

The Nativity of Our Lord: Christmas Day
December 25, 2017
John 1:1-14

“Give Good”

So this is the Starbucks’ holiday cup for this year that debuted back in November. Maybe you’ve enjoyed your favorite brew in just such a cup as this! Note that it comes in both red and white, but note especially the message on the sleeve around the middle: “Give Good.” This is what Christmas is all about: giving good, and not just how we love to give good to loved ones and friends. It’s much bigger than that, as things usually are with God. The Lord God is the ultimate gift-giver; he is the One who gives what is truly good. And what is truly good is God’s gift of his only begotten Son, Jesus, the Word made flesh, whose birth we celebrate on this blessed day. Based on the appointed Gospel lesson for this Christmas Day, the theme for preaching, borrowing that Starbucks slogan, is “Give Good.” May the Lord’s rich and abundant blessing rest upon the preaching, the hearing, and the living of his Word for Jesus’ sake.

As this Reformation 500 anniversary year draws to a close, only this past week I finished a wonderful book released just this year: *Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World*, by Eric Metaxas (New York: Viking, 2017). It was Christmas in the year 1545, and Luther’s life was drawing to a close (he would die less than two months later on February 18, 1546). He preached the following as part of a Christmas sermon that year. Never one to mince words, the aging reformer blasts not only the people of Bethlehem but the people of Wittenberg:

The inn was full. No one would release a room to this peasant woman. She had to go to a cow stall and there bring forth the Maker of all creatures because nobody would give way. Shame on you, wretched Bethlehem! The inn ought to have been burned with brimstone, for even though Mary had been a beggar maid or unwed, anybody at such a time should have been glad to give her a hand. There are many of you in this congregation who think to yourselves: “If only I had been there! How quick I would have been to help the baby! I would have washed his linen! How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the Lord lying in the manger!” Yes you would! You say that because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at that time you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. Childish and silly thoughts are these! Why don’t you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor. You ought to serve him, for what you do to you neighbor in need you do to the Lord Christ himself (p. 420, quoting Roland Bainton in Here I Stand, p. 365).

Because God does indeed “give good,” and has given us the gift beyond all gifts – his only Son, Jesus, the Word made flesh who dwelt among us – how can we adequately express our thanks to God? The Lord God doesn’t need our gifts and offerings, but our neighbor does. And that is Luther’s point. Faith must make itself known in humble and loving service to our neighbor. As Jesus points out in his parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), our neighbor is defined as whoever needs our help, no matter who that person may be; not just those who look like us, or talk like us, or dress like us, or who are nice to us. This is what mission practice #4 in *Joining Jesus on His Mission* reminds us: what is the good we can do around here? Because God has given good to us beyond measure, how can we but do the same to those around us, not only now in this Christmas season, but at all times? Jesus, who came not to be served but to serve and offer his life as a ransom for us all (Mark 10:45), calls us all to humble and loving service to our neighbor.

John’s Gospel does not contain the same warm and familiar account of Jesus’ birth that Luke’s Gospel does (Luke 2:1-20). No mention of Mary and Joseph; no word about angel messengers or the manger in Bethlehem. None of this; instead, what John records is how the eternal Word of God who brought all of

creation into existence now took on human flesh and blood to become the Word-made-flesh who came and dwelt among us. As Eugene Peterson's rendering of Scripture in *The Message* records this passage: **"The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood."** Jesus is that Word who became flesh and blood, and he has moved into our neighborhood, the neighborhood of this world and the neighborhood of our lives, not to condemn or convict, but save and redeem. This is why Jesus came, and that is mighty important to remember. Jesus' Name is who he is: **"You shall call his name Jesus for he will save his people from their sins"** (Matthew 1:21). Jesus = Savior. Now that's giving good! I received an email this past week in which a man wrote the following: "Several years ago, my wife and I took our three-year-old granddaughter to a recreated Bethlehem walk at a local church. We walked through displays of artisans and families recreating life in Bethlehem. We stopped at an animal petting pen where my granddaughter marveled at goats and sheep and donkeys. Finally, we arrived at the last display, which was the manger scene with Mary, Joseph, and the baby. As people gathered around, the pastor began to share about the gift of Christ. I leaned over to my bundled up granddaughter who I was holding and said, 'See there is baby Jesus.' She yelled out, 'I want to see the goat!' I was so embarrassed. I again attempted to get her to focus on Jesus. Once again she yelled, 'I want to see the goat!...' Voices will come from those you love and those you don't love so much. Voices will sound urgent and anxious. They will be loud, or they may be subtle. Many of us will scurry off just to quiet the voices. My prayer... is that you do not hurry so much that you miss the Christ child. Everything else is just a goat" (email from J. Clif Christopher & Horizons on 12/19/17).

With so much unrest and turmoil going on in our world at present, it's easy to overlook God's gift to us and miss the Christ Child. Racial prejudice and bigotry that are no longer in the shadows but out in the open; the rising threat of nuclear warfare; disaster upon disaster that decimates life and property; the ever-growing busyness, anxiety and distraction of modern life. Can we see the Christ, the Word made flesh, in the midst of these? Hugh Kerr (1871-1950) was a Presbyterian minister in this country who wrote the following in the midst of the dark days of World War II:

*I cannot see the Christ-Child for the soldiers marching past:
I cannot hear the angels for the bugle's angry blast.
But I know the Bells are ringing
And that Faith and Hope are clinging
Till the Day when Love shall crown the world at last.*

*I cannot see the Christ-Child, for the smoke is in my eyes,
I cannot hear the Shepherds for the little children's cries:
But I know the Bells are ringing
And I think I hear the singing
Of the Day when Peace like Morning Dawn shall rise.*

*I cannot see the Christ-Child, for the clouds hang dark and low
I cannot hear the Wise Men, for the conflict rages so:
But I know the Bells are ringing,
And that Christmas Morn is bringing
In the Golden Day, Foretold so long ago.*

(Hugh Kerr, quoted in For All the Saints: A Prayer Book For and By the Church, Vol. I, p. 147)

On this Christmas Day, we rejoice in God's giving so good to us in Jesus, the Word-made-flesh. Let us now go forth to give good to our neighbor. A blessed Christmas to you in Jesus' Name. Amen.