

Promise!

Four Gifts of Christmas:

Luke 1:11-20

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Bethany Church

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I suspect some of you are procrastinating, some of you are chipping away, some of you are stuck and fretting, some of you are super-organized and nearly done, and some of you – mostly men – are relying on someone else to do most, if not all, the Christmas shopping. Some times it is really fun to give a gift. I'm really gratified when I know that my gift supplies a real need and enriches a life. Other times, I wonder if my gift is a burden to someone I care about and if it does no more than take up closet space. It is said that the king of Siam often gave gifts to get even. When he was troubled with a bothersome attendant or adviser, he would purchase and present them with a white elephant that would soon eat them out of house and home. They would be plundered by the royal gift because its expensive care could not be long sustained. Diane and I were part of a very interesting and annual white-elephant gift exchange with other pastor couples. We got some very unique things that plundered closet space. I think we finally gave away the horse shampoo. Sometimes, people are plundered by the gift of Christmas. To them it is a white elephant. It plunges them into debt as they seek to express their love to others. It drains their souls as they reunite or just think about their families that suffer turmoil or loss. I remember opening a gift 35 years ago that was both painful and precious. It was the last Christmas gift that my dad picked out and gave to me. He had died 11 days earlier. That year Christmas was especially painful, but it also was exceedingly precious.

In Christmas God has given us four gifts that you need and that will enrich your life regardless of your finances, family situation or health. God's Christmas gifts to you are meant to help you now.

However, before we examine the first of these Christmas gifts, you must *understand it's yours*. What good is a gift if you think it belongs to another? The words in the Scriptures we read are for you right now. They belong to you. They are God's gift to bless your life right now. If you will benefit today, you must understand that the gift is yours and you must *unwrap its meaning*. If you never unwrap and discover what the gift is, you never benefit. Sometimes, you tear off the wrapping and see the gift, but you don't know what it is for. God has sent me today to help you unwrap and comprehend his gift to you. Then it is up to you to *utilize its purpose*. If you get a snow blower, but never blow snow, what have you gained? If you receive a wrist watch, but never set it or wear it, what has been gained? Not the intention of the giver! The giver wants you to benefit.

The first gift God provided you in Christmas is seen repeatedly in the Christmas story. It is all over the pages of the Bible. God gave you promises. You can see their impact on a Jewish priest named Zechariah. It was his turn to burn incense before a curtain that separated the most holy place in the temple from those who served God in the temple. No priest could approach this holy place unless they personally went through extensive cleansing and then coals from a fire that burned a sacrifice for sins were placed on the altar to burn the incense. As Zechariah faithfully carried out this task and angel stood at the right of incense altar he was working at. The angel told him not to fear, that God had heard his prayer, not just for his nation, not just for his people. No, God heard those prayers and also the cries of his heart for his wife. The promise he was given of a child was to bless a nation for which he burned incense, but it was also to bless

his wife and him. Unfortunately, he was crippled because of his unbelief. He became mute. Do you think there is a lesson in his experience for us? How excited are you about something you don't trust? Could the physical muteness that Zechariah suffered capture our muteness that results from not believing God's promises for us?

There are three important things to remember about a promise. Each promise signals a future. To be sure, there is a lot of uncertainty about our future, but a promise tells you what is certain. The promise tells you that in the dark and murky future, you can be clear about this event or experience. For example, when marriage vows are given, the groom is saying to the bride (and vice versa): "whatever unfolds for you, ill-health or wholeness, wealth or poverty, if I'm alive, I'm with you." Each promise seeks a response. The promise giver wants you to know something ahead of time so that you may avoid certain things and do others. If I promise to meet you somewhere, I expect you to be there. If I carry out my promise to meet you but you don't show up, I've not broken my promise, but you've not benefited from it. Every promise seeks a response, and every promise stands on character. Some promises go beyond the ability or character of a person to fulfill. How many people have promised to stop drinking, smoking or stick to a job and failed to do it? The value of any promise we make depends on the character or ability we possess to deliver. God's promises depend on his faithfulness and power. They do not depend on our effort. The promise of a Messiah depended only on God's faithfulness and power. He needed no help from us to fulfill it; however, our experience and benefit from the promise depend entirely on our response.

With Zechariah, the promise was a son. It was an invasion of God's Spirit into the life of that son and by extension into his family and human history. It was a destiny of truth, repentance and renewal. To be sure, there were conditions in raising that son in order for Zechariah and the

people to benefit from God's promise. What Zechariah and Elizabeth would do with this promise would affect everyone they love and the nation to which they belong.

With Christmas, God visited the earth in a promise. Christ came as a baby, and each baby is a promise. Satan would try through Herod to destroy that promise, but God would preserve it in Egypt. The promise would unfold as the baby grew, and it benefited all who recognized their gift. God's kingdom would unfold and demons and disease would retreat in Jesus' ministry as a promise to us all. The promise did not die in crucifixion. Instead, our redemption from judgment was secured. It is a promise and a gift for those who recognize it as theirs.

When you string out the Christmas lights or see them as you drive, do you see the promise? When you see the rich reds and dark greens, do you recognize the promise?

Candy was abandoned by her parents, abused by her adopted parents and orphaned through a car accident. As other people gathered with their families, the lights and trees that signaled the approaching festivities accentuated her loss and loneliness. She would descend into depression and usually was hospitalized by Christmas day. All she saw in Christmas was the festivities and her loss. She did not see God's gift to her. She did not see or believe the unfolding promise that Christmas offers. She was crippled, not because of her loss but because of her unbelief.

For so many wading through uncertainty and loss, it is the promise that gives us strength. It is the promise that directs our thoughts and actions. It is the promise that provides us perspective. It is the promise that made our family loss 35 years ago, not merely bearable, but it made the season more precious and helpful. The Bible says:

No matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ. (2 Corinthians 1:20, NIV)