

“Unexpected Gifts & Hidden Blessings”

First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
December 17, 2017

Old Testament lesson: Isaiah 7:10-14

New Testament lesson: Luke 1:26-38

His name was Karol Józef Wojtyła (Voytilla). When his mother was pregnant, she had just recovered from rheumatic fever. Her doctor advised her to end the pregnancy, saying that in all likelihood, the fever had damaged the baby's heart valves. She went against her doctor's wishes and took a leap of faith, keeping her baby. Fifty-eight years later, that baby had grown to become Pope John Paul II.

If his mother hadn't had faith in a brighter tomorrow, the world would never have seen her son grow to become the first Polish-born Pope, a faith leader who was fundamental in the fall of Communism; opened dialogue between Christians, Muslims and Jews; publicly apologized for the Catholic Church's past errors; and had such a heart for young people that he created the first ever World Youth Day gathering. The Pope said he felt like another young person in the crowd. What a blessing!

Her name was Mary. An angel of the Lord came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. ... You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. Thirty-three years later, that baby had grown to become the Savior of our world, and along the way was abandoned by his friends, despised by his enemies, tortured, and put to death on a cross.

One expectant mother told of impending doom for her unborn child and he becomes a great faith leader, the Pope. Another told of her unborn child's future greatness, and she must watch him die at the hands of his enemies.

Two very different life stories. And yet, both these women received hidden blessings and unexpected gifts despite their struggles. Can we count on the same in life? The answer is yes?

God sprinkles our lives with unexpected gifts and hidden blessings all along the way. It's like the man who received an incredible gift from his brother as an early Christmas present – a brand new car.

On Christmas Eve when the man came out of his office, a boy he recognized as a street urchin was walking around his shiny new car, admiring it. "Is this your car, mister?" he asked. The man nodded. "My brother gave it to me for Christmas." The boy was astounded. "You mean your brother gave it to you and it didn't cost you nothing? Boy, I wish" He hesitated.

Of course, the man knew what the boy was going to wish for. He was going to wish he had a brother like that. But what the boy actually said shook the man all the way down to his heels. "I wish," said the boy, "that I could *be* a brother like that." The man looked at the boy in astonishment, then added, "Would you like to take a ride in my car?" "Oh yes, I'd love that." After a short ride, the boy turned and with his eyes aglow, he said, "Mister, would you mind driving in front of my house?" The man smiled, happy to let the boy show off for his neighbors – riding around in a big, new shiny automobile. But when they stopped in front of his house, the boy ran up the steps and returned shortly carrying his little, crippled brother. He sat him down on the bottom step, then squeezed up against him and pointed to the car. "There she is, Buddy, just like I told you upstairs. His brother gave it to him for Christmas and it didn't cost him a cent.

And some day I'm gonna give you one just like it. Then you can see for yourself all the pretty things in the Christmas windows that I've been trying to tell you about." The man got out and lifted the littlest boy to the front seat of his car. The older brother climbed in beside him, tears in his eyes, and the three of them began the most memorable holiday ride of their lives.

God sprinkles our lives with unexpected gifts and hidden blessings all along the way. We see this with the man whose greatest gift came when he encountered two small boys and the unexpected, unimaginable love they shared. We see this with Mary who also received an unexpected blessing beyond comprehension.

The angel speaks to Mary and she is much perplexed by his words – she doesn't understand. Mary is told she will bear a son apart from her future husband, and that "he will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High...."

That's incredible. That is both an incredible gift – bearing the son of God – and an incredible burden – watching her son bear the sins of the world.

The truth is, life is full of unexpected, hidden blessings, even amid our greatest struggles.

Mary, in turning her will and her life over to God, became a part of the greatest blessing the world will ever know. Because of Jesus, we don't have to worry about anything. Jesus is the only gift we need, past, present and future.

We see this in how the angel describes Jesus. "... The Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

In sitting upon the throne of our spiritual ancestor, David, Jesus redeems our past. In reigning over the house of Jacob, Jesus watches over our present – the world of today. And in establishing his never-ending kingdom, Jesus secures our future.

Can you imagine not having to worry about what happened in the past, what you're going through now, or what might happen tomorrow? That is the gift of Jesus, a gift beyond belief, a gift to be shared with others, in how we live our lives- forgiven, joyful and hopeful.

The problem is, many of us live our lives in fear, rather than in faith. We're so troubled by things in the past that we just can't let it go. We're so worried about how things are going these days, that we just can't see a way forward. We're so afraid of what might happen tomorrow we drag that fear into today, letting it paralyze us. And that leaves us unable to enjoy and share the gifts that God has for us and, through us, for others.

When Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" that was fear talking – fear that young girls had never in the past been given such an important role, fear of what an unexplained pregnancy would mean for her and her life, fear that Joseph would call off their future wedding.

The angel saw all these fears in Mary, and reassured her, saying, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God."

In other words, don't worry; God has this. And God will bless your life in ways beyond comprehension, despite your fears and disbelief. God knows the struggles we face, the fears you harbor, the worry that overshadows an uncertain future. And God meets all this with the power and promise of Jesus, his beloved Son and our Savior, full of wonder and power.

As you join in the giving and receiving of gifts this Christmas, remember that the greatest gift was given to us nearly 2,000 years ago. This gift came to us through a young girl who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, laid aside her fears and opened herself to receive and share God's greatest blessing – a Spirit of forgiveness that allows us to put the past behind us, a Spirit of provision and self-giving that allows us to enjoy the blessings of each new day, a Spirit of protection and salvation that washes away our worries and allows us to step into the future – a future of hope, peace, joy and love. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O great God, be near to your children, we pray. There are those among us who feel like you are distant; draw closer to them this hour.

There are those who desire so much to feel your presence; let them know your touch.

There are those who have lost hope; remind them of your truth.

We pray your presence and comfort for Fred Royal, for Ellie, for Jan and all the family. We pray for those who grieve.

We pray for those struggling with illness, limited mobility, financial difficulties, family upsets, and other troubles, that you would meet them in their need, and lead them through their difficult times.

We need the Son of God incarnate, the baby born in a manger who brought shepherds to their knees and angels to their feet.

We long for a liberating truth that cannot be contained in words but must be sung by the heavenly hosts. In short, O great God, we hunger for you.

Come to us anew, we pray, to satisfy our restless hearts, in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come,
thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread;
and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**