

**Stanford Memorial Church
December 18, 2004**

**GOD'S GIFTS
C. George Fitzgerald, S.T.D.**

Just in case there is someone here today who does not know, Christmas is coming—ready or not—in less than a week. Traditionally, this is the time in which we engage in some variation of gathering together with family and friends, singing carols, eating more than we should, and exchanging gifts. For some, unfortunately, this very tradition of joy and celebration may accentuate feelings of grief and loneliness, especially if they have experienced a significant loss at this time of year. For those enduring such pain the most important gifts we can give are those of prayer, concern, care and compassion, to help alleviate their sense of aloneness and despair.

Hopefully, those for whom Christmas will not be easy will be able to take some comfort in the joy and spontaneity of children as they enthusiastically open their presents. Children incarnate the spirit of Christmas with their anticipation and all-out enjoyment. Some families open their presents on Christmas Eve, while others wait until Christmas morning. If a family has experienced a divorce there will be negotiations over whether the children spend Christmas Eve with mother and Christmas Day with father, or vice versa. Either way the parents probably will not get as much sleep as they would like. If the presents are opened Christmas Eve, then the children may be so excited, so engrossed in playing with their gifts, that they cannot go to sleep. If the family waits until Christmas morning to open the gifts, then the children not only have difficulty falling asleep, but they also may be ready to go at 5:00 a.m.

When Christine wrote her popular book *Mommie Dearest* about her famous movie-star mother, Joan Crawford, one of the most poignant and heart-rendering passages had to do with the many gifts the children received from their mother's fans. When the gifts arrived they were immediately stored in a closet until Christmas Day. Then a photo-op would be arranged, Joan dressed her daughters and herself in gorgeous holiday attire, and they visited a community center to present the gifts to needy children. Surely the sisters must have thought, and perhaps had the temerity to ask their mother, "Couldn't we just keep one or two?" What a wonderful difference that would have made. The children would have the joy of receiving some nice gifts while also having an experience of sharing with those less fortunate. Not only were Joan's daughters denied their gifts, but they had to stand by and happily observe the other children enjoying them. The girls' pain is accentuated by the fact that Christmas and gifts belong together.

Gifts of course played an important role in the very first Christmas, initiated by the wise men, or three kings, who brought their marvelous gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus. Here, at the very outset, an important component of Christmas gift-giving occurred: namely, those who are abundantly blessed generously share with those less fortunate. Over the centuries this sentiment has found

expression in such things as the Salvation Army volunteer ringing a bell outside a store or market, food baskets for hungry families, and toy drives for deprived children. We witnessed the strength of this tradition a few weeks ago when a couple of area chain stores attempted to evict the Salvation Army volunteers. Quick and overwhelming cries of protest, and satire, prompted management to change their minds; and in a few days the Salvation Army bells were ringing—just like old times. Indeed, this greater sense of gift-giving has become so embedded in our culture that even atheists can participate.

A week ago you may have read in the Parade section—the intellectual journal of our Sunday newspaper—the following letter written to the columnist Marilyn vos Savant. The writer states, “I’m an atheist, but I celebrate Christmas. I believe the holiday season is also about taking the time to remember family and friends, help those less fortunate and appreciate the good around us. . . Do you think I am a hypocrite for celebrating what for most people is a religious holiday?” Marilyn did not think he was a hypocrite, nor do I. He may not have gotten the why, but he knew the how, which may be more important, reminding us of Jesus’ comment, “By their works you shall know them.”

The Christmas story, however, actually has to do with two types of gifts. So far we have been talking about gifts that have what might be called a “conformative” nature. Such gifts conform to a fairly predictable pattern: there is an element of a delightful surprise; they usually make us feel good; and we experience a sense of gratitude. Though we may not always recognize it, we are constantly surrounded and enriched by these types of gifts—on a variety of levels. We have the numerous ones associated with holidays such as Christmas, special occasions, anniversaries, birthdays, and so forth. Then there are the almost infinite number of daily gifts given to us by creation which, because of their commonness we, unfortunately, tend to take for granted: whether it be the splash of a shimmering gold and pink sunrise announcing a new day, majestic clouds traversing a deep blue sky, a quiet stream wending its way through a cool forest, a flock of pelicans strafing the cascading waves, a hummingbird entranced by a Mexican sage bush, the first crocus of spring (that’s an East Coast association), a sparkling canopy of stars on a still, dark night—and so on and on and on. Or what gift can compare with that of this nation in which we are fortunate to live--so endowed with natural resources, an experiment in democracy which has outlasted any other, a merging together of people from almost every country on earth, and, perhaps most important of all, standing at a moment in history when we could take a significant initiative in establishing a more enduring world peace. Hopefully, we will not squander this critical and unique opportunity.

In truth, the gifts we exchange at Christmas remind us of how blessed we are by the multitude of gifts that daily enhance our lives. Gifts that conform to the pattern of delightfully surprising us, filling us with joy and gratitude. In contrast to these *conformative* gifts, there is another category of gifts which we might think of as *transformative*.

Quiet often transformative gifts do not initially appear to be gifts at all. Indeed, they may initially strike us as quite the opposite; and while they may surprise us, they

rarely if ever fill us with an immediate sense of joy and gratitude. Dr. Rachel Remen, one of our acclaimed Bay Area physicians, tells the story of her grandfather, a highly regarded rabbi, and his penchant for transformative gifts. One day when she was a young girl, he brought her a little cup filled with dirt. While it did surprise her, it hardly filled her with joy or gratitude. Instead, she thought, “What kind of gift is this?” But her grandfather told her to water it a little bit every day and set it in a sunny window. In a few days the dirt parted a bit, a plant began to emerge, and before long she had a lovely flower to enjoy. Her joy and gratitude was enhanced by the fact that she had been a part of making it happen. It became special to her.

Our gospel lesson for today recounts one of the greatest transformative gifts of all time. It is one of two stories about the birth of Jesus. Mark, the first gospel to be written, informs us that the story of Jesus begins with his baptism, by John the Baptist, in the River Jordan. At the other end of the spectrum, John, the fourth gospel, introduces Jesus to us as “the Word that became flesh”. . who has dwelt with God since the beginning of time. All four of the gospels of course conclude with the “Good News” of the death and resurrection of Jesus the Christ. As the years passed following that event, however, the young church felt a need to flesh out the story of Jesus, to complement the resurrection stories by providing more information about his birth—particularly to affirm the fulfillment of prophetic passages from the Hebrew scriptures having to do with the coming of the Messiah. Matthew and Luke step forward to fill the gap, Luke telling the story from the perspective of Mary and Matthew from that of Joseph. Mary appears to have received better press. She is visited by Gabriel, a leader among the angels. She is overwhelmed with joy and shortly thereafter she utters the eloquent words we know as the Magnificat (My soul magnifies the Lord). In subsequent centuries countless works of art have portrayed the baby Jesus embraced by Mary with Joseph, at best, standing by in a supporting role. When is the last time, for example, you have seen a pieta scene with Joseph mourning over the death of his son? Moreover, in the nineteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church proclaimed Mary was a virgin for life, despite references in the New Testament to the brothers of Jesus; and, in addition, the pope declared she experienced a bodily resurrection, like Jesus, which elevated her to divine status

The account of Joseph pales by comparison. Yet, Matthew asserts, Joseph is quite important because his bloodline commences with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and includes the great kings David and Solomon. This heritage had to be in Joseph’s mind when he struggled with the decision of what to do with his fiancé. Unlike the Mary story which preceded her pregnancy, he has already been informed Mary is pregnant. Joseph has a wrenching decision to make. If he follows the customs of his community he will call off the marriage—which, and he knows this, would be tantamount to condemning her to a life of poverty, shame and perhaps prostitution. Yet if he proceeds with the marriage, and the word got out, would his family be shunned and condemned? While pondering his dilemma, an unnamed angel comes to him in a dream, which may have struck him as more of a nightmare. It is hard to imagine that he had much appreciation for the news that his bride was pregnant by the Holy Spirit. But “when Joseph woke from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife”(Matt. 1.24).

When the birth of Jesus occurred—with shepherds coming from the fields and wise men bring gifts—Joseph must have recognized what a transformative gift he had received. What had initially seemed a disaster eventuated in the birth of a treasured son who would become the greatest transformative presence in history. It is impossible to imagine any other individual who has had such a transformative influence on so many men and women across the generations.

Such is the nature of transformative gifts. They catch us off guard and, initially, raise our apprehension. But they quite frequently significantly transform our lives; and it is a transformation we often want to share with others. Such transformative gifts occur on a regular basis in the hospital world I inhabit as a chaplain. A man or woman confronted by a serious—often life-threatening—illness may feel their world has been dislocated if not totally shattered. They readily identify with the Psalmist’s feeling of “walking through the valley of the shadow of death.” But when they emerge and life takes on a semblance of normalcy, they will quite often comment on how much deeper their life has become. They would not want to go through it again, but they have been enriched in a transformative way. Life takes on new meaning and preciousness; it becomes clearer what is essential and what is secondary; oftentimes there is a sense of increased productivity; and each day is lived with a greater sense of gratitude.

The writer William Styron in his little book *Darkness Visible, A Memoir of Madness*, gives us a vivid portrayal of his almost totally debilitating struggle with depression. After a few years of barely managing to cope with the illness, he begins to pick up the pieces of his life once again, reminding us how many artists have had endured such blackness of night experiences: whether it be writers such as Emily Dickinson, Gerard Manley Hopkins, John Donne or Nathaniel Hawthorne; artists such as Albrecht Durer and Vincent Van Gogh; or musicians such as Beethoven, Schumann, Mahler and Bach. Reflecting on his own experience, Styron states, “For those who have dwelt in depression’s dark wood, and known its inexplicable agony, their return from the abyss is not unlike the ascent of the poet, trudging upward and upward out of hell’s black depths and at last emerging into what he saw as ‘the shining world.’ There, whoever has been restored to health has almost always been restored to the capacity for serenity and joy, and this may be indemnity enough for having to endure the despair beyond despair” (p. 84). Each of these artists would say that these transformative gifts, so unwelcome at the outset, ultimately contributed immeasurably to transforming their lives and their art for the better.

In the last few days Hollywood has released a new movie entitled *A Series of Unfortunate Events* by an author who calls himself Lemony Snicket. He has become the latest publishing phenomenon, especially among the young, having sold 25 million copies worldwide; and his stories appear to have that transformative element of being confronted with trials and struggles which eventuate in something surprisingly transformative. He concludes one of his recent stories by declaring, “It is a miracle if you can find true friends, and it is a miracle if you have enough food to eat, and it is a miracle if you get to spend your days and evenings doing whatever it is you like to do. The

holiday season, like all other seasons, is a good time not only to tell stories of miracles, but to think about the miracles in your own life and be grateful for them.”

This is the time in which we celebrate God’s gift to us, the miracle of Jesus the Christ. May our gifts, given and received, remind us of that wonderful gift. For those who find yourself challenged and overwhelmed, by forces pulling your life in the wrong direction, may you also receive the transforming gift of God’s presence and love to sustain and enrich you. Amen.