

# The greatest gift of all

Message for Sunday, December 27, 2015  
by Bruce Fraser

**Scripture:** John 3:16-21

**Children's Message:** Luke 2:1-7

Mary and Joseph loved God and they loved each other. How do you think they felt when, just when their baby was about to be born, the ruler said they had to go to Bethlehem to pay a tax? How do you think they felt when there was no place to stay except a stable? How do you think they felt when Jesus was born and they held him in their arms?

Let's think for a moment about the difference a baby makes. Along with the joy there are changes in the family. There is a cost to both parents and to any other children:

- getting up in the middle of the night
- you can't go places as easily as before
- other children aren't able to have as much time and attention from parents because it is now shared with one more; etc.

Love means sacrifice. Love costs.

Mike and Sharon Garrod are part of our church family, and had a baby recently. I asked them to talk with you today to help us know what it's like to have a baby in the family. What would you like to ask them?

The point: Jesus came at great sacrifice: to his parents, to himself, to his heavenly Father. We are thankful!

**Message** "The greatest gift of all"  
"Merry Christmas." Those words automatically go together for us. I'm not sure they do for God.

Writer Ron Hutchcraft put it this way, "My little brother died as a baby. I remember how my father cried on each anniversary of his birth and death. I can't help but wonder if that's how God feels each Christmas - the anniversary of *his* Son's birth."

After all, Christmas is when, according to the Bible, "God gave his one and only Son." When that happened, God knew his Son's life would lead to a cross where he would bear the burden of the sins of the world. Why would God do this? They Bible

says, "God loved the world so much" that he gave us his Son. [John 3:16].

God loved *you* so much. That's what Christmas is about. God giving us the greatest gift of all.

In that spirit of thinking of others, and giving the best of all, I'd like to tell you a story.

Stella Thornhope had been prepared for her husband's death. Since the doctor's pronouncement of terminal cancer, they had both faced the inevitable, striving to make the most of their remaining time together. Dave's financial affairs had always been in order. There were no new burdens in her widowed state. It was just the awful aloneness...the lack of purpose to her days.

They had been a childless couple by choice. Their lives had been so full and rich. They had been content with busy careers and with each other. They had many friends. Had. That was the operative word these days. It was bad enough losing the one person you loved with all your heart. But over the past few years, she and Dave repeatedly coped with the deaths of their friends and relations. They were all of an age - an age when human bodies began giving up. Dying. Face it - they were old!

And now, approaching the first Christmas without Dave, Stella was all too aware she was on her own.

With shaky fingers, she lowered the volume of her radio so that the Christmas music faded to a muted background. To her surprise, she saw that the mail had arrived. With the inevitable wince of pain from her arthritis, she bent to retrieve the white envelopes from the floor. She opened them while sitting on the piano bench. They were mostly Christmas cards, and her sad eyes smiled at the familiarity of the traditional scenes and at the loving messages inside. She arranged them among the others on the piano top. In her entire house, they were the only seasonal decoration. The holiday was less than a week away, but she just did not have the heart to put up a silly tree, or even set up the stable that Dave had built with his own hands.

Suddenly engulfed by the loneliness of it all, Stella buried her face in her hands and let the tears come. How would she possibly get through Christmas and the winter beyond it!

The ring of the doorbell was so unexpected that Stella had to stifle a small scream of surprise. Now who could possibly be calling on her? She opened the wooden door and stared through the window of the storm door with consternation. On her front porch stood a strange young man, whose head was barely visible above the large carton in his arms. She peered beyond him to the driveway, but there was nothing about the small car to give a clue as to his identity. Summoning courage, the elderly lady opened the door slightly, and he stepped sideways to speak into the space.

“Mrs. Thornhope?”

She nodded. He continued, “I have a package for you.”

Curiosity drove caution from her mind. She pushed the door open, and he entered. Smiling, he placed his burden carefully on the floor and stood to retrieve an envelope that protruded from his pocket. As he handed it to her, a sound came from the box. Stella jumped. The man laughed in apology and bent to straighten up the cardboard flaps, holding them open in an invitation for her to peek inside.

It was a dog! To be more exact, a golden Labrador retriever puppy. As the young gentleman lifted its squirming body up into his arms, he explained, “This is for you, ma’am.” The young pup wiggled in happiness at being released from captivity and thrust ecstatic, wet kisses in the direction of the young man’s face.

“We were supposed to deliver him on Christmas Eve,” he continued with some difficulty, as he strove to rescue his chin from the wet little tongue, “but the staff at the kennels start their holidays tomorrow. Hope you don’t mind an early present.”

Shock had stolen Stella’s ability to think clearly. Unable to form coherent sentences, she stammered, “But...I don’t...I mean... who...?”

The young fellow set the animal down on the doormat between them and then reached out a finger to tap the envelope she was still holding.

“There’s a letter in there that explains everything, pretty much. The dog was bought while his mother

was still pregnant. It was meant to be a Christmas gift.”

The stranger turned to go. Desperation forced the words from her lips. “But who...who bought it?”

Pausing in the open doorway, he replied, “Your husband, ma’am. Merry Christmas.” And then he was gone.

It was all in the letter. Forgetting the puppy entirely at the sight of the familiar handwriting, Stella walked like a sleepwalker to her chair by the window. She forced her tear-filled eyes to read her husband’s words. He had written the letter three weeks before his death and had left it with the kennel owners, to be delivered along with the puppy as his last Christmas gift to her. It was full of love and encouragement and admonishments to be strong. He vowed that he was waiting for the day when she would join him. And he had sent her this young animal to keep her company until then.

Remembering the little creature for the first time, she was surprised to find him quietly looking up at her, his small panting mouth resembling a comic smile. Stella put the pages aside and reached for the bundle of golden fur. She thought that he would be heavier, but he was only the size and weight of a sofa pillow. And so soft and warm. She cradled him in her arms and he licked her jawbone, then cuddled into the hollow of her neck. The tears began anew at this exchange of affection and the dog endured her crying without moving.

Finally, Stella lowered him to her lap, where she regarded him solemnly. She wiped vaguely at her wet cheeks, then somehow mustered a smile.

“Well, little guy, I guess it’s you and me.” His pink tongue panted in agreement. Stella’s smile strengthened, and her gaze shifted sideways to the window. Dusk had fallen. Through fluffy flakes that were not drifting down, she saw the cheery Christmas lights edging the roof lines of her neighbours’ homes. The strains of “Joy to the World” floated in from the kitchen.

Suddenly Stella felt the most amazing sensation of peace and benediction wash over her. It was like being enfolded in a loving embrace. Her heart beat

painfully, but it was with joy and wonder, not grief or loneliness. She need never feel alone again.

Returning her attention to the dog, she spoke to him. “You know, fella, I have a box in the basement that I think you’d like. There’s a tree in it and some decorations and lights that will impress you like crazy! And I think I can find that old stable down there, too. What d’ya say we go hunt it up?”

The puppy barked happily in agreement, as if he understood every word. Stella got up, placed the puppy on the floor and together they went down to the basement, ready to make a Christmas together. <sup>1</sup>

Like the husband in this story, Jesus knew that he was going to die. But his gift isn’t just something to make us feel good. His gift is to save us, to forgive us for the wrong things we do, to fill us with the Holy Spirit, to give us a new heart and a new life.

That’s why we say that Jesus is the greatest gift of all.

### Next Steps:

- Know in your head that God loves you. That’s the message of Jesus’ whole life.
- Know in your heart that God loves you. Yes, in spite of all the wrong you’ve done. Yes, in spite of so often ignoring God. Yes, in spite of the times you’ve rejected God and done things your way. *God still loves you!*
- Say “Yes” to that love. Today and every day, say to God, “I love you, too! Thank-you for all you’ve done for me, and are still doing. Help me now to live for you. Amen.”

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<sup>1</sup> Stella’s story was passed on by Cathy Miller in an article in *Chicken Soup for the Pet Lover’s Soul*.