

December 24, 2025 – Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 2:11-14, Luke 2:1-20

One of my most vivid Christmas memories growing up was of wrapping Christmas presents. It was quite the production. With a family of four in a fairly small house, finding a place to even wrap your presents could be a struggle. Then you had finding the perfect wrapping paper. Everybody had their favorite and we had boxes of wrapping paper scraps that we would rifle through, looking for the last piece of something we knew they would like. Then, of course, you had to put a bow on it. My sister was the queen of putting together the fanciest bow she could create.

But when it was all over, when Christmas Eve rolled around and all the presents were piled up under the Christmas tree, it was truly a sight to behold. We were not a wealthy family. We couldn't spend a lot on the gifts. But we could make them look good. Those presents themselves were the final Christmas decoration of the season. Promising a joyful Christmas celebration.

Over the past weeks at our midweek Advent services, we have discussed the decorations that fill our homes and sanctuaries at Christmas: evergreen trees that speak of life, lights that push back the darkness, nativity scenes that depict the story itself. Tonight, our attention is drawn lower, beneath the branches, to the gifts piled up underneath.

Christmas presents are an interesting form of decoration. Because they're beautiful. But they are also temporary. That pretty wrapping paper is torn off in a hurry. Bows are crushed. Boxes are recycled or thrown away.

And the gifts inside don't fare much better in the grand scheme of things. Even the best gifts wear out, break, or lose their shine. The decorations under the tree promise joy, but they can't really deliver what they seem to offer. They certainly can't give us anything eternal. They can't forgive sins. They can't conquer death. They can't restore what is broken inside of us.

And if we're honest, they're often undeserved. I'm not complaining. That's the nature of a gift, after all. Christmas presents are supposed to be an act of grace. They're given not based on the worthiness of the recipient, but based on the love of the giver.

Which is something we see in our passage from Isaiah this evening. Isaiah speaks to a people walking in darkness, and that darkness isn't merely the darkness of suffering or sorrow. It's a moral darkness. It's a spiritual darkness.

It's the darkness of a world bent towards violence, idolatry, and fear. The prophet doesn't describe a people who simply need encouragement or advice. He describes a people who cannot fix what is broken in themselves. That is why the child is born.

*"Every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire."* This is a vivid depiction of an end to war itself. Yet war ends not because humanity finally learns peace, but because God intervenes where we have failed. The child brings an end to violence precisely because we can't stop shedding blood. We can't silence our hatred. We can't stop fighting. Fighting each other and fighting God. We desperately need the Prince of Peace because we can't make peace on our own.

The same is true of the throne and the kingdom He establishes. Isaiah promises justice and righteousness from this day forth and forevermore. Which is a wonderful promise, but it's a promise that is itself an indictment. We don't deserve a righteous king because we're not a righteous people. We're unjust and self-serving, curved inward on ourselves rather than outward toward God and our neighbor. We're all very much on the naughty list.

So the child Isaiah promises brings us what we ourselves can't produce: justice that's not corrupted, righteousness that does not fail. The very gifts He brings stand as evidence that we have not earned His coming. They prove that this child isn't a reward for good behavior. He is grace for the undeserving and light for those who persist in works of darkness.

And then Luke shows us how that gift arrives. Not wrapped in gold or silk, but in swaddling cloths. Not born in a palace, but laid in a manger. Not announced to kings and nobles, but to shepherds, men of little status, keeping watch at night. The contrast is striking. The gift God gives does not look impressive by worldly standards of decoration or display. There is no outward beauty that we should desire Him.

The Son of God enters the world without the trappings of wealth or royalty. He's born in humility. He lives in poverty. He dies the death of a criminal. If Christmas were about appearances, he would be a failure. If Christmas were about decoration alone, the incarnation would seem almost offensive. But the beauty of God's gift isn't in how it looks. It's in what it does.

Paul tells us that *"the grace of God has appeared."* Grace has appeared not as an idea, not as a principle, but as a person. Grace has a face. Grace has hands and feet. Grace cries in a manger. So that Grace could one day hang on a cross. The gift God gives is His own Son.

And this gift is profoundly undeserved. For *"while we were still sinners,"* Christ came. Not when we had cleaned ourselves up. Not when we had proven our worth. Not when we had earned a place beneath the tree. God's gift is given precisely because we cannot deserve it. For grace that is earned is no longer grace.

Our gifts to one another, however generous, are often shaped by worthiness. We give better gifts to those closer to us. We measure, we evaluate, we set budgets for ourselves. Christ does not. He gives His very life for sinners. He gives everything, without holding back. He gives light to those in darkness. He gives life to those who are dead in their trespasses.

And what does this gift accomplish? Paul is clear: Christ *"gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession."* This isn't merely forgiveness as a momentary feeling. It's a transfer. An exchange. Christ takes what is ours – our sin, our guilt, our shame – and He gives us what is His: righteousness, holiness, peace with God.

And that's the true beauty of the gift Christ gives us. Not that it sparkles under the tree or gives us worldly splendor, but that it clothes us before God. Christ's obedience becomes ours. His faithfulness covers our unfaithfulness. His perfection covers over us more beautifully than any wrapping paper or bow ever could.

And yet, the story doesn't end in Bethlehem. Paul presses us forward. The same grace that has appeared in humility trains us to wait *"for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ."* Christmas looks forward. The child in the manger is the Lord who will come again.

His first coming may have been quiet, hidden, and humble. But His second coming will be anything but. The glory that was veiled will be revealed. The child wrapped in cloths will come wrapped in majesty. The One laid in a feeding trough will sit on a throne to judge the living and the dead. The beauty of the gift will no longer be hidden. It will fill all things.

So our Christmas joy isn't shallow. It isn't dependent on how perfect the decorations are, how generous the gifts are, or how smoothly the evening goes. Christmas joy rests on something unshakable: God has given His Son, and He will not take that gift back. The righteousness given to you in Christ is secure. The glory promised to you at His appearing is certain.

Tonight, as you look at the presents beneath your tree, let them do more than decorate the room. Let them remind you that the best gifts are undeserved, freely given, and rooted in love. And then let them fade into the background as your attention is drawn to the greater gift. The one that doesn't break, doesn't wear out, doesn't disappoint.

In the manger, God gives you Himself. On the cross, He wraps you in His righteousness. In His resurrection, He ties you to his everlasting life. And at His return, He will present blameless before His Father, to reign forever. Glory to God in the highest. And on earth, peace among those with whom He is pleased. Amen.