Christmas Eve 2005
GOD'S PERSONAL GIFT

Your life can get out of balance like a tire on your automobile. You may find yourself placing too much emphasis on less important things and too little emphasis on what truly matters. Sometimes it takes an illness, a crisis, a surprise gift, or even a Christmas Eve sermon to help you regain perspective.

A man I know was diagnosed with fast-growing cancer, with only a 50/50 chance of recovery, even after aggressive treatment. He told me that his cancer helped him put his life back into balance. He began to re-examine what was most important to him and his family. He said that many of the things he had once worried about now seemed insignificant.

A surprise gift can have a similar effect. A couple who had been married for 11 years always wanted a child but were discouraged, thinking that dream might never come true. Then, one day, surprise! The wife discovered she was pregnant. Eight months later, a healthy baby became the center of their lives. This surprise gift gave them 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 because the Christmas story is one of God's surprising and personal gift — the gift of Jesus — and it unfolds in such an unexpected way.

Consider some of the astonishing aspects of the story. Nothing about the humble narrative of Christ's birth fits the usual ideas of important and impressive occasions. I hope Hollywood never makes a movie of the story, because they would dress it up too much, and in doing so, it would lose its simplicity and power.

God's personal gift was a baby born in an out-of-the-way place. The third verse of the Christmas hymn captures its innocence beautifully: "How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given. So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of His heaven. No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive Him still, the dear Christ enters in."

Surely, if you had been in charge, God's gift would have arrived either in Jerusalem, the religious center, or in Rome, the political capital, with fanfares and fireworks and coverage by CNN. From the world's point of view, it is in such places where "important" things happen. And who was the mother of God's gift? Certainly not someone Barbara Walters would have considered one of the most fascinating people of the year. No one outside her immediate family had ever heard of her. Mary was a devout peasant woman whose ultimate trust was in God.

Where did God's personal gift grow up? In a small town. No one of importance had ever come from Nazareth. It wasn't even mentioned in the Old Testament, which means it had no notable religious or historical significance. It wasn't much of a location for the upbringing of God's personal gift.

In today's world of real estate, three important factors are location, location, and location. That may apply to property values, but it has nothing to do with the way God works in people's lives or in the world at large. The sacred and holy are not dependent on location, fame, or size.

As far as we know, only Mary and Joseph were present when Jesus was born. Perhaps a local midwife was called — it's not important to the significance of the event. Maybe there were animals in the stable — the Bible doesn't say. The first people to learn of the birth were not the movers and shakers of that day. Only some shepherds, who came to the stable later that night, are mentioned.

Religion and business didn't know about it. The Jerusalem Times sent no reporters. No one took notice of the birth. After all, what significance could a baby born in some out-of-the-way place have?

The simplicity of the Christmas story can give you a new perspective. It can help you regain balance. God's ways are not always your ways. The sacred and holy are revealed in unexpected places, and they can surprise you. God's love, given personally, does not come dressed as a conqueror.

God's personal gift is given with humility — through a baby. God enters this world in the same way you did, as a vulnerable child. God's personal gift can turn your 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, and as he helped her gather them up, she said, "Oh, I hate Christmas anyway! It turns everything upside down." Luccock replied, "You're right. That's exactly what Christmas means." Christmas is about a baby, and anyone who has had a baby knows that babies turn everything upside down. They rearrange everything in your life. A baby divides time into two eras: "BC"—before child — and "AD"—after deluge.

God's personal gift in Jesus turns everything upside down. For example, the Christmas story places new value on every person. It reminds you that you are a child of God — and so is everyone else. Human beings are not objects to be used. You are not a biological accident. Everyone is a VIP because each person has divine worth.

God's personal gift is good news in a world filled with bad news. As the gospel of John describes it: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it." The truth is, the darkness never will overcome the light.

God's personal gift rearranges everything. Jesus said, "The first shall be last, and the last first." He said, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." The world says, "Blessed are the bold and the tough — that's the only way to 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 and in money — that's how you get ahead." Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted." The world says, "Blessed are those who never cry — crying shows weakness." And Jesus 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 — just make deals and get ahead however you can."

God's personal gift shows you that the Spirit of God works in unexpected ways. This gift turns life upside down and inside out. It gives you a new perspective on yourself, others, and God.

Here's another part of that new perspective: God's personal gift in Jesus tells you there's a part of you that is never fully satisfied with the everyday necessities of living — paying bills, going to work, watching TV, accumulating stuff, or filling your life with endless activities. God's gift tells you there is more to life. Your life is filled with eternal longings and hungers. The Holy and the Sacred are found in ordinary events but also transcend them. You can sense the Divine within yourself and others. You are connected to the universe in a deep way. Life goes on in new ways after this life.

You are like the wild duck in the ancient story — the one that dropped into a barnyard for a meal of corn and stayed for the season, and then the next, until it became a tame duck. But each autumn, when his fellow ducks passed overhead on their migratory flight and called to him, there was a restlessness deep inside. He remembered who he was and what he was made for. That's what the Christmas story can do for you — it helps you remember who you are and that there is more to you than meets the eye. Your dignity as a human being begins and ends with God.

God's personal gift in Jesus is given to you and to everyone, over and over again. Whenever a human being is cherished, cared for, or rescued from despair — whenever hands reach out to help others, and when people are reminded that their worth does not depend on their wealth, fame, or background — the love of God becomes personal. What a gift! What grace!

Tonight, there is nothing any one of you needs to do to receive God's personal gift. All you have to do is accept it. Accept it with gratitude, and then pass it on to others. Watch God's gift spread and multiply. Amen.