

Accepting the Gift

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

2nd in a four-part series

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Isaiah 40:1-9 (NRSV)

Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.

²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's
hand
double for all her sins.

³A voice cries out:
"In the wilderness prepare the way of
the LORD,
make straight in the desert a
highway for our God.

⁴Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be
made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.

⁵Then the glory of the LORD shall be
revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has
spoken."

Mark 1:1-13 (NRSV)

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

²As it is written in the prophet Isaiah,

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way;

³the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight,'"

⁴John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

It is a tougher question than we might think. Will we genuinely and fully accept the gift of the Christ child that God has offered to us?

Christmas will soon be upon us, a deluge of gift-giving unrivaled by any other season. Here's a question that comes to my mind every Advent: Am I better at receiving a gift or giving one? How would I respond to a stranger who came up to me and tried to give me a gift? Would I think the person a little nutty?

How about you? Would you immediately try to figure out the angles? Would you try to reject the stranger's gift for fear of obligations that you might incur by accepting the gift?

⁶A voice says, "Cry out!"

And I said, "What shall I cry?"

All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of
the field.

⁷The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows
upon it;
surely the people are grass.

⁸The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand
forever.

⁹Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good
tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
"Here is your God!"

Would you, perhaps, run to your closet to grab one of the generic presents you've stored there to make sure that no gift you receive goes unreciprocated?

I think we know the answers to these questions. The truth is that for many adults it is much easier to give than it is to receive. Contrast this to children. They feel under no compulsion to reciprocate every gift they are given, as if they could. A small child accepts a gift with open arms, giving no thought to any future obligations! Indeed, we consciously teach our children to be suspicious of such "free" gifts because we understand that we live in a flawed world where predators can take advantage of small children's openness and cheerful receiving. We teach our children that it is better to give than to receive as we try to move our children from selfishness to selflessness. But we lose something along the way. We lose our ability to rightly see and appreciate God's gifts to us.

In the 18th chapter of his gospel, Luke gives us the following brief story about Jesus and small children:

¹⁵People were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they sternly ordered them not to do it. ¹⁶But Jesus called for them and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. ¹⁷Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."

Christians sometimes, and wrongly, assume that Jesus is saying that we need to be as simple or naïve or unlearned as children when we approach the Good News. Instead, as Walter Liefeld notes, Jesus is talking about the attitude "essential for receiving God's grace. It is not age per se that is in view, but childlike qualities such as trust, openness, and the absence of holier-than-thou attitudes."¹

And this is why it so hard for us adults. We've worked hard for what we've got. We've earned it – the old-fashioned way. The idea that what we have is a gift from God is counter to the worldview most of us actually embrace, even if we claim otherwise. Frankly, this very problem underlies the difficulty so many of us have in grasping the essentials of the Christian proclamation. We have as much trouble accepting God's free gift of salvation as we do acknowledging that what we "own" came from God. As we saw in the *Christianish* series, a majority of Christians mistakenly believe that we earn our way into heaven, into eternal communion with God. If we've earned our "ticket" then we haven't accepted a gift at all.

Yet, there lies the babe in a manger. God himself in the flesh. Incarnation isn't something we could ever accomplish; it could never be anything other than a gift. Still, we have such trouble truly accepting the Good News of this gift.

But accept it we must! The Creator of the Cosmos has offered himself to us in the most personal and intimate way imaginable. How could we even imagine turning away?

Despite that, we have trouble grasping that the stirring proclamation of comfort and freedom brought by the prophet of Isaiah 40 is about a gift, an outright gift. The Israelites didn't *deserve* redemption from slavery in Egypt, just as they didn't *deserve* to be freed from exile in Babylon. Yet, God promised freedom and delivered on that promise.

So it is with you and me. We don't really *deserve* rescue from the mess we've made of this world and of our lives, but God promises rescue and God has delivered on that promise in the faithfulness of Jesus.

Baptism signifies our entry into the people who have availed themselves of the rescue offered by God through Christ. We baptize infants because they are taken into this new family of the rescued, much as infants were carried in their mother's arms across the Red Sea as they fled from slavery into freedom.

¹ From Walter Liefeld's commentary on Luke in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, F.E. Gaebelin, Editor, 1984, Zondervan

This is the weekend that St. Andrew's confirmation class steps forward, ready to be Christians on purpose, believers by their own choice. Though they were baptized as infants, taken into the community of Christ by their parents, these teenagers are stepping forward to affirm their own faith and trust in their Lord, Jesus. They are accepting God's gift in their own right.

Yet, even as we embrace all that Confirmation signifies, we inevitably ask ourselves how much choice we really have in the matter of our acceptance. It feels like a real choice, yet many would argue that God chooses whom God chooses, that some are predestined to eternity with God and others are predestined to . . . something else.

Such questions swirl around St. Andrew. I know, because rare is the week that someone doesn't want to get into this with me at least a bit. I suppose we will be struggling to understand our role in our own rescue until Jesus returns. Until then, here are a few thoughts that may be helpful.

Free to choose? ANDs and ORs

I don't have much space left, so let's cut to the chase. God chooses us AND we choose God. It is that simple. Both are taught repeatedly in the Bible. We are a chosen people AND we have chosen God. There is no "OR" here. Indeed, Christianity is a *both/and* faith. Here are a few more of our "both/ands". Jesus is fully God AND fully human. God is three AND one. We are saved AND we are being saved. The kingdom of God has come already AND not yet. We get into trouble when we go too far in emphasizing one side of the "and" at the expense of the other. John Wesley understood the importance of the "both/and" better than many. Wesley was determined to lift up both sides of the "and," avoiding the mistake of thinking that he could resolve the mystery.

Admittedly, all this takes a big dose of humility. We want to resolve the seeming paradox, especially those of us, like myself, who tend toward first meeting God with their minds. But most Christian heresies over the last two thousand years have arisen from the attempt to figure all this out, invariably falling down on one side of the "both/and" or the other. Roger Olson recently wrote an excellent history of Christian theology, *The Mosaic of Christian Belief*, organized around fifteen both/ands of the Christian faith. I recommend his book.

So, yes, God chooses us. The arrival of the infant Jesus is God's work and God's alone. And the people of God are those to whom God has chosen to reveal the Son. What a remarkable claim, that the Creator of the universe has chosen to reveal himself to me. Surely, this ought to make us humble, not arrogant. As Paul wrote, "For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing: it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:9).

Yet, of no less significance is my own choice to love God, to choose God, to embrace and rely on the one born to a Galilean virgin. The people of God are called to love God and love neighbor. And for love to be love it *must* be freely given. By definition, love cannot be coerced. You can't threaten someone into loving you, or terrify them, or even bribe them. They might act lovingly toward you, but love has to be freely given or it is not love. No one desires to be loved by a robot. C.S. Lewis rightly noted that God did not create tin soldiers who had to obey their creator or had to love their creator. God desires from us a love that is freely given; anything else is not love.

It is hard not to emphasize one side of the AND over the other. Perhaps we tend to at different times in our lives; for example, at times we may especially need the confidence of knowing that God has chosen us. But, in the end, our challenge is to maintain balance, to cling to the AND.

This Advent, embrace the "and" as you reaffirm and celebrate the outright gift God has given you, even as you eagerly grab hold of the hope and promise and peace that is embodied in the babe in a manger.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. How can we go about learning to be better receivers? This is absolutely critical to grasping the depth of God's grace and our dependence on him. Most of us don't like being dependent on anyone. I, for one, used to make an idol out of my independence and self-reliance. How do we teach our children about our dependence on God? How do we wean them from their selfishness but still help them to become cheerful receivers?

2. What is your reaction to the ANDs of the Christian faith? How can it truly be that God chooses us and we choose God? It is certainly not hard to find passages in Scripture that support both. As Christians, what do we do when we come to mysteries that seem to be no more than contradictions? You might also discuss how it is that love is the key to understanding the importance of our free choice.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. *The Advent Readings are all drawn from the Common Lectionary. You might ask yourself why these Scripture passages were chosen for Advent.*

<p>Monday, Isaiah 11:1-10 Written 700 years before Jesus, the prophet describes the coming of the peaceful kingdom of God.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Malachi 3:1-4 God will send a messenger who will test us and prepare us for God's arrival.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Luke 1:68-79 Zechariah's song about the one who will bring salvation. Zechariah was the father of John the Baptizer.</p>	<p>Thursday, Philippians 1:3-11 Paul's thanksgiving for the Christians in Philippi.</p>
<p>Friday, 2 Peter 3:8-15a Advent is not only about looking back, but also looking ahead to Jesus' return and the consummation of God's work.</p>	<p>Weekly Joys and Concerns</p>

