

God's Christmas gift for you

Message for Christmas Eve, December 24, 2016
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: 1 John 4:9-10; John 3:16

Some children were asked what love is. The responses were quite interesting and instructive for us adults. One said, "Love is when my mommy makes a cup of coffee for my daddy and takes a little sip before she gives it to him to make sure it tastes okay." Another said, "Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you've left him alone all day." A response was, "You really shouldn't say, 'I love you' unless you really mean it, but if you mean it you should say it a lot, people forget." One boy said, "When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different. You just know that your name is safe in their mouth." And finally 7 year old Bobby said, "Love is what's in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen."

Those children have great wisdom, don't they!

Here's what the Bible gives as a definition of love:

1 John 4:9-10, New Living Translation:

God showed how much he loved us by sending his only Son into the world so that we might have eternal life through him. This is real love. It is not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

Christmas is God giving to the world the gift of love. Love isn't something you can buy in a store and put under a tree. The only way to give love is to give yourself. And that's exactly what God did in Jesus Christ: God is giving himself to the world.

The above passage was in a letter that the apostle John wrote. Here's how John recorded it in his gospel, part of the conversation Jesus had with Nicodemus.

John 3:16, New Living Translation:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."

This is difficult for us to understand. No, that's not right. I'd go so far as to say this is impossible for us to understand. Yes, I believe it, and I base my life

on this good news. But can I honestly say that I *understand* it? That God became human? That through him, our sins can be forgiven? That we can live with him forever?

I just made three statements, all of which many people take for granted: we've heard them so many times, they go in one ear and out the other. Yet they are some of the most amazing and incredible statements ever spoken.

It's like we've been inoculated. You know how the smallpox vaccine works: you get exposed to a weakened form of the germ, so that when you come in contact with the real germ, it doesn't have any effect on you. That's how it is with Jesus. We've been exposed to a small dose of something powerful, so that when we experience him in person, he doesn't disturb our comfortable lives.

From time to time I hear stories of missionaries who tell the story of Jesus to people who have never heard it before. This is their first time. And the impact on those people is so powerful!

So here's what I'm suggesting we do. Listen to this story, and see if you can put yourself in the place of the person who is meeting Jesus for the first time.

In 1994 the Russian Department of Education invited the United States to send someone to teach morals and ethics, based on biblical principles in the public schools. (This was after the fall of communism, and they were looking for other curriculum materials. Boris Yeltsin was the president of Russia, and relations with the West were much warmer than now!) They were invited to teach also at prisons, businesses, the fire and police departments and a large orphanage. About one hundred boys and girls who had been abandoned, abused, and left in the care of a government-run program were in the orphanage. They relate the following story in their own words:

It was nearing the holiday season, 1994, time for our orphans to hear, for the first time, the traditional story of Christmas. We told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem. Finding no room in the inn, the couple went to a stable, where the baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger.

Throughout the story, the children and orphanage staff sat in amazement as they

listened. Some sat on the edges of their stools, trying to grasp every word. Completing the story, we gave the children three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger. Each child was given a small paper square, cut from yellow napkins I had brought with me. No colored paper was available in the city.

Following instructions, the children tore the paper and carefully laid strips in the manger for straw. Small squares of flannel, cut from a worn-out nightgown an American lady was throwing away as she left Russia, were used for the baby's blanket. A doll-like baby was cut from tan felt we had brought from the United States.

The orphans were busy assembling their manger as I walked among them to see if they needed any help. All went well until I got to one table where little Misha sat. He looked to be about 6 years old and had finished his project. As I looked at the little boy's manger, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger. Quickly, I called for the translator to ask the lad why there were two babies in the manger.

Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at this completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously.

For such a young boy, who had only heard the Christmas story once, he related the happenings accurately – until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger. Then Misha started to ad-lib. "And when Maria laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn't, because I didn't have a gift to give him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift.

So I asked Jesus, "If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?" And Jesus told me, "If you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me." "So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and he told me I could stay with him – for always."

As little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears that splashed down his little cheeks. Putting his hand over his face, his head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed. The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon nor abuse him, someone who would stay with him – FOR ALWAYS.

Christmas is not over yet. There is still one gift remaining. It is God's gift to you. He wants to give you his love. He wants to give you himself.

You may have questions that make you hesitate; concerns that trouble you. If you wait until you have God all figured out, you will never accept that gift. Instead, you can open yourself to receive Jesus into your life, commit yourself to follow him. Then you've got the rest of your life to enjoy the mystery.