

**ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH  
COMPASS, PA**

December 19, 2021 – ADVENT 4, YR. C

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Sermon: “*Christ, our PEACE—the Greatest Gift*”

Micah 5:2-5a	(Bethlehem is foretold as the birthplace of the Messiah)
Canticle 15	(Mary’s song of praise to God for His promises fulfilled)
Hebrews 10:5-10	(Christ desires not sacrifices, but obedience to God’s will)
St. Luke 1:39-45	(Mary visits Elizabeth; both women have been blessed by God)

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A little boy was writing a letter to God about the Christmas presents he badly wanted: “I’ve been good for six months now,” he penned. Then, after a moment’s reflection he crossed out “six months” and wrote “three.” Following some deliberation, he crossed that out, and put “two weeks.” Another long pause followed .... The boy got up from the table and went over to his family’s manger scene where stood the figures of Mary and Joseph, awaiting the Baby Jesus’ arrival. He picked up the figure of Mary and went back to his letter. Starting once more, he wrote: “Dear God, if you ever want to see your Mother again...!”<sup>1</sup>

At this time of year, we can easily become obsessed about Christmas gifts. Think of it, you still have five shopping days left until Christmas! You could spend *every one of them* searching high and low for just the right thing—for people who already have everything they could possibly need. Then, after you’ve gotten all those gifts, you still have to wrap them!

A Holiness pastor, Jon Earls, confesses: “For some reason, I can never completely wrap a present. I can take a gift the size of a deck of cards, and even though I put it in the exact center of a section of wrapping paper with the dimensions of a regulation volleyball court, when I’m done folding and taping, you can still see part of the gift peeking out. Sometimes I camouflage that sector with a marking pen, scotch tape, a sticker, or another piece of wrapping paper that looks completely out of place. On the other hand, if you give my wife a 12-inch square of wrapping paper, she can wrap a C-130 cargo plane.”<sup>2</sup>

If you’ve got a hard-to-wrap gift, Pastor Earls recommends, “Skip the wrapping paper! Just put it in a bag and stick one of those adhesive-backed bows on it. This creates a festive visual effect that is sure to delight the lucky recipient on Christmas morning:”

WIFE: Why is there a Hefty trash bag under the tree?

YOU: It’s a gift! See? It has a bow!

WIFE [Peering into the trash bag]: It’s a leaf blower.

YOU: Gas-powered! Five horsepower!

WIFE: Thanks a lot!

YOU: [Grinning], Actually, I’m God’s gift to you.

WIFE: [Not smiling] I don’t think God’s into gag gifts!

In today’s Gospel lesson, a young, unmarried woman who is nevertheless expecting a child, is probably still wondering—despite her strong faith and unquestioning obedience—whether God might somehow be playing a trick on her. We don’t know why St. Luke records that Mary left town in a hurry to visit her cousin Elizabeth. But just possibly, Elizabeth might be able to help her sort things out. Here she was, well-advanced in age and having been “called barren,” yet already six months pregnant with the child who will grow up to be John the Baptist. Surely, it will comfort Mary to talk things over with another woman in whom is also growing a miraculously-conceived baby.

Oh, but when Mary visits Elizabeth, she receives much more than just a friendly chat with her relative. For when Elizabeth greets Mary, the Holy Spirit reveals to her that this innocent virgin is, in fact, the Mother of her Lord! Ecstatic with joy, Elizabeth cries out, “Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!” (Lk. 1:43-45, NIV).

Here is divine confirmation of what Mary heard from the Angel Gabriel, and of everything she has experienced until now. You see, God does not give gag gifts. What was given to Mary was the real deal, the ultimate Christmas present!

The Holy Spirit further reveals to the Blessed Virgin all the wonderful transformations that will come about through her Son’s reign of mercy and justice, which she proclaims in her song we know as “The Magnificat.” Those words are found in today’s Canticle.

Men may not know much about gift wrapping. But all of us—men, women, or children—have learned from God whatever we know about giving, because God is into gift-giving, big time! In Romans 8:32 (NLV), St. Paul declares: “God did not keep His own Son for Himself but gave Him for us all. Then with His Son, will He not give us all things?” Think about it:

- God gave Adam and Eve the skins from innocent animals to cover the shame of their nakedness.
- God gave Noah plans for the ark that would save his household and all the world’s animals, when judgment came.
- God gave Abraham’s wife, Sarah, a miracle child in her old age, and Isaac became the father of all Israel.
- God gave the Israelites possession of a homeland flowing with milk and honey.
- God gave His people the prophets to plead for justice and foretell God’s amazing works to come.
- God gave the Holy Scriptures to prophesy about the Messiah, who would bring salvation to all.
- God gave Joseph the patience to understand the strange circumstance of a virgin who is with child.
- God gave the shepherds the news announced by angels that Christ was born.
- And God gave the world the Prince of Peace.<sup>3</sup>

This morning, we lit our fourth and final Advent candle to symbolize Christ, the Prince of Peace. As that flame was kindled, somewhere deep inside each one of us it also set afire a silent yearning for more peace—in our hearts, our minds, our homes, and in this dark and violent world in which we live.

In Micah 5:5, the prophet writes of the coming Savior, “this man shall be the peace.” Notice, Micah does not say, “this man will bring peace.” Rather, he announces that the Messiah IS our peace. It’s been said that peace is not the absence of conflict—it is the presence of Christ. Through His loving presence, Jesus gives us an inner peace that is beyond our ability to comprehend. But also, Christ has made peace between us and God the Father, by cleansing us of our sins so that we might be worthy to stand before God. Moreover, Bible Commentator Matthew Henry wrote in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: “The peace of Christ is a promise of safety for all believers from the designs and attempts of the powers of darkness.” See? Jesus is both our peace and our protection.

A few years ago, I read in a Christmas shopping guide that the best gifts are “practical, personal, pleasing, and permanent.” This morning I want to help you with your Christmas shopping by reminding you that Jesus, as God’s greatest gift to us, is all of those.

Now, it may be hard for some of us to think of Jesus as fully human. We don’t like to think about God being hungry, or angry, or in pain, or subject to temptation. It seems almost sacrilegious. But Jesus was as human as you or I. Those nails with which He was crucified wounded his hands in the same way they would painfully pierce yours.<sup>4</sup>

So why did God choose to be born through a human mother, to become one of us, and suffer along with us? He did it because He looked across time and saw you. He saw your heart. He saw how desperately you needed a Savior. He saw your longing for peace in every aspect of your existence.<sup>5</sup>

So God gave you the gift of Himself, in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. This self-giving that God models for us is the highest form of giving, because it is the highest form of love. And without that love, all other gifts are meaningless. Therefore, as we accept gifts for ourselves this Christmas, we should be sure to accept the gift of eternal life that Jesus offers to all who believe in, and enter into a relationship with, Him.

Jesus' mother Mary willingly accepted this great gift—the first Christmas Gift—even though it wasn't something that had to be wrapped or could fit under a tree. Or, in the immortal words of Dr. Seuss: “And the Grinch, with his Grinch-feet ice cold in the snow, stood puzzling and puzzling, how could it be so? It came without ribbons. It came without tags. It came without packages, boxes or bags.”

Yes, Jesus would come into the world barely wrapped in threadbare cloth, even though He was the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, and the Prince of Peace. So along with St. Mary, let us say in the words of St. Paul: “Thanks be to God for his gift that is too wonderful for words” (2 Corinthians 9:15, NCV).

And now, you are welcome to pray along with me if you are so inclined:

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee.

Blessed art thou among women,  
and blessed is the fruit of thy womb Jesus.

Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners,  
now and at the hour of our death.” Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapt. Jon Earls, “Let's Go Christmas Shopping,” February 2003, [SermonCentral.com](http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/lets-go-christmas-shopping-jon-earls-sermon-on-christmas-55062.asp?>) < <http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/lets-go-christmas-shopping-jon-earls-sermon-on-christmas-55062.asp?>> 7 December 2021. Used with permission.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*