

Emmanuel Ev. Lutheran Church—Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod
Festival of the Nativity of Our Lord – Christmas Day
December 25, 2024
Sermon by Pastor Jon D. Buchholz
No greater gift

—Romans 8:31,32

The family is gathered around the Christmas tree on Christmas Eve. One by one the presents are taken out from under the tree and handed out to be opened. All eyes are on Dad, as he opens his present. The children's eyes gleam with anticipation to watch his reaction to the gift that they all chipped in for, and then spent time picking out and wrapping. It's a necktie. Truth be told, it's hideous. It doesn't go with anything in Dad's wardrobe. He'll probably wear it once for the sake of his kids, and then he'll tuck it away, and it will never see the light of day again. But Dad beams with appreciation and gives each of his children a huge hug and thanks them for their love and thoughtfulness.

Then it's Mom's turn. Her box is big. It's a gift from the family, but it looks like Dad's wrapping and handwriting. She peels back the paper (save the bow!) to reveal . . . a vacuum cleaner! Dad's face shines with pride at the super-deluxe model he picked out for his beloved wife, as Mom smiles and says, "Thank-you!" and thinks about all the relaxing hours she'll enjoy holding the handle of her new machine.

The gift exchange continues, and finally it's time for the youngest member of the family to open her gift. She's barely over one year old. She's handed her gift. The toddler tugs at the wrapping, it comes off, and she starts to play with the paper. "No, sweetheart," she's reminded to keep going. She gets the package unwrapped, and she starts to play with the box. "Keep going!" She gets the box open, and she unwraps the perfect, age-appropriate toy that will teach eye-hand coordination. She looks it over for a few seconds, before she puts it down and goes back to play with the box and the pretty wrapping paper.

It's hard to find that perfect gift for that special someone. We might guess wrong on their taste or their style or what they really need. And even if we know exactly what they need, it might not be what they want.

So what gift does God prepare for us? Let's think about this for a moment. God knows everything; he knows exactly what you and I need, even better than we ourselves do. But even more, God has already given you and me everything we have. God called the universe into existence; he said, "Let there be," and matter and space and time came into existence. "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world and all who live in it" (Psalm 24:1). God gave you life itself. God foreordained the moment of your conception, the instant when you began to exist. God saw your unformed body and knit you together in your mother's womb. All the days of your earthly life were written in God's book before one of them came to be (Psalm 139:16). So God made the world, God made you, he gave you your life and your existence. He's given you everything else. He's given you the breath in your lungs, the clothes on your back, the roof over your head, the food on your table, the chariot in your garage. He's given you your mind, your abilities, your intellect, your talents. He's surrounded you with family and with friends. He's given you time for fruitful labor and hours for leisure and rest. He's given you every material thing you possess. God has already given you everything. God is the Maker and Giver of everything. So what gift does the Giver of everything have to give you for Christmas?

The answer lies in Bethlehem. God, who has already given us everything, gives us *himself*.

And when I say that God gives us himself, I mean that most literally. The one through whom the world was made entered the world he made. The eternal Word of the Father, the only-begotten Son, who existed with the Father before all worlds began, the one who created space and time entered space and time to be born into our world. The one who created matter itself clothed himself with material flesh and became our brother in the human race. Conceived sinless in the womb of a virgin mother, Jesus the Son of God grew to term. He was born in history in a place on earth called Bethlehem. God was wrapped in swaddling clothes. He was laid in a manger, and Mary and Joseph and shepherds worshiped him, as they gazed into the face of God.

Every day God gives us new gifts. They come in the form of blessings we receive. They are gifts under the Christmas tree. They are holiday bonuses from our employer. They are hugs and smiles and words of encouragement from people around us. They are beautiful worship services and times of celebration. They are beautiful Arizona weather, good government, peace and safety, good health. I could go on and on; the list of blessings we receive is way too long for a brief Christmas sermon. But *this* gift, the Christ Child in the manger, this is the Gift of gifts. How will you receive *this* gift, your brother, your Savior?

Truth be told, a lot of times we just want to play with the box and the wrapping paper. We occupy ourselves with worthless, trivial things in life, and these things become all-important and all-consuming. We busy ourselves with making money, getting ahead, looking good, enjoying life. But these things are just the trappings and the wrappings; it's the *Gift* that is truly important. Sometimes we tuck the gift away like an ugly sweater or a hideous necktie. Sure, we

might bring the Christ Child out and put him on display from time to time for appearances' sake, but mostly we keep him tucked away, hidden out of sight because we don't want to wear our religion on our sleeve. And sometimes we treat him like a household appliance—like a vacuum cleaner—as we roll our eyes and shrug our shoulders when we think of how much work it is to follow Christ, to fight temptation, to put off carnal desires, to control our tongues and tame our emotions, to deny ourselves and follow him.

But this is why God gave himself as the gift. Our lives of rebellion, our hearts filled with arrogance and consumed with self could not fix our broken relationship with God. So God had to fix it for us. That is why he came. He was conceived and born without sin to be the substitute for us, who were conceived and born in sin. He lived under the law and obeyed God's law to be the substitute for us who have completely shattered God's law. And he died on the cross to be the atoning sacrifice for a world of sinners who mock and scorn him, so that with his innocent blood he purchased the forgiveness of sins, restored our broken relationship with God, and threw open the gates of paradise. Christmas leads to the cross and to the empty Easter tomb and finally to a throne at the Father's right hand. That's why God gave himself as the gift: to forgive sins, to destroy death, and to restore life and immortality.

We all know that life is a roller coaster. Ups and downs, gains and setbacks. The joy of celebration gives way to times of loneliness and frustration. The twinkling lights and holiday decorations cannot pierce the gloom and darkness of depression. Sometimes we feel bold and confident and ready to take on the world, and other times we are anxious and afraid. Sometimes we are healthy and strong, and other times we are weak and sick and uncertain. So in the midst of all the ups and downs, the swirling emotions, the good times and the difficult times, how can we know where we stand with God? How can you know God loves you? How can you know God forgives you? It's easy to feel loved and forgiven when everything in your life is going well, when you're well-fed, successful and happy. Is that the foundation of your confidence of where you stand with God? What about when life takes a difficult turn? When the pink slip appears on your desk at work? When news of tragedy and terrible loss strikes your ears? When the diagnosis is terminal? How can you *know* that God is gracious, and his love is real, and his forgiveness is for you?

You don't find answers to those questions in your feelings, be they up, down, or all over. You don't find answers to those questions in your circumstances, be they good, bad, or ugly.

The answer is found in the gift. In the Christ Child, lying in the manger, in Jesus' sacrifice offered on the cross. *What then shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?* That is how we know that God's love is real. That is how we know that God's forgiveness is for us. That is how we know that God really does work out all things for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. That is the unwavering, constant fact that is the anchor for our soul and the certain hope for our salvation: God gave his Son.

That's why we celebrate Christmas. That's why we gather to sing and to celebrate with saints and with angels. That's why we give gifts to each other. That's why our Christmas is truly merry and truly blessed: because God gave himself.

There is no greater gift! Amen.