Sunday, December 10, 2000
PRICELESS GIFTS (No. 1 in a Series)
Luke 3:1-6

Usually, when we think of giving someone a gift during this season, we have in mind something material — a book, a bracelet, a ring, a toy, a basket of fruit, a set of golf clubs, a watch, or some other object. Children, grandchildren, and even adults create lists of possible gifts so that potential givers can be guided in their purchases.

Today and for the next two Sundays, I am going to suggest some other kinds of gifts you can give, ones that might not be on your Christmas list. The first of these gifts is the "gift of the past." The Bible story read earlier about John the Baptist underscores the value of this gift. When he came out of the wilderness to tell the people of his time about the coming Messiah, God's greatest gift, he began by reminding them of their history, of their gifts from the past, and how the coming gift of God's Son was all part of the plan. He quoted from the prophet Isaiah: "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." By recalling the past, he was helping them prepare for the future. He was saying, this gift of God's Son is connected to our past, to our present, and to the future. We'll come back to this later.

Now let's examine why giving and receiving the gift of the past is so important, especially in our time and during this Advent season. Last Sunday morning during the 10:30 worship service, I had the privilege of teaching this year's Confirmation Class of 9th-grade young people. My assignment was to help them understand the history of First-Plymouth Congregational Church — in other words, to talk about the past. I began by explaining when this congregation was organized and how it got its name. But before I did this, I asked them various questions: Why were they given their names? Was it a family name? Was there some other significance attached to it? Did they know the history of their name?

I could also have asked them but didn't: What was the maiden name of your grandmother on your father's side? Or what is your mother's maiden name? What was the maiden name of your grandmother on your mother's side? Do you know at least some of your family's history? Are you aware of any of the gifts of the past you have already received?

There are many people today who do not have much knowledge of their family's history. Many of us meet friends and are introduced to them as Bill, Mary, or David. What does it mean that they have little sense of their connection to a whole network of relatives and to a particular history? They have not been given the gift of the past and therefore do not appreciate the value of being connected. A knowledge and appreciation of the past, especially of our family connections, can give us strength for the present and hope for the future.

In this season of gift-giving, I am suggesting that one of the most important gifts you can give to those around you is the gift of the past, and part of that gift is to know something of the background of your life — where you have come from, who some of your ancestors were, and how they came to be. The next two sermons in this series will deal with giving the gift of the future and the gift of the present. It's up to you to be creative and to determine how to give these gifts.

In addition to the gift of the past as far as our families are concerned, we also need the gift of the past if we are to truly appreciate our Christian faith. That's why seasons such as Advent and Christmas are so important. We look back and recall the history of our faith. We remember that Jesus was born a Jew and came out of a long history of the Jewish people.

The gift of the past is so important that in the Gospel of Matthew, the first book in the New Testament, before we are told anything about Jesus and how he was born, we are given a family tree of Jesus which traces his ancestry all the way back to Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament.

Over and over again in the Old Testament, the people of Israel are told to learn and remember their past and tell their children so the stories can be passed on to the next generations. Listen to the command in the Old Testament: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God is one God, and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart, and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise."

"When your children ask you in the time to come, 'What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the ordinances which the Lord your God has commanded you?' Then you shall say to your children, 'We were slaves in Egypt and God brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand, and God brought us out from there, and God commanded us to do all these things.'"

In the same way, you can give the gift of the past to those around you. What makes this gift so priceless?

First of all, the gift of the past gives us a sense of perspective. We know we are not the first or the last, but each one of us is part of a long line of people — all connected, all part of God's creation. In our Christian faith, the gift of the past reminds us that Jesus did not appear out of nowhere, but that in addition to being the son of Mary and Joseph, he came out of a long history of people with an abiding faith in one God who made all things good.

There is solid evidence that Jesus received from his parents and from the synagogue school a history of his people. He came to know about Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob, Leah, and Rachel, and he came to know Moses and the prophets. He learned of the sacrifices of his people, their hardships, and their triumphs. He learned of God's covenant with them.

When we receive the gift of the past, we also learn that many of our ancestors sacrificed a great deal so that we could be here. And before we humans came on the scene, other parts of creation were here millions of years preparing the way. We are but a small speck in the history of creation, and yet we are connected with all of creation and made in the image of God.

Thornton Wilder expressed this beautifully when he gave the following as the address of one of his characters in his play Our Town:

Jane Crofut; Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County, New Hampshire; The United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; The Earth; The Solar System; The Milky Way; The Universe; The Mind of God.

Secondly, the gift of the past is priceless because it helps us understand and live in the present. We are all molded by the events of the past and by what we remember — where we come from, where our roots are, what's happened to us and to our ancestors. It is my belief that most of us do not tell our children and grandchildren the important stories about our own ancestors and about the ancestors in our Christian faith, and we are the poorer for it. Maybe most of us do not know the stories ourselves.

Some years ago, my wife Rowena and I took our oldest daughter and her then two children with us on a trip to Southwest Missouri, where Rowena grew up and where most of her relatives lived and many died and are buried. We went to the little town where Rowena was born and tried to locate the house in which she was born. We visited some of the towns and farms where she grew up and went to the church in Springfield. We also went to old country cemeteries and found the graves of Rowena's grandparents, her uncles, aunts, and others. We had previously done this kind of trip for my side of the family, all of whom grew up in rural eastern Missouri. There too, we visited the cemeteries and homesteads, and we found the house where I was born and visited the schools I attended. It's part of giving the gift of the past to those we love.

Many years ago, before my mother died, one of my sisters got our mother to recall the birth of each of her seven children, the problems with the births, and what she remembered about each one of us as a baby and young child. My sister wrote all of this down, and now we have it — a beautiful gift from the past.

I can imagine Mary, the mother of Jesus, telling her son about his birth in Bethlehem, the story of the shepherds and the Wise Men, the escape to Egypt, and other memories of his childhood and growing up. These gifts of the past were crucial in helping to shape his life in the present and to give him a sense of his future.

There are many people who have no sense or knowledge of the past and try to live only in the present. Then a person lacks a sense of being connected. We all want answers to the questions: Where did I come from? Who am I? These are all answers the past helps shape.

Unfortunately, there are some people who try to live only in the past, and others who have difficulty letting go of the past, especially unpleasant experiences. Then they miss the present and have little hope for the future. However, giving and receiving the gift of the past can help us live fully in the present and look forward with hope to the future.

There are others who make the mistake of trying to live mostly in the future. The person who continually says, "I can hardly wait until tomorrow," or "until next week," or "next month," or "until I am sixteen," is always so focused on the future that he or she misses the joy of the present and has no use for or learns nothing from the past.

We need all three dimensions to make our lives complete — the gifts of the past which guide us in living fully in the present and give us hope for the future. I think a strong case can be made that the persons in our society who most often get into serious trouble are those who have little sense of their roots. They have not been given the gift of the past. Because of this, they do not feel connected and have no foundation on which to build.

When we have a sense of heritage, when we have been given the gift of the past, then we find strength to live in the present. For example, I believe that a large part of the strength and dignity of the German people who came here from Russia, many of whom still live in Lincoln,

comes from the fact that they have worked hard at remembering the past so they continue to give it as a gift to those who follow them.

So it should be for all of us as families and as Christians. In this season of Advent, we are reminded again of our religious past, which begins with Abraham and Sarah in the Old Testament stories and continues on through John the Baptist, through Jesus, and then through the early church.

There are so many gifts from our past. From the Jews, we received the Ten Commandments, our faith in the one God who created us in God's image, and the priceless gift that tomorrow can be better than today — that progress is possible. There are so many priceless gifts we have received from the families that preceded us.

When John the Baptist came to tell the people of his time about the Messiah who was soon to appear, he began by reminding them of their history, of the gifts from the past. This gave them a context in which to receive and appreciate this gift.

We need to know the story of our religious past in addition to that of our own personal family history. From these stories come a sense of place, a sense of belonging, the knowledge that we are connected. It is the gift of the past that gives us our roots, and without roots, we dry up, or the wind comes along and we have no strength to stand.

There is a memorable line in the book Roots by Alex Haley, when Kissy explains to Chicken George why she cannot marry Sam. "Sam wasn't like us," Kissy explains. "Nobody ever told him where he came from, so he didn't have no dream of where he ought to be going."

During this season of Advent, give those you love the gift of the past. Amen.