

The Gift Is Hidden

The Nativity of Our Lord

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2023

Luke 2:1–14

At Christmas we hear the good news of great joy. Even non-Christians know that the celebration of Christmas is special, that joy fills the air.

But there's something else about this day and this time of year. Many people struggle during this season devoted to joy. The joy is dampened by the pain of missing your loved ones you have lost. The joy of Christmas can be overshadowed by the pain of conflict in the home. The world is a mess. Many in government positions are in perennial power struggles. There is social disparity. Religious strife seems endless. Taxation is oppressive. Natural disasters, pandemics, and wars are all too ordinary occurrences.

Is there actually true joy to be found when we can't escape these gloomy parts of life? Yes, there is, but it is hidden. It's brought out in the Scripture readings we heard. All of these awful things are what was going on back then during the time when Mary gave birth to her firstborn Son in a little town called Bethlehem.

In giving us the account of the birth of Jesus Luke actually gives us some information which tells us of how things were in society and in the lives of people at the time. Taxation was oppressive. Those in power were not content with the power they had. They were always striving for more. War and bloodshed were the norm, not the exception. Social disparity was a given.

It's kind of depressing to consider, but not much has changed 2000 years later. There is nothing new under the sun. People say often that things are getting so much worse. It does seem that way. But are things really getting worse? Considering how bad things were back then it appears that not all that much has really changed.

We sang in the Introit, Why do you the nations rage and the peoples plot in vain? In the Old Testament reading we hear of war and bloodshed. In the Gospel reading is mentioned the name of the man who changed the Roman Republic into an Empire. He declared himself to be the emperor. His name was Octavian but he was now to be known as Augustus, the August One. He even considered himself as divine. His empire extended over a vast area of the earth. Even those Jews who were just trying to live their lives and worship God could not escape the reach of Caesar Augustus who reigned from almost 1500 miles away.

So when he dictated a census, all the people complied. Joseph and his bride-to-be went to his ancestral home for the census. That is great power. Nearly everyone knew who Caesar Augustus was. If you did not comply with his laws you paid strict penalties. His glory was clear to everyone. His power was not secret.

What he didn't know, or perhaps wished not to believe, is that his power was in fact greatly limited. It was also fleeting. It was for a time in this life. What he didn't know is that the eternal God worked through this registration of Caesar in bringing about the greatest glory of all. And what is that glory? It is Jesus. It is salvation. It the greatest gift of all. Caesar made demands. He demanded homage. He demanded taxes. He demanded glory. His glory was not hidden, it was as clear as day.

The true glory was hidden. The glory of God was not that of demands but of a gift. He was the one giving the gift. It was His own Son. He is the God of the universe, He alone has all glory. He has brought all things into existence. Caesar did not recognize Him as the true God. He did not give Him the glory that is due Him alone.

God does indeed demand we give Him the glory that is due Him alone. The remarkable thing is that He has displayed His glory not by demanding of us but by giving to us. He gives a gift. It is His own Son. Jesus is God and yet He came in the flesh. His glory is vastly greater than that of Caesar Augustus.

And yet it is hidden. The glory is wrapped up in a little baby who was born of Mary on that night in Bethlehem. Little did the supreme emperor know that his attempt to tax his empire brought about the fulfillment of prophecy, that the Savior of the world would be born in that little town of Bethlehem. Little did he know that his glory, while readily seen, was overshadowed by the greatest glory of all.

The angels declared it to the shepherds. I bring to you good news of great joy, to you is born this day a Savior who is Christ the Lord. This will be the sign to you: you will find the baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger. Not much of a sign. A baby, not a glorious ruler on a throne. This baby was arrayed not in royal garb but cloths. He was not sitting on a throne but a manger. Not much glory there. It's a feeding trough for animals.

And yet it is the greatest glory. The greatest gift. Hidden in that little body, among those cloths, in that dirty manger, is the gift. Jesus. The Savior. The one whose even greater glory was shown when He was beaten and blood-stained and hanging limply on a cross. It appears as the ultimate in weakness and defeat and humiliation. But no, it is the greatest glory. The greatest gift. Hidden in that man who was born and laid in a manger and now suffering in crucifixion was God's great gift to all people: salvation from sins. Deliverance from eternal damnation. Peace with God. Eternal life.

Your joy may be dampened by sadness, you may be weighed down by all the turmoil in your life, you may worry about how bad things are in this world. Maybe you are struggling with sins you can't seem to overcome. Is there really any hope or joy in this life? Yes, but it is hidden. Perhaps you are looking for joy in the wrong place. God's glory, His salvation, His gift, is hidden. It was hidden that little baby born 2000 years ago. It was hidden when He was crucified on a Roman cross. But it is there in your very life when instead of arguing with your loved ones, you forgive them. You are weak, you struggle, but Christ is in you, hidden, as He has joined you to Himself in your Baptism. He is hidden in bread and wine when He gives you His Supper to eat, His very body and blood. He is the greatest gift and in Him is the greatest joy. Amen.

SDG

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