

Sermon for December 21, 2014– Advent 4

Romans 16:25-27 (NIV84)

Theme: **Find Joy in God's Gift . . .**

- 1) *Which remained wrapped until Christmas,*
- 2) *Which was opened before your eyes,*
- 3) *Which you can share with your friends.*

²⁵ *Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past, ²⁶ but now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him-- ²⁷ to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.*

Since there are only four more days until Christmas, gifts are starting to appear under our tree. The children are excited. They can't wait to open all those wonderful boxes with their names on them to see what's inside. I can also imagine one of my daughters being just as excited to tell all her friends about her Christmas experience.

Do you know what? This childlike anticipation and joy for opening a gift fits well with our sermon text: a text that encourages us to always be rejoicing in Jesus and sharing the good news about him with others.

With the apostle Paul as our guide, let us: **Find Joy in God's Gift** for us. It is a gift 1) *that remained wrapped until Christmas,* 2) *that was opened before our eyes,* 3) *that we can share with our friends.*

Part One: Which remained wrapped until Christmas

Our sermon text is the concluding verses of Paul's epistle to the Romans. After writing a wonderful letter - filled to the brim with important doctrines like explaining the way of salvation, and how we can thank God with our lives - Paul concludes his letter with a doxology that both praises God for his work of saving us and commits all believers to the Lord's tender care.

Paul writes: ²⁵ *Now to him who is able to establish you by my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ. . .* What exactly is Paul's Gospel – his good news for the world? It is the proclamation of Jesus Christ: that is the message of who Jesus is and how He saved us from our sins through his life, death and resurrection for us.

Paul says that this Gospel was *according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past.* What exactly does this mean? Imagine receiving a gift in the mail from a long lost friend.

It's totally unexpected, but meant specifically for you. This is how God's salvation came to most of his lost creation. Because the Gentile world was not under God's special covenant given at Mt. Sinai, they had no clue about the special gift God was planning for them in Jesus until He actually came.

But there is also another way this gift was a mystery – even to the Jews who knew that the Messiah was coming. Imagine a grandpa telling his grandkid that he will buy him a bike for Christmas. The child does not know much about the bike – just that it is coming and that people like his parents (who know the details but aren't sharing them) tell him that he will absolutely love it!

In a similar way God gave his promise of salvation, but did not fill in all the details. For example, right after Adam and Eve sinned, he promised that one of Eve's descendants would crush the devil's power, but He did not tell them exactly who this person would be or when He would come. The Lord simply gave them enough information to trust Him, and look forward to that coming Savior in faith. As time progressed, the Lord continued to remind his people of the coming Savior – giving them hints to His identity. For example, He told them that he would be a descendant of King David and establish an eternal kingdom. They knew that He would come from Bethlehem and that he would suffer and die for the forgiveness of their sins. God even provided prophecies regarding his resurrection; and yet, in spite of all this, the identity and work of Jesus himself was still a mystery – wrapped up in the paper of prophecy.

And so God's Old Testament people looked forward to Christmas: to the day when God's gift to mankind would be revealed. Like a child investigating his wrapped Christmas gifts, trying to figure out what they might be, St. Peter tells us that: *Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow. . . Even angels long to look into these things. (1 Peter 1:10-11,12c NIV84)*

I want to pause here a moment to ask: Do we have the same excitement for God's great Christmas gift that the Old Testament prophets and angels had? Sadly we must confess: not always. And why not? Because the world often entices us to pursue the glitz and glitter of what it offers instead of God. We often find ourselves thinking this or that material thing will fulfill our innermost need for peace and value, all the while neglecting the gift that gives us eternal peace and true value. The truth is that nothing in this world matters compared to the gift of Jesus that God gave us on Christmas. And yet, do we find joy in him as we ought?

This sad truth about ourselves, should lead us to confess our sins to God - pleading: ¹² *Restore to me the joy of your salvation and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me. (Psalm 51:12 NIV84)* And do you know what? God is very happy when we turn to him in repentance and faith. He is more than willing to give us joy in His gift of salvation – a gift He opened before our eyes in the person of Jesus.

Part Two: *Which was opened before your eyes.*

Oh, how wonderful it is to live after Christ's birth! Unlike the Old Testament prophets, we get to read the Gospels and see God's great gift of salvation revealed in the person of Christ! What a treasure! But, without the Old Testament prophecies, we would not have known whom to look for. This is why Paul says that: the proclamation of Jesus Christ is *now revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God.*

How do we know that Jesus is the Savior and not some religious nut like David Koresh? Only Jesus fulfilled every Old Testament prophecy concerning the Savior, that's how! Jesus was born in Bethlehem in fulfillment of the prophecy found in Micah (5:2ff). He was born a descendant of David, in fulfillment of our Old Testament reading (2 Samuel 7:11ff). He was born of a virgin as prophesied by Isaiah (7:14). I could go on and on, but the point is this: not only does Jesus reveal the meaning of the Old Testament Scriptures, studying the Old Testament Scriptures are important for us to know exactly who Jesus is.

Oh how privileged we are in having both the Old and New Testament Scriptures! How so? Because we get to study the very details prophets and angels longed to know. We get to read about God's love from beginning to end: how patiently He accomplished our salvation by sending Jesus to live, die and rise again.

Since God's great Christmas gift of forgiveness lies unwrapped on the pages of Scriptures for us to rejoice in anytime we want, let us immerse ourselves in the great joy this gift offers our sin-sick souls. And how do we do that? By making Bible study our top priority. Do not let inconveniences like cold or hot weather, lack of sleep or vacation prevent you from hearing the Gospel of Christ Jesus at church. And if work, severe sickness or disability keep us from coming to Church, let us make every effort to keep connected with the Gospel, watching the services on cable or downloading them from our Church website. If you don't have access to these things, call me and I will make sure you get a DVD or written copy of the sermon. I will come and offer you Holy Communion at your house or in the hospital. Come to Bible class whenever you can and learn to read your Bible at home. Let the Gospel ever be in your eye and heart, so that the peace, joy, love and hope it produces may always occupy your heart and mind. Find joy in God's great Christmas gift for you and share this joy with others.

Part Three: Which God wants you to unwrap in front of the eyes of others.

There are few things more heart warming than watching a person open up the perfect gift and seeing the joy on their face. Experiencing that is just as great as getting the perfect gift for yourself. What a blessing it is, then, that the Christmas gift God gave us is a gift He encourages us to share with others.

Paul says that the Gospel is *revealed and made known through the prophetic writings by the command of the eternal God, so that all nations might believe and obey him.*

God wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Timothy 2:4). He wants all people to know his Son, but, unfortunately, for many people in this world, God's gift of Jesus is still a mystery.

And this is where we come in. God wants us to open the gift of His Gospel before the world. He wants us to reveal to those who are still shrouded in ignorance, the beautiful message of Christmas: that God sent His Son to be the Savior into the world. But how do we do this?

Listen to what St. Paul writes earlier in Romans: *"Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."* ¹⁴ *How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? . . .* ¹⁷ *Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. (Romans 10:13-14, 17 NIV84)*

How do we unwrap God's great Christmas gift before the world? By simply telling others about Jesus! Use the opportunities God gives you to give the reason for the hope we have to those who ask you - and do this with gentleness and respect. (cf. 1 Peter 3:15) It is that simple.

But you might feel, "I don't know what to say. I am not an expert in the field. I might offend someone." Well, let me address those fears with an illustration. When children get a fantastic Christmas gift that they absolutely love, what do they do? They tell everyone they can about it. They aren't afraid of offending others. They aren't afraid to talk just because they don't know exactly all the ins and outs of how their great gift works. So what do they say? They talk about the great gift given by the giver, and how happy it makes them.

This is exactly how we can witness God's great Christmas gift to others. Be so overjoyed at the love of God that you talk about him. Talk about how much Jesus means to you. Speak from your heart, and you never will be at a loss for words, because your love and happiness will show. And what if they are offended? If you speak the truth in love, there is nothing to worry about. If they are offended, then that is their problem for rejecting God's great gift. You, on the other hand, can continue to rejoice in it, for God's Christmas gift, as you well know, is Jesus himself given to be your Savior, your God, and your eternal life in the glories of heaven.

Therefore, *to the only wise God be glory forever through Jesus Christ! Amen.*