

"Unto You"

Rev. Peter Bynum
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In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. (Luke 2:1-18)

It is now after 5 p.m. on Christmas Eve, which means that, for most of us in this room, the search for the perfect gift is probably over. If that is not true for you— if you are a truly accomplished procrastinator — then fear not, for all hope is not lost. I understand that Target will be open tonight until 11. But for most of us, the die is already cast.

And I expect that you all probably found a few really good ones... the kind of gift that was not just plucked off of one of those shelves they put in the middle of the aisle in Belks... not something regifted... not something left over after others have taken all the good stuff, or something that just happened to be on sale while you were shopping. I expect you found some gifts that really fit the person you had in mind. Those are the gifts that bring the most joy, both for the giver and the recipient. Those are certainly the ones that I find the most joy in giving -- a present that speaks directly to something you cherish in that person, something that says to him or her, "I know who you are, I value who you are, and I love who you are."

These are the kinds of gifts that are not measured by how much you paid, because their value is determined on a scale of intimacy and thoughtfulness that has nothing to do with money. It reminds me of that old story of a blue-collar man who struggled every week to put food on his family's table. The pressure was always greatest around Christmas. The search for the perfect gift in that household was always a challenge because resources were so tight. Even so, the man did splurge on one roll of fairly expensive gold wrapping paper. At least, he thought, we can make the packages look pretty for each other.

One evening right near Christmas, the man came home to find that his little five-year-old daughter had used almost all of the paper on one gift. She wasn't great at wrapping. There had been a lot of waste in the process of wrapping one shoebox. He wondered what could possibly be in there, where she could possibly have found any money to buy something. He could not help but scold her for the decadence of using so much of the family's special paper.

Even so, on Christmas Day, the little girl could not wait to present this gift that she had wrapped so lavishly. She grabbed the box from under the little tree, ran over to her father, put the gold box in his lap, and said with unbridled joy, "Here, Daddy! This is for you!"

As he opened the box, the father felt a little bad about having scolded her about the paper. But that didn't last long, because when he opened the shoebox, it was empty. Now he was really mad. "Are you kidding me?" he said. "Don't you know, young lady, that when you give someone a present, there's supposed to be something inside the box?!?"

The little girl started to cry, not understanding her father's reaction. She looked up at him with sad tears rolling down her face. "Daddy, it's not empty. I blew kisses into it until it was all full."

Of course, the father felt terrible. He tearfully pulled the little girl into his arms and told her how sorry he was. It was the perfect gift, one not measured by money, but by something much more rare and precious. It was a gift that had been lovingly imagined, prepared, wrapped, and given just for him.

On Christmas Day in 1530, Martin Luther preached a sermon that made a simple but profound point, one that still resonates with power on this holy night nearly 500 years later. The angel does not simply say "a Savior is born." The angel says that, in the city of David, a Savior is born **unto you**. The heavenly messenger does not simply bring good tidings. He brings good tidings of great joy **to you**. It is the gift that had been brewing since the prophet Isaiah had proclaimed not just that a child would be born, not just that a son would be given, but that a child has been born **for us**, that a son has been given **to us**." This gift to the world, to us, to you, is nothing less than the "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."¹

"I have more than the mother's estate," Luther joyfully proclaimed. "He is more mine than Mary's, for he was born for me, for the angel said, "to you" is born the Savior." In the embrace of this kind of loving generosity, Luther said that every Christian could really only say one thing: "Amen, I thank thee, dear Lord."²

This is the gift that is given tonight. It was not offered in fancy packaging. Its value cannot be measured in gold. It is simply a gift that has been lovingly imagined, prepared, wrapped, and given not just to the world, but **to you**.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹ Isaiah 6:6-7.

² Jonathan Kleis "To You is Born a Savior: Martin Luther on the Good News of Great Joy," <https://reformissio.wordpress.com/2016/12/23/to-you-is-born-a-savior-martin-luther-on-the-good-news-of-great-joy/>, accessed December 21, 2017.