

YOUR GOD IS SHOWING

John 1:1-18

January 4, 2009

What can I give him, poor as I am?

If I were a shepherd, I would give a lamb;

If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part;

yet what I can, I give him: give my heart.

It's so simple, and yet so full of grace and truth, that lovely hymn by Christina Rossetti ... "In the bleak midwinter, frosty wind made moan, earth stood hard as iron, water like a stone..."

And the verse about Mary, who worshipped the Beloved with a kiss reminds me of something that happened a few years ago in a church in Virginia that one of my classmates from seminary was serving at the time. And he told me that there was a wonderful new Sunday school teacher there named Betty Jo. And Betty Jo, he said, put together a Christmas pageant for the children's service on Christmas Eve. And she let the children decide what gifts they would give the baby Jesus when they came to the manger. Some of

the children wanted to give the baby Jesus a teddy bear or Elmo from Sesame Street or a big soft Winnie the Pooh. And there were some who wanted to give him toys -- Legos and Lincoln Logs, Mister Potato Head, I suppose, or maybe just a rattle or a teething ring. One little girl couldn't make up her mind what she wanted to give baby Jesus. Every time Betty Jo asked, the little girl wouldn't say. Then on the Sunday before Christmas, Betty Jo asked the little girl if she had decided what she wanted to give the baby in the manger. And the child blushed and said, "I don't want to tell you."

"You don't want to tell me?"

"No."

"Why not?"

And the little girl said, "'Cause I'd be embarrassed."

And Betty Jo said, "Oh, it must be something very special. Won't you tell me what it is?"

"A kiss," said the child.

And on Christmas Eve that's what she did. All the other angels, and shepherds, and wise men came bearing stuffed animals and toys. But Sarah, the little girl who'd been so embarrassed, walked up to the manger, bent down, and gave the little baby a kiss.

And a sigh, a loving sigh, went up from the congregation. And David, the pastor, said, "A funny thing happened that night. When little Sarah gave Jesus the kiss, they felt it, too. Maybe not on the cheek, but here, in the heart. As if her gift to God's Son was somehow a gift to all of them, too. ✕

The third verse of that wonderful Christmas hymn reminds me of that. Do you remember the words? It says,

**Angels and archangels may have gathered there,
Cherubim and seraphim thronged the air;
but his mother only, in her maiden bliss,
worshipped the Beloved with a kiss.**

And something like that happened again, two-thousand years later, at a church in Virginia on Christmas Eve, when a little girl brought her gift to the

Christ in the manger and to the Christ in the hearts of his friends and his loved ones who sat in the pews.

But on the other side of us, in Kentucky, not so far from here, the people gathered into a small, mountain church for the same thing, really. The children's annual Christmas program. The real stars were the preschoolers who played the part of the angels and shepherds. And one kid's baby brother played the part of Jesus, which just seemed to come naturally to him.

So that night, in that small, mountain church, Joseph and Mary were turned away from the inn. And they found shelter for the night in a stable of all places. And there she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes. And the little angels appeared to the shepherds with their glad tidings of great joy. And then they went where angels go ... to heaven, I suppose, or the narthex...

Except for one ... one little angel stayed near the manger. She was spellbound. Just fascinated, I think, with what she saw there. And she stepped closer and closer to behold the manger. And then she looked

back toward the people in the pews and said, “Look! It’s a real baby!” And so it was. There was a real baby in the manger. A baby that could touch and be touched. A baby who needed love and attention -- who had to be fed and cared for and rocked to sleep just as she did ... as we all did when we were new born.

And so it was on that night of nights when Mary brought forth her firstborn child and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and placed him in a manger, a feedbox in a cow’s stable in an ordinary, hometown sort of place called Bethlehem.

One of the oldest hymns in the world is an old Latin hymn called *O Magnum Mysterium*. It says, *O great mystery and wonderful sacrament, the beasts behold their Lord lying in a manger.* ✕ It was a real baby. And the baby was Jesus. And the baby was God. God-with-us. Emmanuel. And yet, says Paul in Philippians 2, **He did not count equality with God as something to cling to. But he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in human likeness.** Fully divine and yet fully human. Born as we are, yet without sin.

John said it this way in his gospel: **In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and with out him not one thing came into being.** ✕ It means he was there all along. He was with God and *was* God in the beginning -- creating, shaping, forming, bringing life where there was nothing before. That’s what John says ... **What was coming into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it ... And [that] Word, says John, became flesh and lived among us.**

It was a real baby. God-with-us, God-for-us. The word made flesh. And we have seen his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son. And we see it still. For he is still God-with-us. And his Word is made flesh here... among *us*. For as John says in the beginning of his gospel, *To all who receive him, who believe in his name, he gives power to become the children of God.*

So the gift is still given. The Word is made flesh and the grace is received through you [and me], the children of God when we empty ourselves like Jesus our Brother, and love and serve and give in his name.

Let me tell you a little story about that this morning, just to show you what I mean.

It's been a couple of years or so since Red Davis died. Have you heard of him? Well, Red Davis was nobody special or a great saint. It depends on how you look at these things. But I'll tell you something wonderful and true. "Nobody special" and "great saint" go together a lot more than some folks would imagine.

Twenty-five years ago, Red Davis was CEO of a big company in Texas. And some people would tell you that *that* was the crowning achievement of Red's life -- that he climbed the ladder of success and attained such a high position in such an important company. But that wasn't it, really. It was something he did after he retired back in the late seventies.

When Red got his gold watch and had his retirement party, he went to the pastor of First Baptist Church in Marshall, Texas and told him that he would like to serve the Lord. And the pastor just assumed ... well, what would you think? He thought Red wanted to chair the finance committee or set up an endowment or head up a special pledge campaign for some new building project or something. But that wasn't it. Red said, "I heard that the Sunday school class for three- and four-year-olds needs a teacher. And I'd like to do the job." And so it came to pass that the CEO of the most important company in East Texas showed up the next Sunday morning to sit on the floor and tell bible stories to children. And in the beginning, Red didn't know a lot about teaching children. But he was warm and kind and willing. And he knew that patience and hugs and smiles are the key to a child's heart.

Some of the parents remember that Red used to call the kids in his class every Saturday night just to ask how their week had gone. And he always ended the conversation by telling them he looked forward to seeing them in on Sunday morning. And they say that

having a child in Red's class became something like a rite of passage for all the young families in that church. Because if you had a child in his class, you knew you had to be there every Sunday. Because none of Red's kids ever wanted to miss church.

And it wasn't long till groups of little children were seen following Red around the church wherever he went. Some of them were the kids in his class. And some were kids who'd been in his class earlier. ***Red's Army*** is what people started calling them.

Well, five years became ten, and ten became twenty, and then twenty-five. And Red slowed down a bit, but he was there every Sunday for a quarter of a century. And by that time almost everyone in the church had a child or a grandchild who had been in Red's class. And they say that if Red ever stood to speak in a church business meeting, a respectful and reverent hush would fall over the others who were there. Because people respected him. They respected him not because he was a successful businessman, but because he was Red Davis -- the gentle Sunday School teacher and compassionate friend of children.

And that December at Red's funeral, the pastor told a story about a young woman from the church who was shopping one day in a local grocery store there. And her little boy was with her. And the child said, "Mama, I just saw God!" And the woman looked up and the child was pointing at Red Davis. He was a boy in Red's Sunday school class. And when he tried to wrap his little mind around the very big idea of God, the best he could do was think of Red.

And so the Word became flesh and dwelt among the people of First Baptist Church in Marshall Texas, in the heart and life of Red Davis -- who was nobody special, yet one of God's saints.

I think a little girl said it best. On the way home from church one Sunday, she turned to her mother and said, "Mommy, the preacher's sermon this morning confused me." And her mother said, "Oh... why did it confuse you?" And the little girl said, "Well, he said that God is bigger than we are. Is that true?" And the mother said, "Yes, dear. That's true."

“And he also said that God lives in us. Is *that* true, mommy?”

“Yes.”

“Well,” said the little girl, “If God is bigger than us and he lives in us... wouldn’t he show through?”

Christ has come. The Word is made flesh. He is Emmanuel. God *with* us. God *for* us. God *in* us. And today, on this Epiphany Sunday, God calls us to let him show through, that all the world [that all in *your* world] may see God’s glory.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria

Benen, ObLSB

