Christmas Eve 2000
THE SUPREME GIFT

Your life and mine can get out of balance like a tire on our automobile. You can find yourself placing too much emphasis on what are not the most important things in life and too little emphasis on the most important. Sometimes it takes a crisis, a surprise gift, or maybe even a Christmas Eve sermon in the church to help you get a fresh perspective.

A man I know was diagnosed with fast-growing cancer, with a 50/50 chance of recovery following the most aggressive treatment. He told me that this event helped him gain a new perspective on life. He began to re-examine what was most important to him and to his family. He said that many of the things he had stressed so much up to this point in his life now fell away as being insignificant.

A surprise gift can do the same. A couple who had been married for 11 years had always wanted a child but were discouraged because it was doubtful if that gift would ever be part of their lives. Then one day, surprise! She discovered she was pregnant. Eight months later, a healthy baby became an integral part of their lives. This unexpected gift gave them both a completely new perspective on life.

I am convinced that one of the main reasons Christmas is such a popular holiday, even among non-Christians, is that hearing the Christmas story one more time can give one a fresh perspective because it's the story of God's surprising and supreme gift, and it all takes place in such an unexpected way.

Consider again some of the astonishing aspects of the story. Nothing about the Bethlehem event, as it is told in its humble narrative in the New Testament, seems to fit into our idea of important and impressive occasions. I hope Hollywood never makes a movie of the story because the producers and writers would dress it up too much, and in doing so, it would lose its simplicity and therefore its power.

The birth of Jesus took place in a small town, in an out-of-the-way place. The third verse of the Christmas carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem," describes it in its innocence: "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given; so God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven. No one discerns God's coming, but in this world of sin, where yearning souls long to be whole, the dear Christ enters in." Surely, if one of us had been in charge, the giving of the supreme gift would've taken place either in Jerusalem, the religious center, or better still in Rome, the political capital, and it would not have taken place silently but with fanfares and fireworks. From the world's point of view, it is in those kinds of places where the action is.

And who was the mother of this child? She was not a celebrity. No one had ever heard of her outside of her immediate family. She was a devout peasant woman whose ultimate trust was in God.

Where did Jesus grow up? In another small town — Nazareth. Nothing important had ever come out of Nazareth. It had never produced a famous person, a prophet, or anyone recognized as being filled with God's Spirit. It is never even mentioned in the Old Testament, which means it had no notable religious or historical associations. It wasn't much of a location for the growing up of God's supreme gift.

We are told today that in real estate there are three important factors: location, location, location. That might be true in real estate value, but it has nothing to do with the way God works in people's lives and in the world at large. What is holy has nothing to do with location, size, or fame.

As far as we know, only Mary and Joseph were present when Jesus was born. Maybe a local midwife was called; we don't know. It's not important as far as the story is concerned. Maybe some animals were in the stable — the Bible doesn't mention any. Those who first learned of the birth were not the movers and shakers of that day. All we are told is that some shepherds came to the stable later that night.

The powerful of the world — the leaders in politics and religion, the United Press International, the Associated Press, and even CNN — were not notified and didn't cover the story. The Jerusalem Times sent no reporter. Nobody took any notice of what happened that night in Bethlehem. And after all, what possible difference could a baby in a stable make in the world anyway?

The story of Christmas, in its simplicity, can give us a new perspective. God's ways are not necessarily our ways. The Sacred and the Holy appear in unusual places and can surprise us. The Holy One does not come to us in the garb of a conqueror, but in an incredible act of humility, God enters our world in the same way that each one of us entered this world — in the birth of an infant.

The supreme gift of the Holy in our midst can turn our world upside down. Halford Luccock tells a story of accidentally bumping into a woman who was Christmas shopping and loaded down with packages. The bump caused all her packages to scatter around her. While he was trying to help her pick up the packages, she said, "Oh, I hate Christmas anyway. It turns everything upside down." Luccock answered, "You're right. That is what Christmas was made for." He could've gone on to say, Christmas is about a baby, and that is a baby's chief business — turning things upside down. As those of us who have had children know, a baby in our lives rearranges everything he or she comes into contact with, from the order of who's important in the family to the dishes on the table. A baby in a family divides time into two eras, in the same way as Christmas. There is B.C., which means "before child," and A.D., which means "after deluge."

The central truth of our receiving the supreme gift of God in a human being is that it turns everything upside down.

For example, the Christmas story puts a new value on every person. It reminds each one of us that we are children of God. Human beings are not things to be used. We are not chemical accidents. Everyone is a VIP because you have divine worth.

The supreme gift is good news in a world of bad news. It is light shining in the darkness. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." The further truth is that the darkness will never overcome the light of the world.

The story of Christmas rearranges everything. Jesus said, "The first shall be last, and the last first." He also said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth," whereas we say, "Blessed are the bold and the tough, for that's the only way you can win."

Jesus said, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The world says, “Blessed are the rich in spirit, or those who are rich in any way, for that’s the way to get ahead in the world.”

Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” The world says, “Blessed are those who never cry, for crying shows weakness, and who needs comfort anyway?” He said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied.” The world says, “Blessed are those who forget about righteousness; it’s better to make deals and to get ahead any way you can, for after all, the end justifies the means.”

The story of the supreme gift tells us God operates in a different fashion than we like to believe. The gift turns things upside down and inside out. It gives us a new perspective about ourselves, about others, and about God.

The story of the giving of the supreme gift tells us that there is another and quite extraordinary part of us which is never altogether at home with the everyday necessities of living in this world — with paying bills, going to work, watching television, and filling our lives with other activities. The supreme gift tells us there is more to life, that our lives are filled with eternal longings and hungers; that the sacred and holy are found in ordinary events and yet transcend them. We can sense the Divine within us and within others. We are connected with each other and with all of creation. Life goes on in a new way after this life, and our life in the here and now is only a tiny bit of eternity.

We are like the wild duck in that ancient story — the wild duck that dropped into a barnyard one day for a meal of corn and stayed on for the next, and then the next, until he became a tame duck. But each autumn, when his fellow ducks passed overhead in their migratory flight and called to him, there was a restlessness deep inside of him, and he remembered who he was and what he was made for. That’s something like what the Christmas story is for us each time we hear it. It helps us remember who we are, that there is far more in us than meets the eye, and that our dignity as human beings begins and ends with God. Indeed, the whole creation is holy because God is among us and within us.

This supreme gift of God in a human being is given and received over and over again. Whenever a human being is cherished and nurtured; when anyone is cared for and rescued from despair; when one hand reaches out to help another; when any person is encouraged to know that his or her human worth does not depend on financial success or personal fame, the love of God becomes flesh. What a gift! What a grace! What a miracle!

Tonight there’s nothing any one of us needs to do to receive that supreme gift of love from God. It’s here for us to accept. Accept it with thankfulness and then pass it on to others, and watch the miracle of the Christmas event multiply and spread. Amen.