

Gifts Aren't Always Wrapped in Pretty Paper
December 8, 2013
By Pastor Laura Hehner

So yes, this change in sermon plans... Definitely unexpected.

Not something I like to do at all---it's something that, normally, for me, causes a lot of angst,

because it brings the *unknown* into the equation. And we don't like that, right?

I can at least say it makes *me* more than just a little uncomfortable.

But this change---it needed to be done, nonetheless.

It was something I felt Life driving me toward,

even though I'd planned for us to travel together a completely different way, this morning.

The other day, a close friend of mine posted on facebook:

“Ok, Universe, message received. My plans don't mean diddly to you.”

I think we've all been there.

Because God—Life—the Universe---

---whatever word you use to describe the Almighty Force of All Things, which is God...

It definitely doesn't move by the force of our own will.

That post seemed a little negative in its wording, but when I read it, I had to smile.

Because no, life doesn't always turn out the way we expected,

But it is always moved in the perfection of God.

And that perfection is something we can't anticipate.

It's something that goes so far beyond our own hopes and dreams,
And it's Something that will bring better things than we ever could've imagined,
from this small place we stand.

So no, Life---God---often moves us in unexpected ways,
but they are ways far better than our own.
So we should trust it. We should hold tight to it. And we should love every second of it,
because all of it comes from the heart and love of the Soul that guides us.
...All of it comes from God.

So today, instead of talking about the origins of our Christmas celebrations,
and figuring out how that all fits in with our own spirit
(Something I was excited to talk about, and that we'll definitely get into next week)
Today, we're going to talk about *gifts*.
And this fact that God's gifts most often come to us come in these *unexpected* ways.
These *unexpected* moments.

In life, just as we do at Christmas, we tend to have these *lists*, right?

These lists of things we hope to see. Things we hope to receive, if we do everything just right.

At Christmas, we expect we'll receive at least one of those things, don't we?

So even as we unwrap those boxes, the possibilities are in some ways,
sort of limited to our own expectations.

...But it's not that way with God.

See, unlike what we receive from each other during the season of Christmas, these gifts from God don't come all wrapped up in bows and shiny paper. In fact, they most often don't look too pretty at all, at first glance.

The gifts we receive from God ---

---they don't come in those more comfortable, predictable moments.

They don't come to us sitting by a fire, drinking egg nog or hot cocoa, still wrapped up in our cozy pajamas, surrounded by the people we love.

They come to us in moments of doubt and fear.

They come to us in those moments we think we're all alone.

Those moments of feeling small, that lift us up into something bigger.

I can tell you that, from my own experience in my friendship with God---

---in my experience of love with God---

Some of the *bigger* minutes that I remember most clearly in that relationship, came in those *tiny* moments.

Those minutes when I felt really small, and worthless,

And was shown a worth larger than I could have ever known on my own.

According to my own plans.

That time I told you about, the first year I was here.

When Ky and I were going through those really tough times,
and didn't think we'd have a tree for the holidays,

and found that one boxed up by dumpster, pre-lit and tall.

The one we still have in our living room right now, in fact.

Our Christmas, that year, saved at the last minute.

By a simple and wonderful "coincidence."

Something happening at just the right time

to make things turn out okay, even when they weren't.

Something that helped us remember the love and care of God,

and the true meaning of Christmas,

In those exact moments we felt most dejected by the holiday, and rejected from care.

...Not pretty, but it was beautiful.

The other day, a local man in the area had just found himself in a new place of struggle,

Unsure of how he was going to eat. How he and his family were going to pay the bills.

In his shame, he told no one. Didn't even want to admit it to himself;

and he certainly didn't want to ask for charity,

not wanting to take it from anyone else who might need it.

He prayed to God to get him through---however that might happen---

---even if it meant just being at *peace*, while hungry---

because he knew what was happening in his life wouldn't allow him to get through it on his own.

Just as he was running out of food----his fridge empty,

his cabinets and drawers filled pretty much only with contact paper----

He came home from work a few days before Thanksgiving

to the sight of his daily bread, sitting there on his doorstep.

So much of what he needed to get by, day-to-day, sitting right there,

in a big bountiful box, stuffed full of not only a turkey, and gravy, and stuffing,

and pie, and all of the fixings you could want for a holiday meal—

---but also two months worth of toilet paper. Hygienic items.

Snacks, extra dinners, extra breakfasts... just for normal hours.

Next to it, a Christmas tree, slanted against the wall.

It was one of the Thanksgiving Baskets from the Interfaith Food Pantry, here at Deer Park.

The man wasn't registered with MRC. He didn't have his name on the lines of any list.

He expected only the *nothing* he already saw.

...But Ingrid, our director down there, knew him, and had noticed he seemed to be struggling.

And out of the seemingly random kindness filling her up,

she reached out to lend a hand however she could.

I'll tell ya, this man called Ingrid. Tears in his voice. He thanked her,

and told her about what had happened between him and God.

---Overwhelmed by the unexpected gift he'd found:

Peace in his experience of so much trouble.

...Love and support he never would've known were there,
without those moments he found himself feeling so alone.

God's gifts... they come to us in moments that aren't so pretty,
but they're always beautiful.

Brings us back to the moment at the manger, doesn't it?

That moment we read about with the star guiding the wise men to Bethlehem
in our reading from Matthew, this morning.

Wow... talk about something that's beautiful but not pretty.

As we were riding on the float, in that nativity scene during the Conifer Christmas
Parade,

I had to keep mentioning that Marieke, that afternoon, portrayed the perfect Mary.

She was all wrapped up in this uncomfortable gauze.

And it was COLD. 15 degrees. That leg-numbing cold,
that even the rays of the sun can't do too much to melt away.

Earlier, she and Bib had just missed the ride up to the middle school,
and walked all the way up there, to get on that float.

By the time I saw her, her face was red, her eyes were tired, and her hair was all wisped
around.

And I'm sorry for Marieke, but boy did she really embody the essence of Mary,
sitting there under the flimsy boards of that manger. It was striking.

Because remembering the birth of that man we call Christ,

Mary brought Jesus into the world in the most humble, and painful of circumstances,
After traveling so far in one of the worst of physical conditions
for that kind of long, and bone-aching journey
But on that night of so much struggle, so much doubt, so much fear, so much pain,
One of the most wonderful gifts from God humanity could have ever hoped to receive,
Came into the world.

...It wasn't pretty, but it was beautiful.

And God giving God's gifts in this way didn't stop there.
Jesus' entire life, after this night of his birth we celebrate in December,
Reflected these strangely *unexpected* ways God shows God's love in the world.
Jesus, a homeless vagrant, *giving* so much *value* of heart and soul to the world
Through all of those *penniless* days of his life...
...that he's revered as a *Prince* by some, a *King* by others....
...God's own *messiah*, by all faithful hearts.

...In all of these ways so opposite of what we normally see,
Jesus gave hope to the hopeless, love to the abandoned, and glory to shameful.
A gorgeous and breathtaking sight to behold, covered in dirt and rags.

And that, I believe, is how we really know it's God's work we're seeing in front of our eyes...

...when things come to us as opposite to the way we at first see them with our eyes.

---Value in poverty, healing in sickness, life in death.

...When things come to us as the *unexpected*.

And I'd say I don't know why I say God tends to move this way, but I do.

Not only is it biblically based: Pretty much every miracle,

every amazing story we read in the Book

follows this same strange and unusual pattern.

But past all of those pages, in my *own* experiences of God,

this truth has remained the same.

But OK... so I know why I've *noticed* it, but why does God *do* it, this way?

Of course, I can't answer, but only imagine. Guess. Wonder. And *Gladly*.

And the thought that came to my heart as I thought about this fact,

is that when these unexpected gifts come to us,

(Usually not pretty, but always beautiful...)

...those are the things we really *notice*, right?

Those are the moments which *shock* us into feeling again. Seeing again.

We get so busy moving around in our routine,

we sometimes become numb to the Life inside of us and around us.

We *stop* noticing things. We *stop* seeing things and feeling things.

Because we've formed all of these *lists* in our minds

of what we expect to see and receive each day we wake up.

It's these opposite moments---these *unexpected* moments---

---which *force* our minds, and our eyes, and our hearts

to *focus* from the blur that so often consumes us.

They force us to pay *attention*. To *notice* God working in our lives.

That was the first thought that came to my heart.

The second was this:

I said at the beginning of this unexpected sermon,

that I didn't like changing my sermon plans,

Because it leaves too much to the unknown.

...Well guess what, friends, what we worship here, is that Very Thing.

God. ---Whom we love and do know deeply,

but at the same time can never fully comprehend. Fully understand.

...God, though known, is the ultimate Unknown.

(...Once again, these opposites...)

And we fear the unexpected, because what the unexpected does,

is it takes the power *out* of our hands. And it puts it back where it belongs.

Into the hands of the All---

---that life that is in us, but also above and beyond us.

These unexpected gifts, which don't at first look so great on the outside,
but wind up giving us more than we could ever hope to receive....
...they make us pay attention enough to notice God,
and they remove control from our hands and our plans enough to the point
where we're forced to remember from where the good things in this life really come.
And that is always the Loving Soul of the Holy that surrounds us,
and carries us, each day we live.

That was all I could think of, anyway, thinking about why God might do what God does.
A small thought. From a limited place.
But knowing our Unknowable God, it makes a lot of strange sense, to me...

So, in this season of giving praise to a homeless King born on hay...
...In this season of gifts...

WATCH OUT, folks.

In those moments which aren't so pretty at first glance,
BE SURPRISED and love every second of it,
When you find breathtaking things fill your eyes.

In those moments you feel the lowest, **BE SURPRISED**, and love every second of it,
When you find yourself lifted up to places you never thought you'd see,
receiving unexpected gifts from God which will force your soul

to remember the one who feeds you, who loves you, who holds you,

No matter your plans, or your lists...

As we move through this season of all of this pretty paper,

let's remember our God who tends to do things in the opposite of the way

we know and expect, as God brings wonderful, beautiful things to this world,

in the middle of all of the mess.

Amen.