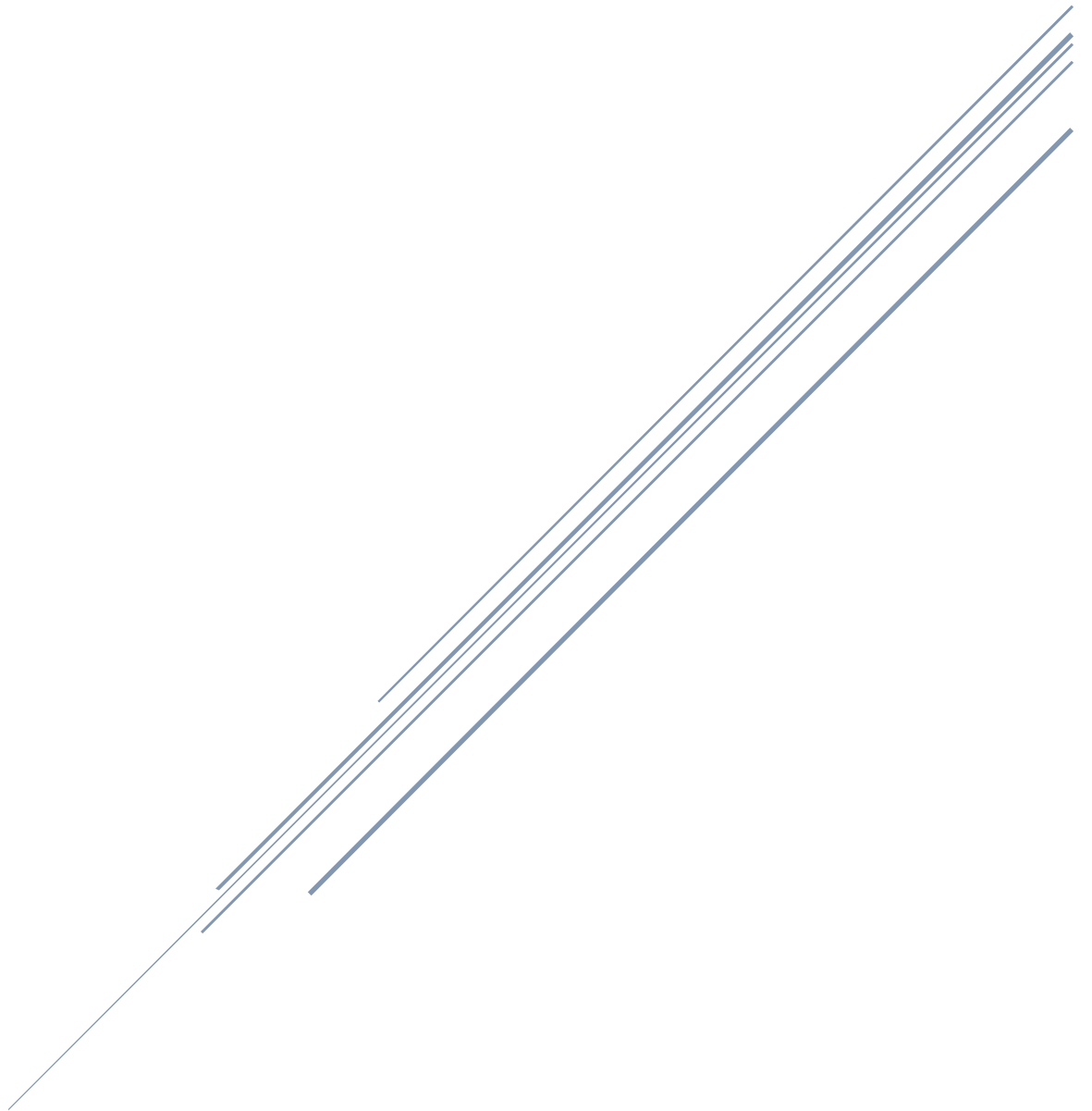


THE GREATEST GIFT

Isaiah 9:1-7 & John 3:16-17

December 29, 2013



Well – we made it through Christmas! I know you're all probably still pretty tired, but we're still pretty excited, right...

And what are we excited about?

Wait – don't tell me...I know....we're all excited because Christmas is the time when Christians all over the world celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ -- the incarnation of God as the Messiah....That God took on flesh and came to Earth to walk among us, right?

Well in all honesty – don't you think the thing most of us are excited about is going home to play with our new toys... I mean, the whole season has been leading up to this moment, hasn't it?

Starting in October, in fact! ... The tree, the lights, the caroling, the bake sale, the Card Exchange, the dinners, the special music every Sunday, the two totally different services on Christmas Eve...

And I must confess, I'm about ready for that "long winter's nap" I keep hearing about!

Quick confession, now...How many people are more excited about the Christmas STUFF than we are about the real Christmas event.

Imagine for minute How it must have been back in the day...2,000 years ago on that first Christmas....when the angels came to the shepherds one night and told them OK – it's time! He's here! The One you've been waiting for has been born!!

The Jews of the first century had been waiting for hundreds of years and they probably all knew these words of the Prophets by heart:

"The people walking in Darkness have seen a great light! On those living in the land of deep darkness, a light has dawned!"

That was the reality of living in first century Palestine, you know – they were living in a land of deep darkness... the Roman military occupation of Judea and Palestine would get pretty ugly sometimes...

The passage goes on...

"For to us a son is given, and the government will be on His shoulders! He will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace! Of the greatness of His government and peace there will be no end!"

They all knew that passage alright! Jews, Gentiles, even the Pagan wise men from the East knew the prophecy and everyone was psyched!

And when the shepherds and the wise men received their Christmas gift on that first Christmas day what did they do? They told everyone they knew! They shouted it to the world – “Good News, everyone!!”

We are so excited about blessing our toys and playing with them when we get home... half of them may already be broken -- or obsolete!

We're all excited about that new tablet, outfit, or power tool – I'm looking forward to a pair of new shoes.... Yeah, we're excited about those gifts, but what about the gift?

... there's one gift that we may have overlooked...or we've opened it and we're just not really using it.... What if I told you that the best gift of all is still sitting under the tree?

God has given us the most amazing gift we can imagine and most of the time we look at it and say, “Oh, how nice, it's just what I needed,” -- and it is... but then we don't use it.

Do you remember those giant boxes we played in when we were kids -- Those appliance boxes? They were more fun to play with than any toy, right?

Well, that's what it's like with God's gift...

We can climb into the box and pretend it's a fort, or a cave!

It's a boat! I'm a stowaway!

I'm George Washington on the Delaware!

Look – I'm a robot! I'm R2D2!! (with punch bowl on head)

...or wait – look! It's a space suit. I'm an astronaut!

Or a suit of armor – I'm a brave knight going out to slay the mighty dragon and save the damsel in distress!

Or better yet -- It's the full armor of God! I'm a good Christian! I must be! I look like a good Christian... I do all the things a good Christian does... I go to church, and I volunteer, I give to the church – I even bring casseroles to the pot lucks!

We play with our faith like a child plays with a box – a box that something miraculous came in! We wear it around town like a costume -- but we forget all about the real gift that God gave us for Christmas –

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.

(have kid go get gift from under tree?)

Imagine – if we had the same unbridled enthusiasm of a child at Christmas when we open Gods great Christmas gift.... How beautiful that must be to God – watching his children open their Christmas gift... (show tag) -- The greatest gift ever...

...unconditional love beyond our imagination and the power to be children of God. But wait! Power... and as someone once said, “with great power comes great – responsibility!” Did God give us a gift that comes with responsibility? You bet! We are responsible to love each other and our neighbors as we love ourselves, whoever our neighbors might be. We are responsible to be the hands and feet of Christ - and the mouth and the ears and the heart of Christ. We are responsible to see with the eyes of Christ and reach out with the arms of Christ. So only one question remains... (put cross on table)

You have been given the greatest gift ever given... The question remains...(put crown of thorns)

What are you going to do with it? Will you pick it up and use it to its fullest? Or will you leave it under the tree and just play with the box?