

TITLE: "What Jesus Wants for His Birthday"

TEXT: Luke 2:1-20 (NT p. 58)

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. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Introduction – Ten Spontaneous acts of good will

In the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*, by Bill Waterman, Calvin is a mischievous little boy and Hobbes is his stuffed tiger who can walk and talk and play with Calvin. Suzie is Calvin's arch enemy because Suzie is (EWWWW!) a girl.

Calvin and his tiger Hobbes are out playing in the snow and discussing the real possibility that Calvin has been so bad all year that he will get no presents from Santa. Suddenly, Calvin says, "OK, Hobbes, I have a plan."

"Yeah?" says Hobbes, his curiosity up.

"If I do ten spontaneous acts of good will a day from now till Christmas, Santa will HAVE to be lenient in judging the rest of this last year! I can claim I turned over a new leaf!"

Hobbes ponders, “Ten spontaneous acts of good will a day? That’s pretty many.”

Calvin frowns and says, “Don’t remind me.”

Hobbes turns, looks down the street and says, “Well, here’s your chance. Suzie’s coming this way.”

Calvin, true to his nature, begins making a snowball and says, “Maybe I’ll start tomorrow, and do TWENTY acts of good will a day.”

Calvin thought that Santa wanted him to do “acts of good will.” Since tomorrow is Christmas, let us ponder what JESUS would like to receive from us on his birthday.

1. Christ is in our neighbor

Let me begin with a story. It’s about a single mother and what happened to her on Christmas Eve way back in 1960, which was, amazingly to me, fifty years ago today.

In September 1960, I woke up one morning with six hungry babies and 75 cents in my pocket. Their father was gone. The five boys ranged from three months to seven years; their sister was two. Their Dad had never been much more than a presence they feared. Whenever they heard his tires crunch on the gravel driveway they would scramble to hide under their beds. He did manage to leave \$15 a week to buy groceries.

Now that he had decided to leave, there would be no more beatings, but no food either. If there was a welfare system in effect in southern Indiana at that time, I certainly knew nothing about it. I scrubbed the kids until they looked brand new and then put on my best homemade dress. Loaded them into the rusty old 51 Chevy and drove off to find a job.

The seven of us went to every factory, store and restaurant in our small town. No luck. The kids stayed crammed into the car and tried to be quiet while I tried to convince whomever would listen that I was willing to learn or do anything. I had to have a job. Still no luck. The last place we went to, just a few miles out of town, was an old Root Beer Barrel drive-in that had been converted to a truck stop. It was called the Big Wheel.

An old lady named Granny owned the place and she peeked out of the window from time to time at all those kids. She needed someone on the graveyard shift, 11 at night until seven in the morning. She paid 65 cents an hour and I could start

that night. I raced home and called the teenager down the street that baby-sat for people. I bargained with her to come and sleep on my sofa for a dollar a night.

That night when the little ones and I knelt to say our prayers, we all thanked God for finding Mommy a job. And so I started at the Big Wheel. When I got home in the mornings I woke the baby-sitter up and sent her home with one dollar of my tip money--fully half of what I averaged every night.

I started working six nights instead of five and it still wasn't enough. Christmas was coming and I knew there would be no money for toys for the kids. I found a can of red paint and started repairing and painting some old toys. Then I hid them in the basement so there would be something for Santa to deliver on Christmas morning. Clothes were a worry too. I was sewing patches on top of patches on the boy's pants and soon they would be too far gone to repair.

On Christmas Eve the usual customers were drinking coffee in the Big Wheel. These were the truckers, Les, Frank, and Jim, and a state trooper named Joe. A few musicians were hanging around after a gig at the Legion and were dropping nickels in the pinball machine. The regulars all just sat around and talked through the wee hours of the morning and then left to get home before the sun came up.

So, what does Jesus want for his birthday tomorrow? Here's what Jesus says in Matthew 25:

³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory. ³²All the nations will be gathered before him, and [Jesus] will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats, ³³and [Jesus] will put the sheep at his right hand and the goats at the left. ³⁴Then the king will say to those at his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; ³⁵for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, ³⁶I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me.’ ³⁷Then the righteous will answer him, ‘Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry and gave you food, or thirsty and gave you something to drink? ³⁸And when was it that we saw you a stranger and welcomed you, or naked and gave you clothing? ³⁹And when was it that we saw you sick or in prison and visited you?’ ⁴⁰And the king will answer them, ‘Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.’

If you want to give something to Jesus, tomorrow or any day, all you need to do is help someone in need. There are plenty of people in need. There are hungry people here in Dryden, strangers who are visiting our church this very evening, thirsty people in Ethiopia who have to walk miles to get water, children here in town who don't have

mittens, parents who don't have winter clothes and families who have no gifts for their children tomorrow.

Just the other day someone said to me, "Who ARE all these people who come to the Kitchen Cupboard?"

I just met one of the ladies who comes at Wal-Mart. A few weeks ago her husband fell off a roof at work and fractured back and he's partially paralyzed. Their daughter, and the daughter's new baby and two step children came to live with her which added four more to the four already in the cramped little house. With her husband out of work and three adults and five kids to feed, she said she would drop by the Kitchen Cupboard."

Then there was the lady who came to Kitchen Cupboard last Wednesday. The temperature was in the 20s and freezing drizzle was being blown around by a stiff wind. This lady stood by the door shivering in just a sweatshirt. Aiden took her out to the clothing shed and found her a warm winter coat. Then Allison, who was helping that night, got her food. Fran from our church had just donated a turkey and they gave her that, which she planned to bake for Christmas dinner for her and her 3 kids.

THAT'S what Jesus wants for Christmas. And that's one of the many things that we DO in this church. So, on behalf of Jesus, I want to say...

THANK YOU to those who work at the Kitchen Cupboard so that 125 to 140 hungry families each month can have food to eat. THANK YOU to those who work on the weekend backpack program that provides nutritious snacks to elementary children on weekends. And THANK YOU to those who support these ministries.

THANK YOU to our Youth Group who sponsored Christmas presents for three families in Dryden who would have no Christmas presents at all without their help.

THANK YOU to the director of the clothing shed and those who have brought clothing.

THANK YOU to those who put gloves and mittens on the Mitten Tree. Take a look at it on your way out. It's a Christmas tree covered with mittens and gloves in the fellowship hall. There are kids in elementary school who come to school with freezing hands. Now they will have gloves or mittens to wear.

THANK YOU to those who have given to support mission programs so that poor people all around the world can have food to eat, clean water to drink, clothing to wear, blankets to sleep in, homes to live in and a way to make a living for their families.

THANK YOU to those who support this church through volunteering their time to serve on committees, teaching Sunday school, singing in the choir, rebuilding our glass hallway that was caving in, those who show up on church workdays and those who support the church financially.

If you are not familiar with our church family, let me tell you about us. We are not perfect people and we don't help people in need to get "Brownie Points" from God OR more presents from Santa Clause. We are simply people who NEED God's forgiveness and we know we HAVE God's forgiveness because of what Jesus did on the cross. And we are grateful. So we worship God, as we are doing tonight, and we help people in need because we know that as we do, we do it for Jesus. And we would love to adopt each and every one of you into our church family.

Well, let's get back to "The Big Wheel," the story about the single mother with six little children and no money for Christmas gifts. As we left it, she was getting off work at early on Christmas morning.

When it was time for me to go home at seven o'clock on Christmas morning I hurried to the car. I was hoping the kids wouldn't wake up before I managed to get home and get the presents from the basement and place them under the tree. (We had cut down a small cedar tree by the side of the road down by the dump.) It was still dark when I came out of the restaurant and I couldn't see much, but there appeared to be some dark shadows in the car--or was that just a trick of the night? Something certainly looked different, but it was hard to tell what. When I reached the car I peered warily into one of the side windows. Then my jaw dropped in amazement. My old battered Chevy was filled full to the top with boxes of all shapes and sizes. I quickly opened the driver's side door, scrambled inside and kneeled in the front facing the back seat.

Reaching back, I pulled off the lid of the top box. Inside was whole case of little blue jeans, sizes 2-10! I looked inside another box: It was full of shirts to go with the jeans. Then I peeked inside some of the other boxes: There was candy and nuts and bananas and bags of groceries. There was an enormous ham for baking, and canned vegetables and potatoes. There was pudding and Jell-O and cookies, pie filling and flour. There was a whole bag of laundry supplies and cleaning items. And there were five toy trucks and one beautiful little doll...

As I drove back through empty streets as the sun slowly rose on the most amazing Christmas Day of my life, I was sobbing with gratitude. And I will never forget the joy on the faces of my little ones that precious morning.

Conclusion – Whose Birthday Is It Anyway?

Tomorrow is Jesus' birthday. There are two presents that Jesus would like to receive from you. One is for you to be part of a church family, this or another one, that worships God and serves Jesus Christ. To those in this congregation, I say "Thank you for all you do to make this church the wonderful family it is."

The second gift Jesus wants is for you to help those in need. If you are doing this, Jesus says, "Thank you."

And if you have given both of these gifts, Jesus will thank you tomorrow on his birthday, and when he comes again in glory with his angels, and forever and ever and ever.

Amen.