Christmas Eve 2005

GOD'S PERSONAL GIFT

Your life can get out of balance like a tire on your automobile. You can find yourself placing too much emphasis on the less important things in life and too little emphasis on the most important. Sometimes it takes an illness or some other crisis or a surprise gift or even a Christmas Eve sermon to help you get a fresh perspective.

A man I know was diagnosed with a fast growing cancer with a 50/50 chance of recovery following the most 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 emphasized so much up this point in his life now became 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 a 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 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 that the Christmas story in its

simplicity can give one a fresh perspective because it's the story of God's surprising and personal gift in the person of Jesus and it all takes place in such an unexpected way.

Consider again some of the astonishing aspects of the story. There is nothing about the event as it is told in its humble narrative that seems to fit any 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 so doing the story would lose its simplicity and therefore its power.

God's personal gift was a baby born 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 you had been in charge, the giving of God’s personal gift would’ve taken place either in Jerusalem, the religious center, or better still in Rome, the political capitol and it would not have taken place silently but with fanfares and fireworks and with CNN news covering the event. 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 baby? Mary was not a celebrity. Barbara Walters would not have considered her one of the year's most fascinating persons. 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 God's personal gift grow up? In a small town. No one of importance had ever come from Nazareth. 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 personal gift.

It is common knowledge in today's world that in real estate value 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 live and in the world at large. What is holy and sacred has nothing to do with location, fame or size.

As far as anyone knows, only Mary and Joseph were present when Jesus was born. Perhaps a local midwife was called. It's not important for the significance of the event. 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 you are told is that some shepherds came to the stable later that night.

The powerful of the world, the leaders in politics, religion and business didn't know about it. The Jerusalem Times sent no reporter. No one took any notice of the birth. After all, what possible significance could a baby born in some out of the way place have?

The Christmas story in its simplicity can give you a new perspective. It can bring your life back into balance. God's ways are not always your ways. The sacred and the holy are revealed in unusual places and can surprise you. God's holy love, God's personal gift, does not come to you in the garb of a conqueror. God's personal gift of God's Holy Self, is present in an incredible act of humility. God enters this world in the same way that each

one of you entered this life, in the birth of an infant.

God's personal gift can turn your world upside down. Halford Luccock tells the story of accidently bumping into a woman who was Christmas shopping and loaded down with packages. The bump caused all her packages to scatter around her. As he was trying to help her pick up the packages, she said, "Oh I hate Christmas anyway. It turns everything upside down." Luccuck answered, "You're right. This is what Christmas means." He could've gone on to say, "Christmas is about a baby and that is a baby's chief business—turning things upside down. All of you who have children know this. A baby re-arranges everything in your life—from the order of who's

most 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 fact about God’s personal gift in Jesus is that it turns everything upside down.

For example, The Christmas story puts a new value on every person. It reminds you that you are a child of God and so is everyone. Human beings are not things to be used. You are not a biological accident. Everyone is a VIP, because you have divine worth.

God’s personal gift is good news in a world of bad

news. It is light shining in darkness. As the gospel of John describes it, "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.

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, the tough for that's the only way you can win." Jesus also 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."

He 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 anyway you can, for after all the end justifies the means.”

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

Here's another part of that new perspective. God's personal gift in Jesus tells you that there is another and quite extra-ordinary part of you which is never completely at home with the everyday necessities of living in this world—with paying bills, going to work, watching television, surrounding yourself with more and more stuff and filling your life with other activities.

God's personal gift tells you that there is more to life, that your life is also filled with eternal longings and hungers; that the Holy and the Sacred are found in ordinary events and yet transcends them. You can sense the Divine within you and within others. You are connected with others and with all of creation. Life goes on in a new way after this life.

Your life in the here and now is only a tiny bit of eternity.

You 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 season and then the next until he became a tame duck. But each autumn when his fellow ducks passed overhead in the migratory flight and called to him, there was a restlessness deep inside and he remembered who he was and what he was made for. That's something like what the Christmas story can be for you each time you hear it. God's personal gift helps you remember who you are and that there is far more in you than meets the eye and that your dignity as a human being begins and ends

with God. Indeed the whole creation is holy because God is within you and all around you.

God's personal gift in the person of Jesus is given to you and to everyone 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 a person is encouraged to know that his or her human worth does not depend on financial success or personal fame or color of skin; when the hungry are fed, the love of God becomes personal. What a gift! What a grace!

Tonight, there 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 and watch God's personal gift spread and multiply. Amen.

offering

End prayer with 8 minutes to go