

A Better Than Anything Christmas
Advent week 2: The Gift of Forgiveness

If you were with us last week, you heard that **not only is Mary miraculously pregnant** as a virgin, but also her **cousin Elisabeth**, who is unable to have children and old, has become pregnant. Mary will give birth to the Messiah and **Elisabeth will give birth to John the Baptist**, who is the one who will point people to the Messiah.

The angel Gabriel then visited Zechariah, the husband of Elizabeth, and said here's what happened. ¹³ **But the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. ¹⁴ You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord...¹⁸ Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure this will happen? I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years."** ¹⁹ **Then the angel said, "I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was he who sent me to bring you this good news! ²⁰ But now, since you didn't believe what I said, you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born. For my words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time." Luke 1:13-20**

Zechariah, Elisabeth's husband, when told by an angel that his wife was pregnant, doubted. Therefore, the angel made him unable to talk. Which is not always a bad thing. A little tip to you young men, "When your wife is pregnant, speak less and choose your words wisely."

After the baby is born, the family takes the baby to the temple at the appointed time for his circumcision. This is also the time when the baby is named, typically after someone in the family. Elisabeth surprises them and says, "The baby's name is John. This surprises the rest of the family, so they ask Zechariah. He writes on a tablet, "His name is John." As soon as he is able to speak, he begins to prophesy concerning his son and his role in God's story. Here's a portion of his prophecy over his son.

"And you, my little son, will be called the prophet of the Most High, because you will prepare the way for the Lord.⁷⁷ You will tell his people how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins.⁷⁸ Because of God's tender

mercy, the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us, ⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, and to guide us to the path of peace." Luke 1:76-79

The phrase I want us to focus in on is, "...how to find salvation through forgiveness of their sins." Salvation, being rescued or saved by God will be connected to "the forgiveness of sin." As a spiritual insider, or Jew, you would say, "Of course, we are forgiven because of the sacrifices that happen in the temple, but mostly because we are God's chosen people. That makes us forgiven."

But it sounds like Zechariah is saying something different. This salvation through forgiveness is connected to the Messiah, to whom John will point the way. Clearly God is doing something different that is for all people.

What we are talking about is one of those gifts that God gives us through Jesus. Those gifts will make this a Better Than Anything Christmas. In other words...Forgiveness is a gift.

A gift is not earned, that would be payment for goods or services. It's based upon God's grace.

But that doesn't mean that it's something you get by saying a prayer and assuming your life doesn't have to change. No, this forgiveness that God gives us because of his grace is anti earning, not anti effort. You can't earn it but once it's given there is absolutely effort involved in living in it.

Listen to what Mark says in his Gospel. **So I will prove to you that the Son of Man has the authority on earth to forgive sins.**" Then Jesus turned to the paralyzed man and said, ¹¹ "Stand up, pick up your mat, and go home!" Mark 2:10-11

If I can heal a person's sickness that is based upon what sin has done to this world, then I can forgive sin too. Now we see that this salvation that comes through the forgiveness of sin has one source, Jesus.

So stop trying to earn it or pay for it. Trying to earn it means it's not a gift. It's about my desire to be in control. It's like demanding to pay for a gift after opening it. That's embarrassing and rude.

So how is this forgiveness of sin a gift from God through Jesus? It's a gift because...1. It is the only path to God's other good gifts.

It's a gateway gift!

One must go through forgiveness to be rescued, it is the only path from where we are to where we need to be.

It's like this, **"If you can't handle this gift, then the others will be useless to you."** If you want your child to learn how to handle a gun safely, you don't start them off on an automatic assault rifle. It's like getting an automatic assault rifle as your first gun instead of a BB gun, a pistol, a small caliber rifle. You jump straight to the M16. You can't handle the M16 with no experience or wisdom that might create restraint.

You don't get a Harley before you get a tricycle, bike with training wheels, a ride around town bike, a state of the art mountain bike or touring bike. You can't handle the mountain bike at 5 years old.

Forgiveness is the batteries on Christmas morning. If you don't have them, the other stuff doesn't work.

Through Jesus, God's part is done, once for all. Our part is to respond or acknowledge two things, the truth about ourselves, and what has been done for us that we could not do ourselves.

You can't skip this gift and get the other stuff like peace, purpose, love, acceptance...All of the stuff that our hearts ache for cannot be ours if we try to jump over this one. Jumping over forgiveness is choosing religion over a life transforming relationship with Jesus. It's choosing Tylenol when you really need surgery.

So how do I receive this forgiveness as a gift? It was also written that this message would be proclaimed in the authority of his name to all the

nations, beginning in Jerusalem: 'There is forgiveness of sins for all who repent.' Luke 24:47

Repent is to put a foot in the ground and pivot about face. It is acknowledging those two realities we just spoke of. It is acknowledging that I am sinful; I have sinned and will continue, I'm addicted to it. It is also acknowledging that I don't have an answer for this, the remedy. The only answer, or remedy, is Jesus and what he did for me on the cross.

I believe that there is a temptation to try to avoid forgiveness. There are two reasons why I believe that good people would do this.

#1. It means we have to own up to our sin. We have to fess up to our desire to be in control; it's the kingdom of me. Let's just not look at that too much. Instead let's just try to do a lot of good things and religious things in order to make up for it.

#2. Deep down, you don't feel like you are worthy of forgiveness that you want and continually fail to earn it. That is also about control.

The first can lead to pride, the second can lead to feelings of worthlessness and despair.

Again, we must recognize our need for forgiveness and that it is the only path to the other things our heart yearns for, but cannot have.

So how is this forgiveness of sin a gift from God through Jesus? It's the only path to Jesus' other gifts and it's a gift because...**2. It brings the light of Jesus to illuminate more of the path.**

Is there anything more frustrating than wondering if you are on the right path? It's like standing in a line forever at a store, airport, or government office only to find out you were in the wrong line. You're standing there seeing people who seem to know where they are going, passing your long line, and going in different lines that seem to be moving faster, and doubt creeps into your mind. Do they know something I don't? Am I wasting my time? What will I do if I stay here and find out 30

minutes later that it is the wrong line? Or, **what if I leave** to stand in another shorter line only to get to the counter and have someone point toward the line I was in first.

Life is complex. There are all kinds of ways to approach it. There are plenty of **voices trying to tell me what path** I should take from what I wear, what I do for a living, and how I plan for the future.

I desperately want light shining ahead of me on the path, even if it's just a little bit. I am in **uncharted territory** in my **ministry** and in my **family...**

to open their eyes, so they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God. Then they will receive forgiveness for their sins and be given a place among God's people, who are set apart by faith in me.' Acts 26:18

Did you notice those two phrases after "receive forgiveness of their sins". The next gifts are **"a place among God's people, who are set apart by faith in me."** Those two phrases held define the path I am to take.

#1. I am among God's people, therefore, Jesus is my example and my guide.

#2. I have been set apart by Him. That means he has something for me to do, **"Good works that he has created ahead of time."** That speaks of a path or direction my life will take if I keep following the guide. **It's really more about the guide and the direction** as it is about knowing the exact path. **He will illuminate what I need when I need it so that I don't wander off.**

So how is this forgiveness of sin a gift from God through Jesus? It's the **only path** to Jesus' other gifts and it **brings the light of Jesus** to illuminate more of the path. And it's a gift because...**3. It brings peace.**

Not diversion, which is what the gifts of this world provide and what Christmas has become in our culture. The gifts of this world will if not

divert our attention for a moment, which doesn't help, **or it will numb us to what is going on.**

The Hebrew word is shalom, which means wholeness, completeness. This is not the absence of conflict.

"I am leaving you with a gift—peace** of mind and heart. And the **peace** I give is a gift the world cannot give. So don't be troubled or afraid. John 14:27**

It's not a diversion or a drug. It affects the mind and the heart. And yes it is a gift that the world cannot give. Now access it by not being preoccupied or afraid.

But there's more...I have told you all this so that you may have **peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the **world.**" John 16:33**

Now it clearly states that peace does not mean removing trials and sorrows. It means something that we get in the midst of those trials and sorrows. You don't wait for times to get better and then, because it is better, I get this peace. No, it is in the midst of all that this world can pile on us.

Would anyone like some shalom right now in 2020? Of course we do, but you have to open that first gift, forgiveness, before you get the gift of peace.

So how is this forgiveness of sin a gift from God through Jesus? It's the only path to Jesus' other gifts and it brings the light of Jesus to illuminate more of the path. And it's a gift because it brings peace. And finally...4. It is designed to be regifted.****

Forgiveness is meant to spread.

But when you are praying, first **forgive anyone you are holding a grudge against, so that your Father in heaven will **forgive** your sins, too." Mark 11:25**

It's the gift that once it is given to me, then I have the ability and responsibility to pass it on.

So what does that really mean? An initial forgiveness, even though seemingly insignificant, can become an avalanche if it is passed on by each who experienced it.

Forgiveness heals relationships, ours with God and ours with those around us.

Forgiveness is mandatory in any relationship that is intimate, life giving, and that lasts.

Relationships are better than things. So I guess you could say relationships, as God intended them to be, are better than anything, particularly at Christmas.

But there is a great difference between Adam's sin and God's gracious gift. For the sin of this one man, Adam, brought death to many. But even greater is God's wonderful grace and his **gift of forgiveness to many through this other man, Jesus Christ. Romans 5:15**

What Jesus did coming as a baby and dying on a cross was better and more powerful than what Adam did getting us into this mess.

Steps of Obedience

1. Confess and repent...The actual thing that you are doing that is according to scripture and/or conscience, a sin, disobedience to Jesus. Also confess and repent of the deeper issue, the desire to control and not trust.

What a joyous Christmas if there are people in this room or watching in Beaverton or at home were to Confess and repent and **begin new during advent!**

2. Position yourself to see the lighted path and experience Jesus' peace.

Remember you can't earn forgiveness but once you receive it there is effort necessary to live in it.

Make one change that will put you regularly in the presence of God. That's what I mean by position. That may mean that you start a **new habit of being in scripture four times in a week.** Maybe it's to join a **Bridge Group.** **The light gets brighter and the peace more sustaining in relationships.** Don't wait for a new years' resolution. **Find a place to join Jesus in serving others.** **Talk to Tammy** about finding your calling. Talk to Deb or Tammy about **volunteering at Cultivate.**

3. Forgive because you have been forgiven

This regifting of the forgiveness that you have received will also help you access those other gifts, like light and peace. **There will be tons of awkward, shallow gatherings in living rooms** like this during Christmas, not because of COVID but because those living rooms will have **people who refuse to receive forgiveness from God and, therefore, don't know how to give it** to the people they are "celebrating" with.

A better than anything Christmas and just about everything else starts with God's gift of forgiveness.