

2 January 2011
The Epiphany of our Lord (Observed)

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Unwrapping the Gift”

Text: Matthew 2:1-12; Isaiah 60:1-6

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Eight days ago, we celebrated the Nativity of our Lord and rejoiced in the gift of God, that **“For us a child is born, to us a son is given”** (Isaiah 9:6). Today, as we celebrate Epiphany and begin the Epiphany season, we will unwrap this gift and see what it is all about, that we may delight in what we have received and give thanks for this gift.

For on the outside, all gifts look pretty much the same - wrapped in colorful paper, with ribbons and bows; but on the inside, they are quite different. And so it is when we unwrap the gifts that we delight in what we have received - wearing the clothes, playing the games, eating the food.

It is the same with Jesus. On the outside, He looked the same as any other baby; and actually, maybe even poorer, *wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger* (Luke 2:12). But the Word of God unwraps this gift for us and we see that under the appearance of a baby is much more. That this gift to us is God Himself. That the glory of the Lord has come to us in this child. That here is the King of kings and Lord of lords. And so the Word of God, both today and all this Epiphany season, will show us just how great a gift we have received, that we may delight in Him and give thanks to God.

That is what happened, as we heard today, for the wise men. First, they saw the star of the king of the Jews; the star which told them that a great gift had been given. And so they travel to Jerusalem to see this gift. For where else would the gift of a king be but in Jerusalem, in a palace, in soft and luxurious clothes, and surrounded by attendants? But this gift is not wrapped like that, they find out. The words of the prophet Micah tell them that not in Jerusalem, but in Bethlehem, is this ruler born. And so they set out again, and now follow the star to the house where Mary and Jesus are. And there they see the gift of God. On the outside, all they see is a poor and humble mother with her newborn child. But the Word of God has unwrapped this gift and revealed what is inside - that here in poor human flesh, is the King. And with the gift unwrapped by the Word, they delight in this gift, fall down and worship Him, and give this great gift their poor gifts, of gold and frankincense, and

myrrh.

But the wise men were not the only ones delighted by the unwrapping of this gift - *so was God*. For when you give a gift to someone, it is not only the receiver who is excited to receive and unwrap the gift - the giver is, too. For the giver, too, the gift so carefully chosen and specially wrapped means something, and when it is received with delight, there is great joy and satisfaction.

And so it is with the wise men, these Gentile visitors from the East. When this gift of a Son, of a King, of a Saviour, is unwrapped for them, and they receive it with delight and offer their gifts, *God is delighted*. Not in their gifts. He doesn't need them. He created them. All things are His. No, He is delighted because His gift is received; because His gift has filled the wise men with faith and joy. For this gift of a Son, of a King, of a Saviour, is for all people - the Jew and the Gentile, the simple and the wise, the poor and the rich, people then and people now. That, as Isaiah said, ***all nations come*** and unwrap this gift; that their ***hearts thrill and exult***; that ***the glory of the Lord*** be seen in this child, this Son that is given to be your Saviour.

Sadly, though, this gift is not always received with delight. Some regard the gift of Jesus a bit like unwrapping underwear or socks on Christmas morning. Yeah, we need them, but there's really no delight in them. And they're tossed aside in search of other, more exciting gifts.

And so we, too, need the Word of God to unwrap this gift of Jesus for us. That like the wise men, we not be fooled by the humble appearance, but understand how great a gift this is, and how it is given to people who could not be less deserving than we.

Perhaps this is where modern notions of Christmas undermine this gift of God. For with the modern mindset that "I've been good all year and so deserve my gifts," often comes the disappointment of unfulfilled expectations, and even anger at not getting what we think we should. And so the gift of a Saviour? Yeah, that's *nice* . . . but what about the stuff I *really* wanted, the relationship I *really* wanted, the easier life I *really* wanted, the happiness I *really* wanted, the health I *really* wanted, the healing for my loved one who died that I *really* wanted, the solution to my problems that I *really* wanted. Some would even say that if God be God, you *should* receive these things. That's what God is for.

But is this not the same thinking that led the wise men to Jerusalem? To look for the King in luxury and ease and glory? To expect Him in success and highness? But that is not where the King was - for them, or for us. And as it took the Word of God to correct their thinking, to send them to a different place, and to unwrap this gift that looked quite different than they expected - so too for you and me.

For the truth is that we've not been good all year. In fact, we've not been good a single day. For what day goes by without hurtful words, shameful desires, impure thoughts, and selfish deeds? What day goes by when we haven't turned a deaf ear or a blind eye or a cold shoulder to our neighbor in need? What day goes by when we do not fear, love, and trust God above all things? *Do you want what you deserve?* No, you really don't!

But into this world darkened by sin, Isaiah says, **a light has come**. Not a star, but a Saviour. A gift we do not deserve, but so desperately need. For beneath the swaddling clothes and the humble appearance is the Son of God Himself. For you. He gives Himself to you, and gives Himself for you. To be your comfort in sadness. To be your hope when everything seems hopeless. To give you faith when things seem pointless. To be your strength when you think you can't go on. To be with you in sickness and in health, in life and in death, in times of plenty and times of want. For this gift of God in the manger is the gift of God joining Himself to you - not just *some* of the time, but *all* of the time. Joining Himself to us in our sin and trouble, even in our death and condemnation on the cross. That taking our sin, we be forgiven. That dying our death, we have life. That receiving our condemnation, we receive His kingdom. And that rising from the dead, we too rise to a new life.

That is the gift the wise men unwrapped that day, when underneath the humble appearance they beheld the Lord of all. The Lord who had come for them, to give Himself to them. And they got up off their knees with a new life.

And that is the gift unwrapped for you today, as the Lord who came in humbly in Bethlehem, comes humbly here for you in the swaddling clothes of water and words and bread and wine. On the outside it looks quite unimpressive. But the Word of God unwraps these things for you and shows you here your Saviour, the Lord of life, giving you life in the forgiveness of your sins. In the washing of Baptism, in the words of Absolution, in the Body and Blood of the Supper, your Lord giving you what you need the most - not just a better life, but a new life. A life in Him. A life that will never end.

That's why God is delighted to have you here. Yes, you come with your gifts, and those are good things - your gold and frankincense and myrrh; your prayers and praise and offerings. But what delights Him most is when His gift of forgiveness, His gift of a Son, is received with delight. When you come with your sin, with your burdens, with your sadnesses, with your guilt, with your struggles, and receive the forgiveness and life, the hope and strength, the faith and love of your Saviour. That in the midst of a world of darkness and sin, you be set free to live a new life. And delight in Him who delights in you.

That is the Jesus the Word of God unwraps for us today. That this is how God wants to be found, how He wants to be seen, and how He wants to give. That He is a man for all mankind, a beggar for beggars, poor according to the world but rich in the things of God. That we, too, might be rich in the things of God. Rich in forgiveness, in love, in service, in care. And rich in His Word, that we, like St. Paul, might unwrap this gift for others. That they, too, may delight in Him. Until that day when all is finally unwrapped; when our Lord returns in all His glory, and we shall see Him as He is. Which is as He was for us all along.

In the Name of the Father and of the (+) Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

(Thanks to Rev. Richard Futrell for the analogy about wrapping and Epiphany which he used in a sermon for the Feast of the Epiphany 2009.)