

In our Advent theme, Gifted, Chris helped us to open two of the very beautiful gifts that Christ brings to us, not just at Christmas, but potentially every day of the year: Joy and Peace. We agreed that these gifts are way superior to any gift that jolly old St. Nick might bestow because unlike Santa's gifts, the gifts from Christ are lasting, from grace, not earned, and kept with a promised delivery. And Chris made clear that as with any gift, they need to be received and opened to be enjoyed!

Today the gifts we will unwrap are found in the gospel of John's Christmas story. Each of the gospel writers - Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John - recorded a unique birth story for Jesus. Matthew gives us Joseph's perspective and the arrival of the magi from the East and their escape to Egypt. Mark just jumps right in to the story with Jesus' baptism by John the Baptist. Luke gives us Mary's story from conception to the shepherds and the blessings of Simeon and Anna. And John? Well, John gives us the grand story, the overarching story that begins in the beginning. It is perhaps the birth story from Christ's point of view as related by the Apostle John! He tells the story in the first chapter of his gospel. Listen carefully and perhaps you will spot the gifts we unwrap today.

Read: John 1:1-18 Glenna will assist in the reading. Prayer...May your spirit of truth bring understanding to us as we ponder your Word to us today

The gifts we open today, packaged in the person of Jesus, are Life and Light: John says "In Him was Life and that Life was the Light of mankind." The Life John speaks of here is Zoe in the Greek. Zoe is God-Life. It is the self-existent life that depends on no one or thing to keep it going. It is eternal, lasting forever. It is life that looks just like God: good, love-filled, full of justice, patience, faithfulness, kindness, generosity - just like God as revealed by the life of His son Jesus. When you read the words "eternal life" in the gospels, you are reading the word zoe: Jesus confirms John's proclamation throughout the New Testament saying - the water I give will become a spring of water welling up to zoe; whoever hears my words and believes in him who sent me has zoe; I have come that they might have zoe; I have come that they may have zoe and have it to the full; I am the resurrection and the zoe; I am the way, the truth and the zoe. Jesus life was the God-Life incarnated. He lived infused with that kind of life because He was as John says He was with God, and was God, and was with God in the beginning, having made all things. He gave the gift of life to those who received Him.

Our physical lives (bios in Greek) on the other hand are not self-existent and we depend on many things to keep us going - food, water, oxygen, shelter, protection, all kinds of provision and support. We are pretty much dependent creatures - given the breath of physical life bios at birth and it ends when we stop breathing and our hearts stop beating. Zoe is eternal life.

We are infused with this eternal, God-life, not later or just when we die, but now. It is a gift we are given for living in our bios existence. Like any gift it must be received and opened. As I pondered this in my preparation for today, I wondered: I know I am still living (alive with bios life) but am I Zoe-ing? Am I engaged in, embracing, experiencing the God-Life found in Jesus, His gift to me? What does it mean to Zoe - to live in the eternal life of God now? Jesus gives us the path in his final recorded prayer for his followers: John 17: 3.. He is praying to his father God, “ Father, now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”

The key word here is know - it is a knowing found in relationship. How do we experience daily the living of God’s eternal life? Through coming to know Him ever more deeply, intimately day by day. Through relationship! The words from Richard of Chichester (1197-1253) , made popular in the theater production of Godspell come to mind: **Day by day, day by day**, oh dear Lord, three things I pray, to see You more clearly, love You more dearly, follow You more nearly, day by day. A simple three-step plan to live in Zoe, getting to know God the Father and His Son Jesus.

The first gift we open this morning is Life - Zoe! The second gift we unwrap from John 1 is elated to it. “In him was Life and that life was the Light of mankind.” Light is absolutely essential to life here on earth. Light allows us to see, it gives definition, color, depth, detail. The light of the sun helps grow our food and brings energy to our world. Without that physical light we can stumble, get lost, be unable to interface fully with our surroundings and world. Ask one diagnosed with macular degeneration or glaucoma.

John claims, and Jesus Himself asserts, that He is the Life-light that has been given for us all. John 14:6 “I am the Light of the Word,” Throughout his ministry Jesus brought light to the metaphorical darkness through his teaching, and interactions.

But he also brought light to people living in actual darkness - those who were blind. In Mark’s gospel ch. 8 we witness the healing of a blind man...his eyes darkened, his life unfulfilled because “To be born blind was a debilitating handicap. Being blind forced one to depend solely on the charity of others.” and to add insult to injury “The blind were considered unclean - excluded from Temple worship...”

Mark 8:22-26

They (Jesus and his disciples) came to Bethsaida, and some people brought a blind man and begged Jesus to touch him. He took the blind man by the hand and led him outside the village. When he had spit on the man’s eyes and put his hands on him, Jesus asked, “Do you see anything?” the man looked up and said, “I see people; they look like trees walking around.” Once more Jesus put his hands on the man’s eyes. Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw everything clearly.

I have lots of questions about this healing story: How long had he been blind? What was wrong with his eyes? Why did Jesus use such an earthy way of healing - spitting and touching? Why doesn't it quite work - doesn't complete the job. Did Jesus goof up?

Or perhaps... was the man not ready for healing? I wonder... We note that it was others who brought him to Jesus and requested the healing. Did he lack personal faith? Was he afraid of being healed? After all, being able to see would not only open up his world to him but also bring the demands of responsibility, participation, adulthood. Then I had a more kindly thought, maybe full sight, all at once, would have been overwhelming. Think of a time when you have left a darkened space, entered bright light and couldn't open your eyes, had to squint, until your eyes had adjusted. Whatever the truth may be, Jesus works with the one before him, healing in the very best way for that man, for his circumstances. It was a healing that emerged, unfolding as the man had the capacity to receive it. This thought is comforting to me since I wrestle with my own blind spots on a regular basis.

An important fact about blindness is that for us to see, our eyes have to be healthy organs because Light needs a pathway to enter. The man's eyes were not functioning - his light receivers were damaged!!

The musician/poet, Leonard Cohen wrote in his song Anthem "there is a crack in everything, that's how the light gets in."

I want to suggest that the man had a crack - his blind eyes. The crack was an isolating reality, a daily trial for him. But because of the crack of his imperfection, he met Christ, the Light of the World, who gave him light and sight. Through his very blindness, his crack, the light of Jesus entered.

Where are your cracks? Where are mine? Right at the places where we need healing by Jesus. Some need physical healing for sure, but we all need spiritual healing, because none of us are perfectly whole - yet. We all have our own personal cracks. In humility we can all truly say, "Light of the world shine in and on me!!" When His light shines in us, we then become little lights to shine in our worlds. Jesus says in Matthew, You are the light of the world. Let your light shine!! Jesus, the light of the world and he has made us bearers of that light so that we can let our lights shine and bring glory to God. Light is so important - a treasured gift.

It is no surprise or mystery that lights have become such an important part of our preparation for Christmas from the lighting of candles, - one small candle overcomes the darkness - to the decorating of trees and buildings, businesses with strings of

beautiful light to shine in the darkness of winter days and nights. This advent as we decorate our homes with glistening lights, let us ponder how our lives bring light to our families, friends, neighbors, to our worlds.. And let us shine on. "In Him was Life and that life was the light of the world. Let it be so.

We will finish this time of considering Jesus the Life and Light of the world by singing together an almost carol: Please stand as you are able: Light of the world you stepped down into darkness, opened my eyes let me see beauty that made this heart adore you. Hope of a life spent with you.