

The Ultimate Re-Gift

Isaiah 64:1-9; I Corinthians 1:3-9

A sermon given at the Union Church of Bay Ridge

the first Sunday of Advent (and Thanksgiving Sunday), November 30, 2008

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There it was, on the back cover of my alumni magazine, a Sign of the (slightly-more-frugal) Times:

“Certified pre-owned by BMW. It’s the ultimate re-gift.”

And I was going to talk to you about how Nancy Gibbs (a Presbyterian elder) observed recently in *Time* magazine how we have come to view sacrifice as curtailing our luxuries, and about how, in a more practical vein, some of us have decided that we don’t want or need any *thing* this year, and instead we want gifts to, say, the Heifer Project, or even, I realized, why not Union Church?

And for myself I really mean it; did you know you can give a goat or a sheep, or chickens or ducks or did you know you can even give bees, and they go to poor families all around the world who can then feed themselves and make things to sell, and these animals come in a whole range of prices and you can then send a card to your friend or family member that simply says, “a gift of a (whatever) has been made in your name to the Heifer Project, or Oxfam does it too, or alternatively, “a gift has been made in your name to BRUCA at Union Church, or the Union Church music program, or the Union Church Window Fund, etc. etc. because really, most of you have been to our house, we really don’t *need* anything, and I suspect that many of you feel the same way.

Because why *do* we give gifts at Christmas?

Now I was going to answer that question, and then life happened, in the world I mean: 174 people mercilessly and apparently meaninglessly gunned down in the Taj Mahal Hotel in Mumbai. Djimytai Damour, 34 years old, mowed down by stampeding shoppers at the Valley Stream Wal-Mart last Friday.

Pontius Pilate sending soldiers into the Temple, the Vatican of its day, to mow down the people as they worshipped God, and mingle their human blood with the blood of the animal sacrifices.

Stalin and Hitler sending millions to their deaths in the name of righteousness and payback and “a better economy.”

And the addiction of our culture to shopping and consuming in all its forms, even though it colonizes the whole planet, and the excuse we have to shop without restraint, because it’s “for the children” — and this year more than ever, the hundreds of thousands of families that will risk bankruptcy in the name of love and a tragic perversion of the virtue of self-sacrifice. And now our shopping cult has a real tragedy and a real martyr, a martyr to HDTV at that, and I wonder how the Damour family, who must have been so happy that he had a job, even a temporary one, feels now about thanksgiving, or about giving gifts this Christmas, and whether any of us would want a BMW, “certified pre-owned” or not, with all of this weighing on our conscience, or would dare to go to Wal-Mart ever again.

Why indeed *do* we give gifts at Christmas? I don’t know about you, but I’m not satisfied any more with the same old answers: we give gifts at Christmas because God gave the Gift of the Christ Child. But how, we ask, is that good news to the people who have been murdered down through the centuries in the name of Christ—we ask that, or our non-churchgoing friends ask us. How is that good news to the people who are so enraged and filled with hate, for the West and Christianity and all the power and privilege that in their world the name of Jesus (however wrongly) represents, that they blow up buildings and shoot strangers in cold blood? And how is that good news to people who, new in this country or not, think that Christmas in America is about toxic, pathological consumption?

We give gifts at Christmas, we say, because the Wise Men brought gifts to the Christ Child. We make Christmas into a kind of one-upmanship birthday party for an eternally infantile Jesus. Christmas, the Feast of the Incarnation, the Feast of the Word Made Flesh—when God did what God does not do, when God became, by human lights, what in any created being would be blasphemy: God, that one time, in that one place, actually became a human being, and if you really think about the ramifications of that, it’s not only awe-inspiring but unbearable—no wonder we small human beings have domesticated this awesome event, married it to a pagan holiday, and look forward every year with dread to compulsory overeating and inevitable disappointment on December 26.

The answer is: there is no answer to those things. But here’s the closest I can get to an answer that makes any sense. The gifts we give at Christmas honor *not* the

child, but the *reasons why* the Child was given...and, best beloved, those reasons have not changed. Those reasons are the *very same* reasons: the murders in Mumbai, the tragic death of a young immigrant in Valley Stream, the atrocities of Pilate and Stalin and Hitler and Tienamen and Guantánamo and the idolatry of Christmas and all the wrong and hate and evil in the world. Those are the reasons God broke that tabu, broke all the human rules about the role of God and what was God's proper place. And this Advent, every Advent, God is preparing to do the same.

"O that You would tear open the heavens and come down!" the prophet cries. "O that the very mountains would shake as the fire kindles brushwood and the water boils and the nations quake at your Presence...from ages past no eye has seen, no ear has heard, any God beside You, who works for those who wait for You!"

This week, Zachary-the-Cat taught me something about this kind of waiting. He had himself a rite of passage: he caught his first mouse. And he is a different cat. He's found his calling, serene and clear.

But you should have seen him, all day and all night, patiently and intently waiting for the Second Coming...and a second mouse did come, and then a third. O that we might wait as patiently and attentively for the inbreaking of the Spirit, coming ever again and again from the same hole of sadness and despair, to break apart like rain from the darkest clouds upon this woe-filled, weary world!

How about if this year we decided, together, to make Waiting—different? How about if we went about asking one another, "What would you like me to give in your name?" "You are a gift to me. What can I give to honor you?" "What can I give Him, poor as I am?" Christina Rossetti asks, "If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb...if I were a wise man, I would do my part...What can I give him? Give...my heart!"

Love and faithfulness, and "hope though even hope seems hopelessness" — those things come down at Christmas every sad, hopeless, painful year, if we will only wait and watch, with open eyes, ears and hearts: these things, wrapped up in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, have been, and shall ever be, the Ultimate Re-Gift.

AMEN.