Christmas gifts sometimes come in unusual and unlikely packages.

Like the Christmas my dad gave my mom a pair of earrings wrapped in progressively smaller boxes - all inside a big steel trashcan! Or my friend Robin whose husband who put a hood ornament on a chain inside a jewelry box just to see the look on her face, while he hid the real gift in his pocket! Or Cyd, whose dad brought her home a puppy in the inside chest pocket of his coat one Christmas, and asked her to "listen for your Christmas gift."

And sometimes the gifts come in simple ways we take for granted.

Like the Christmas Audrey remembers, when her kids were young, that Tom braved sleet and cold, after a grueling day at work, to put a set of new tires on her car so she’d be safe on the road. Or Tracy, whose grandchildren bought a Dollar Store ornament with their own money, and wrapped it in a whole spool of Scotch tape, which was her best present ever. Or the child in Haiti, who grinned ear to ear at the handmade doll in her shoe, placed outside her door last Christmas Eve for Peré Noel. It was her only gift.

Sort of reminds us of what is most important, doesn’t it?

It surely was like that on the first Christmas. Christmas came simply, without fanfare, almost unnoticed. So unlike the shopping frenzy we see today - in which most of us participate. We do. Hard to admit, but true.

At Old Mission, we try to do something about it, thank God. We remind ourselves that it’s not all about us with Angel Tree, Operation Christmas Child, Coats for Crosslines, Heifer Project, and this year a special Christmas offering for clean water in Haiti. I am so glad we do these things!

And still, the amount the most generous among us give away for these causes, for people we love and do not know, will pale by comparison to what we invest in Christmas for those we love and know the best.
Don’t mishear me. I am not advocating that we take the joy of “gift-giving” out of Christmas, and look to Ebenezer Scrooge as our role model! No!

At our house, we’ve already sent gifts to Alaska, and planned presents for children and grandchildren. And I’ve set some tool catalogs out for Ann in prominent locations, with a few items circled in red! I’m just saying.

I love giving and receiving gifts at Christmas as much as anyone else.

But the announcements of the birth of Jesus – to Joseph in our text from Matthew 1, and to Mary in the parallel text from Luke 1 - keep nagging me.

Consider how the birth of Jesus took place:

- It wasn’t in a palace or a castle, but a plain ordinary town;
- He wasn’t surrounded by might, or majesty, but a manger;
- The announcement of his birth didn’t come to religious leaders, or to rulers, but to regular people – like Mary and Joseph.

The woman we know as Mary was likely called Miriam מִרְיָם, her Hebrew name. Though mentioned in all the Gospels, we know her best from Luke. He tells us she was a cousin of Elizabeth wife of Zechariah, and that she was a young woman, a virgin, engaged, betrothed, to Joseph. He was, like Mary, a member of the tribe of Judah and a distant descendent of David.

Her story is from Luke 1:26-38. When the angel makes the announcement that she will give birth to the Savior, he gives two amazing gifts to us - wrapped up in this ancient story. In Luke 1:30, he says “Do not be afraid, for God is with you.” In Luke 1:37, he says, “Nothing is impossible with God.”

I don’t know anyone, anywhere, who doesn’t need those promises today.

Joseph’s story is found in our text from Matthew 1:18-23. He would have been known by his Hebrew name, Yusef יְוָסֶף. Earlier in Matthew 1, he tells us that Joseph is descended from King David’s son, Solomon, and thus a member of the ancestral tribe of Judah. This becomes important in our familiar Christmas story from Luke 2 when each Judean is ordered by Emperor Augustus to return to their ancestral city for the Roman census. In our text from Matthew 1, we discover that Joseph receives the same

announcement that Mary did, but only after he hears that she is expecting.

Verse 19 tells us Joseph is trying to be faithful to religious law and also compassionate and kind. Even today that’s hard to do at the same time.

And in verse 20, an angel appears to Joseph. Notice that the angel’s first words to Joseph are the same words Mary heard, “...do not be afraid.”

And verses 21 and 23 contain the familiar words, “She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” and, “Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name, Emmanuel (which means, ‘God is with us.’)” ²

All these years since, we have enshrined these words in the sacred story of Christmas. But I wonder if, and just how, and for whom, we believe them!

I suppose, in part, we are always moved by the Christmas story, as we are moved by the birth of each child in our families. Who among us doesn’t love a baby? Harry Reasoner once said on Christmas Eve a very long time ago, “Everyone has seen babies and almost everyone likes them. So if God wanted to be loved as well as feared, He moved correctly here.” ³

And it is still true. I brushed away a tear as I read Julie Steele’s post on Facebook about how she and Tim experienced the Christmas story retold when their Kate, born 12/15/2008, arrived. She says it was an unexpected package, unexpected timing, unexpected reward, and God’s blessing.

We each hug our children, our grandchildren, or nieces, or nephews, a little tighter, or miss them a little more, at Christmas. We do, and we should.

But when the angel said, “He will save his people from their sins,” surely it also means the sins that allow some of God’s children to live in poverty, neglect and hunger. And when he said, “God is with us” - it also means he is with them too. And if that is true, and I know in my heart that it is...

I hope, I pray, some Christmas, this Christmas, we will remember it too.

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