

CHRISTMAS EVE -12/24/18
Not the Christmas Present We Expected
(Luke 2:1-20)

A little boy once wrote to Santa: “Dear Santa, you did not bring me anything good last year. You did not bring me anything good the year *before that*... This is your last chance.” Signed, “Alfred.”

Notice that he didn’t say, “You didn’t bring me *anything* last year, or the year before.” What he *said* was, “You didn’t bring me anything *good*.”

Obviously Alfred had some definite ideas and preconceived notions of what constituted a (quote, unquote) “good gift,” didn’t he? Hold that thought for a moment. We’ll come back to it a little later...

Another wrote this, “Dear Santa, there are three boys who live at our house. There is Jeffrey, he is 2. There is David, he is 4. And there is Norman, he is 7. Jeffrey is good *some* of the time. And David is good *most* of the time. But Norman is good *all of the time*... By the way, I am Norman.”

This Norman, of course, clearly bought into what I would call “Santa Claus is Coming to Town” theology. You know how it goes, “He’s making a list and checking it twice. Gonna find out who’s naughty or nice... He sees you when you’re sleeping. He knows when you’re awake. He knows if you’ve been bad or good. So be good for goodness sake.”

In other words, according to this “Santa Claus is Coming to Town” theology, Christmas gifts and presents pretty much depend on one thing and one thing only, don’t they? What we receive at Christmas depends on how *good* or *not so good* we’ve been during the past year. But is that really how it works? Hold onto that thought as well.

Finally, it was the day after Christmas one year at a church in San Francisco. Pastor Mike was looking at the outdoor nativity scene when all of a sudden he noticed that the baby Jesus was missing from the figures.

Immediately, Pastor Mike headed to the office to call the police. But just as he was about to go inside, he saw little Jimmy with a red wagon coming around the corner. And in the wagon was the figure of the infant Jesus from the nativity scene.

So Pastor Mike walked over to Jimmy and gently asked him, “Say Jimmy, where did you get the baby Jesus in your wagon?” And Jimmy replied, “I got him from here at church.”

“And why did you take him?” asked Pastor Mike.

And with a sheepish grin, Jimmy said, “Well, about a week before Christmas, I prayed to the little Lord Jesus. And I told him that if he would bring me a red wagon for Christmas, I would give him a ride around the block in it.”

An example of how, again, we sometimes wish for certain *specific* presents at Christmas. Especially when we’re young.

Now I was no different. In fact, I still remember one Christmas when I, too, had a very *specific* wish. As I recall, sometime during the weeks leading up to the holiday that year, I had been out shopping with my parents. And, despite all the wonderful toys and games that were on display there in the store, I was utterly captivated by one in particular. So much so that I told my parents that I hoped Santa would bring it to me at Christmas.

I'm guessing I was about four or five years old at the time. Which explains why I was even interested in this *particular* toy. You see, it was a doll.

But before you start jumping to any conclusions, I have to add that this was no ordinary doll. It was a Popeye the Sailor Man doll. Now remember this was the early 1960's and toys were not as sophisticated as they are today. So this Popeye doll was pretty simple really. He had a rubber head, but only a cloth body. But, to me, he was just about the coolest, neatest, toy I had ever seen.

Apparently, he was also my hero at that tender age. I used to watch his cartoons on the television every afternoon. And I especially liked how, whenever Popeye or someone close to him (like Olive Oyl or Swee' Pea) was being bullied – especially by the offish Brutus, he would simply pop open a can of spinach, gulp it down, and experience this astounding transformation to super strongman who would quickly beat up the bad guy and his henchmen, and save the day.

As I say, he was my hero. Especially since I had already encountered a few bullies of my own, even at that young age.

Well, the wait for Christmas that particular year seemed even longer than usual. And every day, several *times* each day, I would think and dream and fantasize about that Popeye the Sailor Man doll. And, needless to say I couldn't wait for Christmas Day to finally arrive.

At long last it did. And that morning, as I viewed the stack of presents underneath the tree with my name on them, I quickly spotted a box that was just about the right size, just about the right dimensions of the box that the Popeye doll at the store had been in. So I made a beeline for it, ignoring all of the other presents, even the ones that were clearly much larger. And, as I tore into the wrapping paper, I was almost beside myself with joy and excitement. Surely this was the Popeye doll I had been expecting and longing for all those many weeks!

Once I had stripped off all the wrapping paper, down to the plain cardboard box underneath, I hesitated for just a second before opening it. And there gently nestled inside the box, wrapped in protective tissue paper was the doll... Only it wasn't Popeye. No, not at all! I couldn't believe my eyes! Instead of my hero Popeye there was the cutest, most adorable little *baby doll*! Complete with a removal diaper and matching T-shirt.

"This can't be!" I thought to myself. "How *can* this be? How could Santa get it so wrong? Didn't he listen to what I wished and prayed for? How could he do this to me?"

Struggling to hold back the tears, I was almost inconsolable. But my parents, to their credit, did their best. "It must have been a mistake up at the North Pole," they reassured me. "Or maybe the elves packed the wrong present. And once Santa gets back home to the North Pole, he

will quickly realize this mistake and then make it right. Don't worry. Don't be sad. You'll still get your Popeye doll," they comforted me.

But it only worked up to a point. And to say that I was devastated would be an understatement. So much so that even today, all these many years later, I don't remember any of the *other* Christmas presents I received that day. Only that I didn't get the one I *really* wanted; the one I was hoping for...

...So here's the thing. I suppose you're wondering where I'm going with all of this? Is there a point to my story, you may be asking yourselves.

Well, as a matter of fact, there is. It's simply this: That very *first* Christmas was really not all that much different. You see, for centuries the prophets had promised God's people that a king descended from the line of David, their most beloved king, was coming into the world. And the people envisioned a very *specific* kind of king; a powerful, warrior king who would defeat all of their enemies, restore Israel's fortunes, and return their nation to its former glory. A great leader who would meet all of their expectations and accomplish everything they hoped and prayed he would. In short... a hero.

Remember the story of that little boy named Alfred? Just like him, God's people had some definite ideas and preconceived notions of what this promised king would be like.

And remember Norman? Like Norman, they felt, they believed, that they would be rewarded for their faithfulness and deeds. Only the truth was they were only good *some* of the time, rarely *most* of the time, and never *all of the time*. The truth of the matter was that very often they

were actually *unfaithful*, and their deeds almost never matched up with how they viewed and thought of themselves.

Nevertheless, as the years passed, and as decades passed, and even centuries came and went, these expectations rose to a near-fever pitch. They were practically beside themselves. They couldn't wait. They were almost overcome with excitement over the prospect that their promised king, the promised Messiah, was going to come into the world. They *deserved* nothing less...

Moreover, just like little Jimmy, who wished for a wagon, and *me*, all those many years ago who wanted that Popeye doll more than anything, God's people, again, were wishing – year after year – for a very specific gift; a very specific kind of king and ruler...

And then, one day, he arrived. But not at all in the way they were hoping and expecting. And he himself was not at all what they expected either. Instead of a powerful king born into a royal family with all the pomp and acclaim one would normally assume... this promised king was born in a stable – not a palace... to a poor, young peasant girl – not a princess... and was placed in a manger; nothing more than a feeding trough for the animals – instead of a cradle befitting such a birth and such a king.

Seriously? This can't be! This makes no sense; absolutely no sense! Wasn't God listening to all of our prayers and wishes down through the centuries? How could God get it so wrong? So terribly wrong?

And instead of being born to great fanfare and acclaim, this promised king, this long-awaited king, was born with almost no one knowing even

what had just happened. Some mangy shepherds, working the overnight shift watching their flocks, were the only ones to receive this glorious good news. Virtually no one else; at least at first.

Oh, some months later, three wise men finally showed up. But they were foreigners, and the exception rather than the rule. Everyone else? Everyone else was completely oblivious to what had just taken place. Everyone else completely missed or ignored this wonderful thing that God had done; this wonderful promise that God had fulfilled with the birth of Jesus.

Many years would pass, in fact, before the truth slowly began to be revealed. And, even *then*, people had a really hard time believing, they had a really hard time conceiving, that this child born in a stable, raised by a simple carpenter and his wife, and now a poor itinerant rabbi himself, was somehow this promised king, the promised Messiah, foretold centuries before by the prophets.

And when Jesus died on the cross instead of raising up an army to resist their enemies, it didn't make any sense either. None at all. But this was what took place. This is how such an unlikely king accomplished his mission.

Only later, afterwards, when he rose from the dead on Easter morning did it finally begin to make sense. Only when he rose victorious over sin, death, and evil did people finally begin to understand the divine plan...

On that first Christmas Day, you see, God literally got undressed. God stripped off his finery and appeared in human flesh. God gave up his power, and came to this earth as a vulnerable newborn child.

God came to be “with us” in the only way that we could comprehend and appreciate. Not as a mighty warrior. Not as a typical hero-figure. But as one of *us*. Because only by becoming *one* of us, could God in Christ truly fulfill all those promises; all of our hopes and dreams. Only by becoming one of us could Jesus truly help and save us.

Not at all what any of us ever expected. Not at all what we always hoped for and dreamt about. But God knew better. God didn't send us what we *wanted*. God sent us instead what we *needed*...

So just to tie up some loose ends...

In case you were wondering, I finally did get my Popeye doll. But even though it was exactly what I wanted, and I enjoyed playing with it for a while, I finally moved on to different toys that soon occupied my attention. And, after a few years, Popeye's cloth body finally wore out and fell apart, leaving just the rubber head, that my brother Dave and I ended up using for a basketball to shoot baskets into our toy chest. It just goes to show you, I guess, beware of what you wish for. Sometimes it's not all that it's cracked up to be.

And now, all these many years later, perhaps that gift of a baby wasn't the right one for me. But, looking back to that *first* Christmas long ago, it certainly was for all of God's people.

Amen.

