Sunday, December 24, 2000
PRICELESS GIFTS (No. 3 in a Series)
Luke 2:1-7

"The future's not what it used to be," goes a country music song, and that song has it right. In the first sermon in this series on Priceless Gifts, the subject was giving the gift of the past, which is the gift of faith. The second sermon was on giving the gift of the present, which is always the gift of love. The third sermon in this Advent series on Priceless Gifts has to do with giving the gift of the future, which is the gift of hope. If you are a follower of the Christian way, as taught and lived by Jesus, then you are certain that the future is always filled with hope, even if it doesn't turn out to be exactly what we imagine it to be.

In Advent and Christmas, we celebrate all three of these priceless gifts from God. All are wrapped in swaddling cloths and given to us in the story of the birth of Jesus. He is a gift of the past because of his Jewish heritage and all the gifts we receive through him from that tradition. He is a gift of the present because he is God's love in a human being. He is "Emmanuel," which means God is with us. He is a gift of the future because in his birth, life, death, and resurrection, we are given the gift of hope.

If we are to give the gift of the future, which is the gift of hope, we have to understand this gift which we have received.

The gift of the future, which is based on hope, rests on two basic assumptions in our Christian faith. The first is that we human beings have been created in the image of God and therefore with free will. Each human being is a reflection of God's image, and God's Spirit dwells in each one of us. Individually and collectively, we human beings have free choice. Our lives are the sum of all our choices. Some of the choices we make are wise and beneficial; others are selfish and destructive. This is true for us both individually and collectively.

The bad news is that personally and collectively, the misuse of free will results in the loss of paradise. God's will for us and for creation is that life will be beautiful, but our bad choices frequently make a shambles of this beautiful plan. War, famine, pestilence, and other menaces roam the earth because of these disastrous choices. So, to a certain extent, we live in a fallen world, and it is not the paradise God intends it to be.

The good news is that we can also choose the good, individually and collectively, and often do. Millions of people do good and live helpful lives each day. The longer I live, the more I am aware of the enormous amount of goodwill that is evident in people's lives. The power of good often overcomes the evil. That's the power of God at work in and through us.

The second basic assumption of our Christian faith, which empowers the gift of the future through hope, is that God is love, and the ultimate power of the universe is Divine Love. The energy of the universe, in its creation and its continued development, is the energy of Divine Love. Unfortunately, our wrong choices sometimes take us further and further from seeing and experiencing the power of Divine Love, which is present everywhere.

It is the celebration of such events as Christmas that reminds us that Divine Love was active in the creation and was born into the world one night long ago in Bethlehem in a tiny baby, but that it is born in us and in the world again and again. It is the light of the world that can never be put out. Sometimes the light flickers and grows dim, but it can never be extinguished.

Ann Weems writes in her book Kneeling in Bethlehem:

Christmas comes every time we see God in other persons.
The human and the holy meet in Bethlehem or in Times Square,
For Christmas comes like a golden storm on its way.
Even now it comes in the face of hatred and warring —
No atrocity too terrible to stop it.
No Herod strong enough, no hurt deep enough,
No curse shocking enough, no disaster shattering enough.

For, someone on earth will see the star;
Someone will hear the angel voices;
Someone will run to Bethlehem;
Someone will know peace and goodwill,
And Christ will be born.

It happens over and over again and in some surprising places. This past week, as I was thinking about the gift of the future, which is the gift of hope, I thought of Victor Frankl, a man who never lost hope and gave that gift to so many other people. He died at age 92 on September 2, 1997.

His best-selling book, Man's Search for Meaning, was completed in 1946 and remains one of the most influential books I have ever read. Even though he lost his parents, brother, and pregnant wife in the Nazi concentration camps, and he was a prisoner there himself until the war ended, he left us with some enduring truths which he learned from that experience. The first truth is that we are free to choose our attitude toward our plight, and no one can take that ultimate freedom away from us. A second truth he discovered in his concentration camp experience was that if you have a "why" to live for, you can endure almost any "how."

His little book, Man's Search for Meaning, was reprinted 73 times, translated into 24 languages, and sold more than 10 million copies. A 1991 Library of Congress survey found that it was one of the ten most influential books ever read by general-interest readers.

Frankl said that what helped keep him alive was trying to help his fellow prisoners have hope. That was his "why" for staying alive — service, helping others. By deed and word, he taught his fellow prisoners that it did not matter what they expected from life, but rather what life expected from them. He said, "We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life, daily and hourly." He kept alive by receiving and then giving the gift of the future. The more he gave the gift of the future, which is the gift of hope, the more he received it.

After his death camp experience, he became a practicing psychiatrist, and in his practice, he frequently had to deal with severely depressed patients. He would often pointedly ask such a person, "Why do you not commit suicide?" The answers he received — love of one's children, a talent to be used, or perhaps only fond memories — often were the threads he and his patients tried to weave into a pattern of meaning in a troubled life. They were building the gift of the future with hope as its foundation.

So many people today need the gift of the future, which is always based on hope. This gift is at the center of the Christmas story because it is about the love of God becoming a human being

in the birth of a baby. Every newborn baby is a gift of the future, a sign of hope. That's why we all love Christmas so much. If everyone in the world thought there was no future and had no hope, new babies would not be born.

What then are some specific things we can do in order to receive and give the gift of the future, which is the gift of hope?

First, the gift of the future for Christians is based on two bedrock assumptions, as I mentioned earlier. One, each one of us is created in God's image with free will. We can and do make choices, individually and collectively. The freedom to decide is the one freedom no one can take away. Two, God is love, and the ultimate power in the universe is Divine Love. It can never be extinguished. Therefore, the powers of the universe are for us and not against us. They renew, heal, and restore us. Love always wins in the long run. The birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus proclaim and demonstrate the overwhelming power of this Divine Love.

Second, you give the gift of the future, which is the gift of hope, by investing in personal relationships. Individuals who have friends they love and can depend on, people with whom they have fun and with whom they can work on projects big and small, always have a more positive attitude toward the present and the future. Lonely people are more likely to have little hope for the future. Hope is not singular but grows out of our positive relationships with one another and therefore with God. When you love and care for another person, you are loving God. The way you treat people is the way you treat God.

Third, if you want to receive the gift of hope and give it to others, you need to remember that hope is more than optimism. Someone said, "I used to believe that hope was optimism until I saw the difference." Hope becomes a reality when an individual is ready for hope. Hope is what's still there when all your worst fears have been realized and confronted.

That's what the Apostle Paul was saying in his letter to the Romans. He begins by contradicting our prevalent impression that hope is dependent on hopeful circumstances. Too often our hopefulness is like a thermometer — if the circumstances of life are good, we are hopeful; if things look bad, we lose our hope. But for Paul, at the very point where things look bad, that is where he begins the road to hope.

Here's what he said: "Suffering produces endurance, endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us." He begins with suffering or trouble; from that, we learn endurance, and out of that, we build character, and from that, we win hope.

All of us know that we do not gain endurance from facing easy situations but in adversity. And if we have the endurance to pull through adverse conditions, we build character and become the kind of people who confront even desperate situations with hope. The point is, the Christian faith does not define hope as a mood produced from the favorable aspect of what's going on around us, but as a reality grounded in God's love, which sustains us when we most need it.

Our moods can change like a weather vane, which moves with every change of direction of the wind. One day you are very optimistic; the next day you are gloomy. Some people listen to the news and then decide to be optimistic or pessimistic. "We're headed for a recession." "An economic recovery is on the way."

The daily stock market averages show how easily moods can change. Any upset, or even rumor of an upset, in the political scene or a prediction of bad news can cause the market to rise or fall quickly. Christian hope takes a longer view. It is a deep confidence in God's love and care, which does not go up or down in relation to short-term outward circumstances.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Jeremiah showed the people of Israel what hope is all about. The enemy was at the gate of Jerusalem. The city was about to fall. The people were hungry and sick. Jeremiah himself was in jail. Yet under these conditions, he bought a field as a sign of his confidence that this people, this world, had a future under God. Jeremiah took action. He lived his hope. Every significant thing that has ever been done on this earth was once a hope, and it was a hope that inspired action.

Many of us have faced times of despair or superficial optimism, but neither of these is adequate. Despair by itself can ruin you, and superficial optimism collapses under pressure.

Jeremiah could take the action of buying a field at a time when the future looked bleak because he believed, above all else, in the goodness of God and of God's creation. That being so, the future is never without hope.

Mary, the mother of Jesus, had the same basis for her hope in the future. She expressed her deep faith in God's goodness when she was pregnant. Her statement of faith is called the "Magnificat," because of its opening sentence, "My soul magnifies the Lord."

She knew that with God there are infinite possibilities; therefore, the future is never hopeless. Like her, we can give the gift of hope when we know that God's ultimate purpose in the universe is not finally dependent on us. Certainly, we believe that God wants each one of us to willingly practice love for one another in the same way as God loves us. But we also believe that over the long stretch of history, God's will shall be done — if not by us, then in spite of us. That's the ultimate gift of the future. Amen.