

“A Generous God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
Christmas Eve – December 24, 2019

Luke 2: 1-20
Isaiah 9: 2-7

As a preacher, I can tell you that one of the most challenging and daunting tasks each year is preaching on Christmas Eve. There are familiar scriptures, with a story we all know very well. What new thing can be said about Mary and Joseph, and the babe, lying in a manger?

For me, I tend to start listening for the Spirit’s guidance around the beginning of December. If an idea hasn’t come by December 15, I start begging the Spirit to talk to me! I try to listen for a theme, a phrase, a story that speaks to me – and hopefully to all of us – that year.

This year, the Spirit was most helpful and got to work early this month. In fact, it was the first week of December, leading up to our Intergenerational Christmas Program on December 8. We had four terrific stories that were acted out by children and adults in the church. In-between each story we not only sang a Christmas carol, we also shared stories of giving from John Knox. The Education Team had asked the Mission Team to brainstorm about different ways we have witnessed giving and generosity in our church this year.

As I reflected on the joy of giving and wrote three of the four stories from our church, the theme of generosity hit me square in the face. The season of Advent is a time to prepare for the events of tonight, the coming of God’s Son, God’s light shining through the darkness of this world. Ultimately, this night is about a gift – an incredibly generous gift which none of us deserved, but has nevertheless transformed our lives by our loving, generous God.

For a moment, put yourself in God’s shoes and consider what all had transpired before this night more than two thousand years ago. As the Almighty, you decide to create something beautiful – this world and all that is in it. You make lakes and valleys, mountains and deserts, oceans and skies. You spin the earth on its axis, so that there are beautiful sunrises and sunsets, and thousands of stars in the night sky. You make creatures of all different sizes and shapes and colors to inhabit this world you have made.

And yet, something is missing. It’s still not the fullest expression of your being, and only one thing will complete that. So, out of the dust of the earth, you breathe life into flesh and bones. Human beings are formed – male and female – in your very image. They are to be caretakers of this world you have made. You feel content and pleased with this gift you have created – and you take a day to rest from your labors.

Only there’s a problem. These humans you have made don’t always act grateful for the gift you have given them. They hide from you. They bicker with one another. They begin to believe they don’t need you, don’t need each other.

They treat this gift you have given to them with indifference, forgetting the love which motivated you to make it – to make them.

You try different methods of reconnecting with them, but prophets and miracles and the like don't change their minds or their ways. They drift further and further from you, losing perspective on the generosity you bestowed on them in the first place. It's as if the gift you've given them is tossed in a pile with other unwanted gifts, and never a thank you is written.

If you were in God's shoes, and this was how your generosity was received, I don't think anyone would blame you if you walked away. When we give someone a gift that we have invested a great deal of our time in, and that person doesn't treat it with the same level of respect or gratitude, we are often led to turn away. Why would we want to be generous to them again? Why would God want to be generous to us again?

This night is holy because God chose to be generous, not resentful. This moment is sacred because God did not want to walk away, but instead yearned to draw closer to humanity. We are here tonight because God is generous in Emmanuel – God with us – Jesus Christ.

Instead of turning his back, God worked through the most ordinary of humans to show how much we were still loved. A teenage girl, a scared young man, a bunch of poor, dirty sheep-herders, an innkeeper who offered a small space – these were the human beings through whom God chose to express his extraordinary generosity. "Do not be afraid," these ordinary humans were told by God's messengers. What God is doing is wonderful, blessed, full of goodness and hope: "I bring you good news of great joy for all the people." Love has come down in human form. Despite humanity's past, God chose generosity.

How do you respond to that gift? What are you led to do when you are shown such incredible generosity? We read that as the shepherds returned, they glorified and praised God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them (Luke 2:20). Will we do the same? Is this our field outside Bethlehem where we encounter the angels? Are we led to go to the manger and worship the embodiment of God's generosity? How do we respond to this gift?

As I wrote those reflections on giving for the Christmas Program earlier this month, I heard the Spirit lifting up our praise and thanksgiving for God's generous gift this night. I realized that many in our congregation are witnesses to "this thing that has taken place," and through acts of generosity they are responding with gratitude to what God has done on this holy night.

It is humbling and powerful to hear people say how much they are grateful for the time someone spent to take them to a doctor's appointment, or to the store, or out to lunch when they had no one else to turn to.

It is humbling and powerful to hear people become excited to work together and contribute their time, talent, and resources to hold special events which welcome our neighbors from our community.

It is humbling and powerful to watch people comfort and strengthen those who are grieving, with a listening ear, a warm meal, or an offer to just be present in their loss.

And I will tell you this: it will be humbling and powerful for all of you to hear next month of the deep gratitude and generosity which our church has experienced and will continue to experience. Mark January 26 on your calendar and plan to be here – you won't want to miss it. How's that for a teaser?

I believe how we live our lives in response to this generous gift of God tonight speaks to how much we trust our lives to this gift of God. I believe when we extend generosity to others – friends and strangers, family and neighbors, young and old – we extend the love which God has shown us in Jesus Christ. God's gift was not given out of a desire to manipulate us or forcing us to love God. God's gift was given out of a desire to remain connected with us as his beloved children. When we give out of joy and love, rather than guilt or control, we mirror the same generosity which God has extended on this holy night. In a world that is fractured, divided, and fraught with strife, I believe being generous in our giving is what God calls us to do with every breath we are given on this earth.

My friend, George Pasley, is a Presbyterian minister in Tennessee, and he wrote the following poem for this Advent and Christmas:

In a world overflowing
With violence,
Shaken by war,
Torn apart by hatred and fear,
May you find peace
In prayer for peace.
May you find hope
As you hold one small candle.
May you find joy
In the mere whisper of a song.
And may you find the grace to love
In being loved by a child
Who gave himself to us
In wild abandon
Because God so loved the world.
(George Pasley, December 2019)

As we go from this place, may we respond to our generous God as the shepherds did, glorifying and praising God for all we have heard and seen.

Thanks be to God. Amen.