



Sermon delivered by  
The Rev. Dr. Augustus E. Succop III  
Quail Hollow Presbyterian Church  
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## "The Gift Tag" (Isaiah 9: 2-7)

In the seasonal classic, **A Christmas Story**, there is that scene when the two brothers, Ralphie and Randy, are opening their Christmas gifts. Now, let me explain something. There are two types of Christmas gift. There is the “generic” gift, the non-personal gift, the gift that can be given and received by anyone. But, there is also the “personal” gift, the gift picked out, chosen, selected with a particular person in mind. Ralphie receives both kinds of gift. What he really wants is that Red Ryder BB Gun; but before he opens that gift, he unwraps a pair of new socks, which he tosses over his shoulder. Those socks represent the “generic” gift. We all get socks for Christmas, or at least we used to. But, then, Ralphie unwraps Aunt Clara’s gift, the “personal” gift, the gift given with Ralphie in mind, and that gift is a Pink Bunny outfit. Ralphie’s mother orders him to put it on, and when he reappears in Aunt Clara’s customized and personalized Pink Bunny outfit, it causes Ralphie’s father to describe Ralphie as a “deranged Easter bunny, a pink nightmare.” Obviously, that reaction was not what Aunt Clara had hoped for, but that was Ralphie’s personalized Christmas gift from Aunt Clara. All of which is to say, tomorrow you are on your own.

Last Sunday, I told you that December can be a mine-field of dangerous moments, and Christmas morning is no exception. Over the years, you and I have received our fair share of generic gifts, be they socks or underwear, and over the years we have also received the personalized gift, the gift that caught our attention, the gift given with us in mind, the gift we still have years later. A gift by any other name is still a gift, I suppose; but it is the personal gift that catches and keeps our attention, and which means so much to us.

I am reminded of that distinction when I read Isaiah’s prophecy. That prophecy is as relevant for us today as it was for Israel so many centuries ago. “The people who walked in darkness,” so says the prophet, they need light, they need brand new light. And who are those people in our day who need light? They are you and me! As much as we would like to think otherwise, we still walk in darkness. From world conflict to sexual harassment, from racial

tension to Charlotte's record-breaking homicide count, we prefer to walk in darkness. And why is that? Why don't we live in the light, the great light God provides and which guides us around all the spiritual and moral potholes of life?

Isaiah's prophecy also tells us this: *A Child has been born **for** us, a son given to us.* The preposition *for* is important. In the prophecy, the wording is that a Child, meaning Jesus Christ, has been chosen and selected and given not just to us but *for* us. Christ has been picked out especially *for* our sake. In God's wisdom, in God's incomparable compassion, we have been given the perfect gift, the right gift, the personalized gift, the gift we need, the gift that puts all other gifts to shame.

There is nothing generic about Jesus Christ. God has given Jesus with you and me in mind. There is a need in each of us for the Son of God. There is an emptiness in here that only Christ can fill. Jesus Christ is the gift that is *for* us, and not one of us can afford to believe there is some other gift more important or more personalized than Who Christ is *for* us.

There are two aspects of Isaiah's prophecy that intrigue me, and which we need to examine closely, especially on Christmas Eve. **First**, Isaiah tells us that God has increased the "joy of Israel." Of all the things Israel needed, God increased her joy. Why joy, and why not something else? At Christmas, joy is the word of the moment. We sing, *Joy to the World!* We send cards wishing people the joy of the season. We may think joy is generic or the same as happiness or contentment, but we would be wrong. Joy is a gift that can only be received. You can't go out and get joy. You can't manufacture joy or mass produce joy like a pair of socks. The joy worth our time and attention comes only from the living God of Jesus Christ, and once you have tasted that joy there is no going back, there is no being satisfied for something less.

Make no mistake at what is being said: joy is THE personalized gift God gives us in Jesus Christ. If you know Christ, then you know joy. Joy is far more useful than contentment, far more practical than happiness, and far more desired than some of us are willing to admit. Only God gives joy, and that is what God gives us in the birth of Jesus Christ.

That is why Jesus is given *for* us. We need what the Christ Child brings to us, what is exclusively His to give. There is nothing generic, nothing universal about what Jesus gives. Everything the Lord provides is customized *for* us. The risen Lord knows you and me so personally, so intimately, that what He gives fits us perfectly. That is what I spoke of last Sunday when I told you about God's *perfecting* Spirit. Nothing Christ gives is an add-on or peripheral or decorative or ancillary. Christ is *for* us because we need Christ and we need

what He brings, and what is so amazing is that faith in Christ means that Christ never ceases to give what He has for us. Don't laugh, but Jesus Christ IS the gift that keeps on giving. Human happiness comes and goes, but Christ knows our need for a steady diet of joy, and to that we say, *Thanks be to God!*

**Second**, I am intrigued that Isaiah's prophecy also tells us that it is the "zeal of the Lord" that makes possible all that Christ does for us. The "zeal of the Lord" is another way of saying that God gets excited for us. At our Advent Dinner, I met a young Preschool family who have two young children. Their son is five years old, and unlike past Christmases, this Christmas finds their son very much aware of the meaning of Christmas. That young father is excited for his son this Christmas, and that father can't wait to see his son's excitement on Christmas morning. Parents do that. They become excited for their children. It is in our parental DNA to become excited for our children. Well, guess what? No less is true when it comes to God. The God of Jesus Christ enjoys getting excited for us. Have you ever become excited for someone when you got them the perfect gift, be it for Christmas or a birthday or some other occasion? You find you can't wait for them to open the gift you found for them.

The "zeal of the Lord" means that God is excited for us because God knows what Christ will do for us. Jesus is the perfect gift. Jesus represents how excited and delighted God is for us. In Jesus, all that God wants for us has been made available to us. All that once was unavailable is now ours. Through Christ, we now possess certain gifts we thought we would never possess, but through Christ they're ours, now. No more do we have to live in darkness. No more do we have to settle for happiness. No more do we have to carry the grudge, or the hurt, or the bitterness. Through faith, Jesus Christ replaces all of that with Himself, and with Himself comes His perfecting Spirit, comes His abiding joy. And knowing what His joy can do for us, that causes our heavenly Father to become greatly excited for us.

To be loved by a God Who is willing to love beyond all reason and expectation is and should be mind-boggling. To be spoiled by a God Who is willing to attach our name to a gift so perfect, so personal, so priceless is life-changing. And to be thought of as we are thought of by God is to realize how much we mean to God, that of all the gifts God could have given us we have been given the one gift we must not and should not live without. One day, one day it will be so very clear to each one of us why Jesus Christ is the perfect gift for us, for your life and for my life. And when that day arrives, we shall sing like angels, *Glory be to God!*

**Let us pray:** Thank You, holy God, for the gift of Jesus. Thank You for knowing our need and for filling that need with Christ. Make us notice why Jesus is the perfect gift *for* us, not just at Christmas, but all the time. Amen.