

Sermon for Christmas Eve

December 24, 2018

The Rev. Paul LeClair

Isaiah 9:2-7 Psalm 96 Titus 2:11-14 Luke 2:1-14(15-20)

Awaken us, O God, to the wonder of your generous love
And give us a sense of the true miracle of Christmas.

- The Rev. Renee Miller
- me

“What do you want Santa to bring you for Christmas?”

is a question we often ask children at this time of year.

Adults may ask of one another, “What do **you** want for Christmas?”

Much of our holiday planning also demands us to focus on what we desire.

What should I prepare for my guests for our Christmas meal?

How shall we prepare the Christmas Eve service, to include a variety of music
and provide a way to involve the children?

A few years ago, Darius Rucker, former front-man for Hootie and the Blowfish,
released a Christmas album which included the song *What God Wants for Christmas*.
It describes someone sitting in traffic, who’s observing a street-corner Santa,
busy shoppers, and a manger scene, and then begins thinking ...

 I wonder what God wants for Christmas;

Something that you can't find in a store,

Maybe peace on earth, no more empty seats in church,

Might be what's on God's wish list.

I wonder what God wants for Christmas.

“Oh, come on now,” we might say. “God doesn’t have a Christmas wish list.”

Really.

In our confession on most Sundays, we pray,

“For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ, have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen”

If we're sincere in our intention to delight in God's will
and if our aim truly is to walk in God's ways, then we **do** have an understanding
that God **does** have a desire regarding; what we should do, and how we should act.

Every time when we pray the Lord's Prayer, we say,

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done.”

By these words, we **are** affirming that God **does** have a will for us.

So, I believe God does have a Christmas wish-list.

Let's see if we can figure out what might be on God's divine mind.

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Our Christmas Eve scripture selections could be a good place to look for clues.  
Based on them we can discover five things God wants for us and desires of us.

In the Christmas narrative from Luke's Gospel,

we heard the angel say to the shepherds, “Do not be afraid;  
for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy, for all the people.”

And in Psalm 96, tonight, we read, “Sing to the Lord a new song.

Let the heavens rejoice, and let the earth be glad;

let the sea thunder and all that is in it;

let the field be joyful and all that is therein.

So, we could say that the first item on God's list is: **for us not to live in fear.**

People's fear is why shepherds lived separated from the rest of society  
at the time of Jesus' birth.

Fear is why Augustus ordered that a census be taken.

Fear is why Herod ordered the murder of innocent children.

**God's** love, and the ways **we** express unconditional love,  
is how we can overcome fear.

Item two on the list might be: **for us to realize that God cherishes us.**

Going back to the angel and the shepherds, the angel said,

“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth, peace  
among those **whom God favors!**”

We need to be cautious with the word *favor*. Sometimes it is used to express preferential treatment, favoritism, where some are given benefits, and others are excluded. That is *favor* on a human level.

On a heavenly level *favor* means to aid and assist.

Divine favor encourages everyone. It benefits all of God's children.

None are held in higher esteem nor are any cherished any less than others.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah, “The yoke of their burden,  
and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, God has broken.”

Item three on the list of what God desires, is:

**For us to seek God and the truth of God's love for us.**

Inspired by what they heard from the angel and the heavenly chorus,  
the shepherds desired to know more, to see for themselves, to seek the Lord.

Much like what Isaiah had said centuries before,

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light.”

The shepherds had been inspired and enlightened. And so they said to themselves.

"Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place,  
which the Lord has made known to us."

- Studying together in our Tuesday morning book study group;
- our discussions on our Discernment Sundays about the many ways God call us to serve;
- and taking classes offered by the Whitaker Institute;

are just a few of the many ways we too can “Go to Bethlehem”

and seek to know more about: that “which the Lord has made known to us.”

Next our list is: **For us to take time to reflect on God’s word which we have heard, read, or experienced.**

Luke’s Gospel tells us that “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

After their visit to the stable and after worshipping the Christ Child in the manger, the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

On Sunday mornings, we read the word of God, and listen to a sermon as a way to ponder in our hearts what we have heard.

At the Sunday evening service, we discuss and ask questions, in order to treasure God’s word, much like Mary did.

Our Sunday worship also includes prayers and songs by which we imitate those humble shepherds; glorifying and praising God for all we have heard, and all we have seen, and all we have experienced.

During the week, as individuals, some of us use *Forward Day By Day*; others have our own private prayer and devotions (which may include praying for the names on the weekly Refrigerator Page) as our way of worshipping the infant in the manger who grew to become our Lord and Savior.

That brings us to item five on the list of what God wants for Christmas:

**For us to persevere** despite the challenges and obstacles we may encounter, in order to live according to God's will, God's desire and plan for us.

Isaiah's writings tell us, "There shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom.

He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness."

In his letter to the Christians of early church, Titus encouraged them to "live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly,"

and to be "people who are God's own, who are zealous for good deeds."

When there was no room in the inn, the innkeeper continued to find a place that Joseph and Mary could use for shelter.

Even though the place where the animals were kept, was not an ideal place to spend the night,

Joseph and Mary were willing to use even those miserable accommodations in order to provide a shelter where their child could be born.

I wonder if **we**, can either individually, or as the church, or as a nation, be creative, like the innkeeper, in finding ways to help homeless persons; or creating means to protect refugees; and taking measures to assist those who are in need of food and medical care?

 I wonder what God wants for Christmas

What might put a smile on that face?

Every Bible with no dust, the devil giving up

Might be what's on God's wish-list ...

I wonder what God wants for Christmas.

By the nature of our human condition, we all have obstacles in our lives. We all experience the death of loved ones, we deal with health challenges, and have financial hurdles to jump, as well as the wide array of other difficulties that life throws our way.

How **can** we deal with so many troubles and trials?

Well, let's consider the five things tonight's scriptures tell us about what God desires for us.

1. Not succumbing to fear
2. Recognizing that we're God's cherished children
3. Turning to God in prayer and worship
4. Seeking to understand, by way of study and fellowship, how God is with us
5. And relying on God's strength to persevere as we face the unknowns of life.

Mary showed this kind of perseverance when the angel, Gabriel, announced that Mary had been chosen to bear God's Son.

Her response was, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me, according to your word."

Her desire was that God's will and hers would be one.

 I wonder what God wants of us at Christmas.

What kind of gift from you and me?

More sister, more brother, more lovin' one another

Yeah, I wonder ... I wonder what God wants ...

By now we oughta know ... what God wants for Christmas.

Yeah, by now we oughta know.



A poem written by Christina Rossetti was the basis for the lyrics to the Christmas carol *In the Bleak Midwinter*.

In it the singer contemplates what gift to give the newborn Savior.

What can I give Him, Poor as I am? —

If I were a Shepherd, I would bring a lamb;

If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part, —

Yet what I can — I give Him, — Give my heart.

In our prayers, through our music, in the silence,

and as we approach the altar rail for holy communion;

let us give God, who came to us in the infant Jesus,

whose Spirit dwells with us now ...

... let us give what we can.

Let us give our hearts.

Amen

Sources:

*The New Interpreters Study Bible*, NRSV with Apocrypha, Abington Press, Nashville, 2003

*What God Wants for Christmas*, Songwriters: Monty Russ Criswell, Darius Rucker, Frank Rogers,  
Lyrics © Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, Universal Music Publishing Group, Spirit Music Group

*In The Bleak Midwinter*, Words: Christina Rossetti Music: *Cranham*, Gustav Theodore Holst