into our lives helping us to see both the good around us and the dangers before us that we might walk with more confidence – confidence means with-faith. And as we walk with faith, with confidence, toward the light we are drawn closer to each other. The light leads us and calls us as we walk together into and through the uncertainties of the future. In this light we know we are not alone, we have each other and God is with us. Thanks be to God.

This light is God's gift to us this and every Christmas. As we discover that God is not just in the past, not distant and aloof, but with us now in whatever darkness we find ourselves.

You know the darkness that surrounds you, keeps you afraid and anxious, keeps you awake in the night, sits like a lump in your stomach, claws at your throat making it hard to breathe. You know the darkness in your life.

Christmas tells us that God is there, in that dark, stable-like corner of your heart waiting to be born in the night. Calling us. Leading us. Drawing us into a future of right relations in all our relations.

Can you think of any better present than to know that God is with you in your present, no matter how dark your present is? The question is always, what are you going to do with this great gift?

Do you put away with all the decorations? Pack it up with the manger scenes, carefully wrapping the baby up with its parents, boxing it and storing it away on a shelf so it will remain unchanged until next year? Another year older and still a baby.

Do you return this gift, exchanging it, perhaps, a better, more comfortable gift? A gift that asks nothing and promises no disturbing changes? That keeps us stable?

Do you re-gift it? The web tells me that re-gifting is finding increasing acceptability. Some etiquette authorities accept re-gifting if done properly, but only if done properly. I went online to Regifting 101 to find out how to do it right.

Strange as it may seem, when it comes to the present we receive from God, re-gifting is where it's at! Reading through the rules I found they apply when we regift our faith.

There is etiquette involved! There are questions you must ask. There are appropriate responses to keep us from becoming foolish regifters. Appropriate responses that will help us become wise regifters.

Is the gift regifiable? Never regift handmade or one-of-a-kind items. Signed books and monogrammed or engraved items are off-limits. Some people have the idea that faith only comes through their own religion, their own denomination, their

own particular spiritual practice. They mistakenly assume that what speaks to them personally will do the same for everybody. Not wise.

What condition is it in? Only new, unopened gifts in good condition should be considered for regifting. Never give partially used-up gift cards. Don't give items that you have owned for a long time. A general rule of thumb: if you have to dust it off, it is not regifiable. Too often we try to give away a faith that has been sitting on a shelf since grade school. If you haven't examined your faith since then you might think twice or more before explaining it to someone else and then putting it back on the same shelf. Better still you might want to look for some ways and means of developing a mature, adult faith. There are opportunities listed in the bulletin!

Is this gift going to work? Successful regifters use common sense. If you are going to regift, be sure you know who gave you the item, so you don't return something to the original giver. Sometimes people think that faith is all about loving God or Jesus and that is that. If you are passing on God's loving gifts back to God or Jesus, it's like refusing the gift. Consider re-gifting God's gifts to other creatures like your family and friends, or even your enemies.

Do you have good intentions? Don't just give a gift to give a gift. Be sure that the recipient will appreciate the gift. Too often religious people believe that what others need is their kind of faith without ever asking what the real problem is. Sometimes those around you just need a friend, a companion on the journey, some light in their darkness. They don't always, I suspect rarely, want to be converted to your way of seeing things.

How does it look? When it comes to gift-giving, go for show! No re-used wrapping paper! Good people giving from the depths of their hearts and their faith are often reluctant to say why they are giving. We are often so humble about our faith that the recipient cannot even guess that it comes from God's love for us.

Can you handle it? If you don't plan to announce the gift as a regift, ask yourself if you can keep the secret. Never feel guilty about regifting once you've done it. If you have tried to give away the love you have received and it is unwelcome or rejected there is no need for guilt or anger. You've tried. Maybe there will be another opportunity.

Have you considered your options? An unwanted gift could be welcome somewhere else. It is also an option to suck it up and keep an unwanted gift—after all, it was a gift and you might just need it.

So let's take a closer look at the gift before we try to shelve it, get rid of it or re-gift it – and before we stretch this metaphor way too far!

Isaiah, Jeremiah and the other Prophets of old tell us about what to look for. In a nutshell this is what they tell us:

When we are overwhelmed and scattered
God will restore us
When life has lost its meaning
God will give us new vision
New vision gives us hope
Hope transforms the present
When we are desolate and overcome with grief
God will bring us merriment and dancing

When we are in the depths of despair
God will lead us to joy

That is God's promise, God's gift – and it is some gift!
The promise is not that we will never be defeated
The promise is that we always have a future

The promise is not that we will never suffer
The promise is that we will never be alone

The promise is not that we can never fail
The promise is that there will always be a new beginning

The promise is not that we will never be hurt
The promise is that we will always be loved

The promise is not that we will never do wrong
The promise is that we will always be forgiven

The promise is not that life will be wonderful
The promise is that we will always have hope

We have a vision of hope for this congregation. It is a vision of worship, outreach, social justice and the arts – all connected, yet all aspects of our work together here, our past, our present and our future.

We have a vision of hope for a renewed building – either by renovation or some re-building, especially of our annex – to enable us to better fulfill our vision of vibrant worship, compassionate outreach, effective work for social justice, and expressions of our spirit and spirituality in and through sacred arts. If you are not already part of this work, this ministry you are welcome to join in and participate to the fullest of your ability.

We have been growing a good thing here for more than 80 years and with your help our light will grow brighter.

Gerhard Frost writes in *Seasons of a Lifetime*: "If I am asked what are my grounds for hope, this is my answer: LIGHT is lord over darkness. TRUTH is lord over falsehood. LIFE is lord over death. Of all the facts I daily live with, there is none more comforting than this: If I have two rooms one dark, the other light and I open the door between them, the dark room becomes lighter without the light one becoming darker. I know this is no headline, but it's a marvelous footnote, and God comforts me in that."

Or, as the Bible says, "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."

More than just a baby in a manger, Christmas is about the birth of light which grows into every corner of our darkness, bring gifts of peace in our tumult, hope in our despair, joy in our misery and love in our loneliness. The light of Christ shines on.