

Most of you know that I like musical worship services. I think it runs in my blood. And Christmas is always a challenging time for me as I try to include as many Christmas hymns in the worship services as possible, and there are so many of them.

Of course there are also many Christmas *songs*, not hymns about the birth of Jesus but songs about another famous person associated with Christmas; SANTA CLAUS. We know a lot of those songs, songs that I doubt will ever end up in a worship service. One in particular is a Christmas song that everyone here probably knows. It starts, “You better watch out; you better not cry...” I think parents make it a point to teach their children this particular song, because of the effect it has on children. The message is clear; you better be good if you expect to get anything nice for Christmas. Why? Santa Claus has some inside knowledge about your behavior throughout the year. He has a network of spies, informants (maybe my parents are among them!), who somehow pass information to good ol’ Saint Nick, who transcribes this information onto two lists, one “naughty” and the other “nice,” and depending upon which list your name is written you will either get the cool new toy or you’ll get a pair of mittens (I used to *hate* getting clothes for Christmas; why would Santa even consider using valuable space in his sleigh for a pair of mittens unless he *knew* it would upset you and thus lead you to the assumption that your name ended up on the wrong list!) So when Christmas was getting close, the lyrics to that song, “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town,” would enter my consciousness, as it must have to millions of other children, and behold, parents would truly experience peace on earth if only temporarily – because once Christmas had passed children would forget all about Santa Claus for the next 10 months and their behavior would deteriorate rapidly. If you graphed the average of children’s “naughtiness” on a one year time scale it would look like a sine wave, with incidence of naughtiness being at its low point on December 25th of each year, after which it would rapidly rise, only to recede again sometime after Halloween.

Now, under most circumstances, the message that this song sends is relevant; good things come to those who are nice, while a pair of mittens come to those who are naughty. As children grow older they put this principle to the test, in education and then into their careers; if you study hard and do your homework, you'll get good grades which will lead to a good job, and you do well at your job and it will lead to promotions, which means you'll earn a decent wage, and then you won't have to wait until Christmas to get all those cool toys! Christmas comes year round for you, as far as the receiving of presents is concerned. That's the reward for being good, for goodness sake.

But whether at Christmas or at another time of the year, we all learn that this "goodness" principle doesn't always seem to work. We do everything good, and we don't always get the coolest action figure or the newest Barbie doll. Sometimes we are disappointed, and we may even feel betrayed.

Which brings me to Jesus. Jesus was a present that all Israel was waiting for. Yes, the nation had gone through some periods of naughtiness, but God also promised that good things would come to all the good little people of Israel. Tonight you heard several prophecies from the Book of Isaiah. The first one sounded a lot like "Santa Claus Is Coming to Town" with a lot of explicit details about what would happen to those who were naughty – or what had already happened to them - a lot worse than getting a mere pair of mittens for Christmas. The second reading sounded a lot better; while the unrighteous would be trampled under foot, a child would be born who would establish peace and justice which would last **forever** – which is much better than an action figure or a Barbie doll as far as grown-ups are concerned! The third prophecy gets more specific; the meek will be lifted up, and the peace that this messiah will establish will involve all of nature (as wolves will live among lambs), and "the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord." This is the promise that God makes to his people Israel as they prepared for the first Christmas. This was certainly an incentive for the children of Israel to avoid naughtiness and embrace niceness.

And then the big event comes! A star appears in the east and magi start following it. On the night of Jesus' birth, angels singing and there is a cosmic light show, and all the shepherds go off to Bethlehem to see God's wonderful Christmas present to the human race, their savior, their messiah. And you have to imagine that everyone must have been a little disappointed. It's like this gift was wrapped so beautifully, but when they opened the lid it was a pair of mittens. If the shepherds had indeed heard the prophecies about a king being born who would "raise up the meek" and establish eternal peace and justice, they must have wondered if this was the right package. As was clear from the location of this child's birth, the parents weren't exactly well-to-do; this child was not likely to be educated among the best and the brightest of Israel. Power and authority did not seem to rest on his tiny shoulders, nor were they ever likely to. If there was anything surprising about the Savior's birth, it was not that he was more than what the shepherds expected; it was that he was far *less*. He was a gag gift, a pair of mittens, hardly anything to get excited about. And it must have left a lot of people puzzled; *How can this child be the One who brings peace and justice to the world?* That may be the untold story of what happened between the time of Jesus' birth and the time that he started preaching; people forgot about him, like he was just another pair of mittens. Maybe they stopped believing that he really was the messiah. Or maybe they just devalued him. God really was sending us a pair of mittens.

What the children of Israel failed to understand, and what we too often fail to understand, is that Jesus is a gift that comes in two installments. Christmas was the beginning, not just of Jesus' life but of God's reign on earth. Jesus is the prince of peace, the lord of lords, and anyone who confesses that Jesus is lord of their lives will tell you he is the best gift that anyone could ever receive, **because he has given them new life seen through new eyes. Jesus makes it clear to us that God is not like Santa Claus** because God does not give to us according to our level of niceness or naughtiness; **God just gives**. That, my friends, is the essence of grace; it's giving unconditionally, not based upon your niceness or naughtiness, but based upon the fact that God loves you, period. There was never a

contingency for Jesus entering this world; the incarnation did not depend upon our worthiness. GOD JUST MADE IT HAPPEN.

Many children learn the same thing at Christmas; parents may SAY that Santa sees you when you're sleeping, that he knows if you've been bad and will set aside a pair of mittens for you if you've been naughty, but I believe that parents give to their children based on love and on what they can afford to give, not based on a child's naughtiness or niceness, AND IT'S GREAT THAT CHILDREN CAN EXPERIENCE THAT KIND OF GIVING BASED ON LOVE AND NOTHING ELSE. This is the nature of God's gift to us at Christmas.

Jesus demonstrates that quality of love to us; that's the first installment. We see God's character, and the character of God's kingdom on earth, through Jesus. And it is a kingdom that is more than we had ever imagined. It's a kingdom of true peace that results from true justice which springs forth from true love which is planted in the heart of everyone who lives under Jesus' authority.

The next installment is yet to come. While the Christian can claim to have Christ ruling his or her heart, we still have other powers that try to rule over this world. Jesus' return will mark the end of those powers. We live in that in-between time, but we can't just sit back and wait for things to happen; we make things happen. As kingdom-dwellers, we are also kingdom-builders as Christ works through us to establish his reign.

So when we look at a little baby born in a manger in Bethlehem, we are looking at a gift that is greater than we can ever imagine, the gift of Immanuel, God with us, and it's a gift that comes with a promise of an even greater gift to come. And if you've been touched by God's love, you know that you don't have to worry about when that second installment is coming, because you'll never get tired of the first gift. May the love of God through Jesus Christ fill your heart and mind, and bring you immeasurable joy this Christmas.