

Unwrapping the Presence

**A sermon by Rev. Dr. Gregory Young
Presented at the Christmas Eve Candlelight Service
on Thursday, December 24, 2009**

Sermon:

Tonight marks my 56th celebration of Christmas. While I cannot remember the first few years of those celebrations, I can look back and remember bits and pieces of most of them. For me, Christmas has always been a family time where we would:

exchange gifts,
share a meal,
and tell stories.

One of my earliest memories of Christmas goes back to when I was around 3 years old, sitting on my Great-Grandmother's lap as she read to my brother and me the story of the "Littlest Angel." As I picture that scene in my memory I can still smell my Great-Grandma Stine's perfume, and sense the love that she had for me while she held me in her arms. As I look back at my childhood I remember the Christmas that my brother and I received a Lionel train set; the time I received a new fishing pole; and, the time I received my very first AM/FM radio. I remember traveling on late Christmas afternoons to a family gathering with all of my aunts, uncles, cousins, grand-parents and great-grandparents. Gifts would be exchanged and food would be served. I remember one snowy Christmas night leaving that gathering only to have my dad's car get stuck in the snow. For many of us, tonight is filled with such memories. Times with family and friends centered around family traditions that include giving gifts, eating traditional holiday foods, and sharing the stories from the past that have served to shape our lives and who we are.

My family always opened Christmas gifts on Christmas morning. One of the things my dad liked to do when I was a child was to photograph the expressions on my

brother's and my faces as we came down from our bedrooms on Christmas morning and caught first sight of the presents under our Christmas tree. A couple of years ago I came across one of these photographs and couldn't resist framing it and giving it to my brother for Christmas. It was a gift from my heart. It was also a gift from our dad's heart.

Have you ever seen the television commercial that used to air during Advent that depicted a brother and sister opening Christmas presents? The boy is seen excitedly opening a gift by tearing off the wrapping paper and exuberantly shouting at the top of his lungs, "YES! YES! YES!" over and over again. The commercial provides us with a picture of sheer excitement and joy that only children can bring to our Christmas celebrations. Unwrapping presents brings with it anticipation, excitement and hope, as we move from the mystery of the unknown to the moment of discovery. Children help us to see the energy and excitement as they move from present to present unveiling each gift. As we grow older we start to see beyond the gift into the heart of the giver. Energy and excitement give way to a deeper appreciation for, understanding of and experience of love. The best gifts are not the biggest or most expensive, but the gifts that are given from the heart. Such gifts are given in an effort to make real, to make tangible the love that a parent has for a child, or the love that a wife has for a husband, or the love that one friend has for another. Unwrapping the presents under a Christmas tree becomes a moment of celebration and discovery as family love is seen and touched.

So it is as we come to see the presence of God in Jesus. This night we celebrate with our worship this most mysterious and wondrous event of God becoming flesh. As the story of Jesus' birth is told, each step of the way we come to see a little bit more of God's self-disclosure: The vision of hope and peace proclaimed by the prophets of old; the archangel Gabriel's annunciation to Mary; Joseph's dream to name the baby Jesus; the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem; the birth in a stable; the manger or feeding trough used as a crib for baby Jesus; the birth announcement by the angels to the shepherds; the star guiding the wise

men from the east; the visit of the shepherds and the magi's gifts, together reveal to us the wonder and mystery of God's incarnation – God taking on our flesh and our life. The annual repeating of the story of the nativity is our way of unwrapping the presence of God each year. It challenges us to see God as one who is real and who deeply cares for each one that he has created. As we come to see Jesus this night we have revealed to us the very heart of God. Jesus is the most precious gift of God given to the entire world in an act of love. This year, as you engage in your family traditions, take some time to unwrap the most precious gift of all – the gift from God's heart; the savior of the world.