

Christmas Eve 2019  
Luke 2:1-20  
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What do you want for Christmas? the shopkeeper asked Harold, as she tied a bright, red bow on the gift he has just purchased for his niece, which he would take with him when he went the next day for Christmas dinner. Harold didn't know how to answer. No one had posed such a question to him since his childhood days of waiting in line to see Santa. Nor, these days, did many people give him gifts. His niece reliably had a small box with his name on it under the tree, usually socks or a handkerchief. A neighbor might send over a box of pears. But that was the extent of his Christmas bounty. He had learned not to expect too much.

What **do** I want for Christmas? he thought as he stepped out of the shop, beginning the short walk home. Well, for one thing, I would like a gift more personal than socks. A sweater, maybe. A bright, red sweater, merry in its brightness. A sweater whose size was not too large nor too small, picked out by someone who knew him. For much of his solitary existence the items in his household had been either mismatched or ill-fitting. I would like something, he thought, that is new, shiny, and precisely for me.

He turned the corner at the end of the shops, heading up the hill toward his cottage. What would I like for Christmas? The question settled in his mind. I would like the bad news to stop, he added. The terrorist attacks, the innocent suffering, the hungry, outstretched hands, the acrimony on every channel. Listening to the news was an exercise in despair. There was no peace, anywhere. A man inclined to light-hearted conversation, Harold secretly was worried ... for his country, for creation, for the future. He felt his own helplessness in the face of the troubles. What would make the cruelty stop, the injustices cease, the powerful protect rather than exploit?

The hill up to his cottage wandered past several other cottages, neighbors he had lived alongside for decades. What would I want for Christmas? he asked himself again. I would like a friend, a real friend. Not a neighbor that I wave to from afar. Not an acquaintance with whom I share a resigned, "Life is so busy, too bad there is never time to talk" exchange. But a friend, for I am lonely. "Modernity," says Thomas Currie, "has produced a loneliness, an aimlessness... born of disconnection. The affluence we enjoy makes this loneliness possible and often preferable... a way to avoid the hurts of friendship, the betrayals of intimacy.... We have come not to expect too much."<sup>1</sup> For just a second, Harold imagined a friend, of whom he could expect much.

Harold opened the door to his tiny cottage, took off his hat, scarf and coat, hung them on the hook beside the entry. He lit the stove, heated up soup for dinner. As he ate, he thought about his niece's gift, the news of the day, the lonely quiet of his four-room cottage. What do I want for Christmas? He was surprised the question still lingered. Who would have guessed such longing was inside him? Then came the answer: I want love. Not romantic love necessarily, but love. Love is what matters. I want to know I am loved in a way that tells me I matter; that I might be

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Currie, "With Heads Held High: Preaching Hope in a Noisy Time" in *Journal for Preachers XLII No. 1*, Advent 2018, 2-7.

of use in this mixed-up world. With that thought, he placed his dishes in the sink, turned out the lights, and went to bed.

Under the night sky,  
while much of the world was sleeping,  
in a barn or perhaps a cave,  
a teenage girl gave birth to a baby  
and God entered our world.

Luke narrates Christ's birth as a story of outsiders,  
a poor couple making the long, lonely journey to Bethlehem,  
arriving with need of a friendly welcome but hearing instead, there is no room,  
left to make do among the animals when it is time to give birth.  
Surely a manger in Bethlehem was not on their wish list. And yet here they are and here is God –  
God in the flesh, coming down to invade their world.

When the gift of Jesus is given, the angels sing. The shepherds are terrified. They had learned to expect little from a night of shepherding, except a hungry wolf, an opportunist thief. They had no wish for a baby, no expectation of joy, favor or welcome. Yet the angels tell them, for you is born this night the Savior, who is Christ the Lord. What can they do but go to find him? With their ragged clothes, dirty feet and bleating sheep trailing behind them, they arrive at the manger, adding to the scene their ill-fitting nature, brought to kneel before Jesus by God's great, outstretched love.

Sometime deep in the night, Harold awoke. The sounds of church-goers singing floated up to him, *Gloria in excelsis Deo*. He looked out his window up into the sky, which shone with particular brilliance. The stars seeming to reach out toward him, beckoning him to the light. From the very heart of God comes the gift of Jesus; a love that invades every moment of our lives, all the way down to the very fabric of our being. To the poor, the lonely, the despairing, the forgotten, the sore at heart and the ones who have learned not to expect too much, Christ comes.

What more could we want for Christmas than a love that does not leave, a companion for our way, one who knows the risks, temptations, pain and worry that comes with being human and brings into the muddle of our lives, the power of God. Jesus, God with us, is a gift, precisely, for you.

“We all must make our own complicated journeys to Bethlehem” says Rowan Williams.<sup>2</sup> Can you find your path, taking with you the wish list of your heart? Can you see here in the manger the bright light that is utterly new, the baby whose fingers reach out to take yours? There is a space for you here, amongst the animals, beside the shepherds. Here is love. Here is life. Here is God.

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<sup>2</sup> Williams, Rowan, “The Kingdom of the Simple” in *Choose Life: Christmas and Easter Sermons in Canterbury Cathedral* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 3-11.