

“The Big Reveal”

Luke 2:1-20

Series: The Big Reveal

The Rev. Dr. Douglas C. Hogle

The Woodside Church

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2017

These days, expectant couples can't wait for the delivery room to find out if they are having a boy or a girl. In fact, they want their friends, family and Facebook to celebrate with them. So they host a “Big Reveal” – a party to announce the gender of their baby. Some are quite creative. The couple, for example, might break open a piñata to release a cascade of pink or blue candy. Yet a few reveals go wrong. Take for example the couple who cut into a cake hoping to reveal a pink or blue center and instead got white. I bet their cake went to a ninetieth birthday party. “Surprise you're having a girl!” There's the couple who pulled strings to release balloons only to have the box fall on their head. That's good preparation for parenthood. Or how about the wife who pitches a ball filled with pink or blue dust to her husband. He swings but instead of breaking the ball open, the ball breaks his wife's nose.

A Big Reveal is especially fun at Christmas. In 2014 we had just cut down our Christmas tree with the family and brought it home. I was busy getting the boxes down from the attic when my grandson Ben said, “Hey Pa!” “Just a minute Ben,” I replied. While I wrestled the tree into the stand, Ben tugged at my shirt, “Hey Pa!” “Hold on Buddy,” I said. As I started stringing up the lights, Ben shouted, “Hey Pa!” “What?” Then I stopped and looked at Ben. On his shirt it said, “I'm being promoted to Big Brother.” A year later we celebrated Christmas with Ben's baby brother Isaac. I was so distracted with the Christmas decorations I missed the Christmas gift Ben wanted to give me.

God wants to reveal His gift to you this Christmas. Yet you may be distracted – not so much by Christmas decorations but by difficult relationships, despair, and doubt. A few weeks ago you gave me a Big Reveal. On December 3 you filled out and placed in our manger a slip of paper which reads, “I need God to be with me in...” I told you not to write your name on them and you didn't – although some of you wrote your spouse's name down. I am overwhelmed by the response. Each one is a window into a soul. You need God to be with you in your:

Family:

- My thoughts and actions as I go through the journey as a mother and wife. I need God to help me learn to love better
- My struggle with trying to help my parents
- Help my children to love one another

Marriage:

- Saving my marriage

Physical problems:

- Every day as we go through paralysis due to a disease from childhood. Help my anger – I know all things work for good
- Dealing with my husband's health issues

Emotional Struggles:

- Handling situations which scare me
- My anxiety, my sorrow, my loneliness, my anger, my shame, my praise, my heart

Grief and loss:

- My struggles with the loss of my son
- The many losses I've had this year

You need God to be with in your school work, your job, your finances, even your celebration of Christmas: "I need God to be with me in my broken home during the holidays." Many simply write, "I need God to be with me in everything." A lot is revealed at Christmas time.

A Big Reveal is not new. God came up with the idea two thousand years ago. He threw a Big Reveal party for the birth of His Son on Christmas. God the Father didn't use colored balloons or baseballs. He revealed the arrival of His Son through prophets, angels and a star.

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (Luke 2:10-14)

This is the Biggest Reveal of all. This is not just another baby. In this baby, God reveals Himself. God Himself is with us. Nobody expected God to become human. Yet that's exactly what He did on Christmas. And because He did, He reveals three gifts He wants to give you and me.

God becomes a Child so we can become His children. God becomes a tiny baby. The Apostle John says:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John 1:1-3, 14).

Scientists estimate there are 1,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 stars in the Universe. According to John the Creator of all those stars visited our tiny planet. He came as a newborn human. He

could have skipped toilet training and adolescence and come as an adult. He didn't. Imagine that: the God of the universe needing to eat and sleep. It's shocking. Yet there is no other way. More prophets, priests, politicians and philosophers can't solve our problems. We need God to come in person. Why? John says:

Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God (John 1:12)

God came looking for us. Though we've wandered from Him in a million different ways, God wants each of us back in His family.

I think many find it hard to believe they are a beloved child of God. There's so much negative talk inside our heads – you're no good, you'll never measure up, you always mess up. We feel bad about ourselves so we make others feel bad about themselves. We feel low so we drag others down with us. We feel hurt so we hurt others back. We feel lonely so we use others to make us feel good. That condemning self-talk pushes us to prove ourselves.

This starts early. During my visits with the Woodside Christian Preschool kids this Christmas I really got a kick out of the shirts some of the children wear. One boy's shirt says, "Define Good Santa." Another shirt has three check boxes – Naughty, Nice, Depends. As cute as these are they reveal a truth: from childhood on up we must prove ourselves worthy of love and acceptance. Most feel they fall short. The others cover over these feelings with a tough outside. But the emptiness is still within. One of those slips of paper reads: "I am lost. God I need you in my life. I feel like a failure and worry eats me up inside. Help me to find you Father in everything I do and to give my worry and pain to you." That's exactly why God became a Child, so you can become His child. His first gift this Christmas is unconditional love. You are His beloved child. John says,

For God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life (John 3:16).

What an incredible gift! If you truly believe you are a beloved child of God it will radically change your life. Our next message series is "Starting Over." Come discover how to get past all your regrets – the things you did, the things done to you. Learn how to get off the regret merry-go-round and start the new life He wants for you. You can't earn His love, buy His love, prove you are worthy of His love...and you don't have to. He already unconditionally and eternally loves you. Love – that's the first Big Reveal of Christmas. Receive His gift of love today.

So how does God becoming a Child make it possible for us to become children of God? That's the second Big Reveal of Christmas. **God Becomes Powerless, So We Can Receive the Power We Need.** There are few things on earth more helpless and powerless than a newborn. Understandably the whole world revolves around their needs. Then we grow up and discover the world does not revolve around us. Yet we still want it to. Selfishness and self-centeredness are the cries of that inner baby that still wants its way. The Bible has a word for this: it's called sin. When life gets frustrating or difficult, that baby throws a temper tantrum. We explode or implode, we

shout or sulk. We know this is not right. It hurts our relationships with God and others. Yet we are powerless to stop it. So God becomes powerless to help us. Paul says,

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:6, 8)

My grandsons love to play a game called “Pile on Pa.” They jump on my back and see if I can hold them up. That’s easy until my wife and daughter get into the act. Talk about being powerless. Paul tells us that’s what happened at the Cross. We were powerless to save ourselves, to bear up under the weight of our own sin and selfishness. So God became human to take the heavy burden of all our sin on Himself. Only a human should pay for sin, since humans made the mess, but only God could pay for our sin. So God became a powerless human being to take away the sin we were powerless to stop.

How do you receive the power of Jesus in your life? Do what Jesus did: surrender. Get that demanding baby off the throne of your heart and let Jesus reign in you. It’s a humbling experience. Yet if you want to save your life you have to give it to Him, if you want to win you have to first admit defeat, if you want to rise up, you first have to bow to the Baby of Bethlehem.

This month our Senator Chuck McIlhinney invited me to give the prayer at the opening of the Session of the Pennsylvania Senate. Whenever I was introduced to a Senator as the chaplain giving the prayer they said, “Welcome. We need prayer.” The Pennsylvania State Capitol building is a masterpiece. Everything is massive. I saw chandeliers that are four tons. Even in the Senate chamber I sat on this enormous green chair which made my feet dangle like a kindergartener. Yet there was one undersized feature: the doors to the Senate chamber are lower than usual. My guide told me this is to remind the Senators to be humble as they enter to do their work. It reminds me of another low doorway – the one leading to the Church of the Nativity where Jesus was born in Bethlehem. All who want to receive God’s power to be free must bow before the humble Child who was born not in a palace or a temple but a manger. Faith – that’s the second Big Reveal of Christmas. Bow your head and received His gift of faith today.

And where do love and faith lead? To the third gift of the Big Reveal: **God Comes to Our House so We Can Come to His House.** Jesus was not born in a palace or even a house. His first cradle was an animal feed trough. God chose a construction worker and his wife to be His parents. God selected homeless shepherds to be His first visitors. God announced the birth to stargazers from a different religion. Why? To show He wants all people, high and lowly, book smart and street-wise to come home to Him. On the night before His Crucifixion Jesus said,

Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. (John 14:1-3)

That is the third gift revealed on Christmas – the gift of Hope. God wants you to have the rock-solid hope that death is not the end, that there is a home waiting for you. I am holding onto that hope this Christmas. This is the first Christmas my Dad will be celebrating Jesus’ birthday with

Him in heaven. Last Christmas, our Traditional Christmas services were led by Kim Engelsman. None of us knew at the time she'd be singing in the Lord's Choir this Christmas. All of us lose loved ones. All of us will one day leave our loved ones behind. Yet because of the homeless baby in a manger you can have hope you will see your loved ones again in His Father's House.

Tonight I invite you to receive the three gifts of God's Big Reveal: faith, hope and love.

- Surrender your life to Jesus and let Him be your Savior and Lord
- Join us in the New Year for Starting Over
- Get into a Growth Group and receive God's love through others

God came all this way to our home so you can go all the way to His Home.

There is a family here at Woodside who is holding on to that hope. On July 21 I received a call that Walter Boone, III passed away at home when his heart stopped. It was surprising because Walter, who used to live across the street from me, was a marathon runner and one of the healthiest athletes you could meet. Walt's wife Carol said he was a gentleman in the true sense of that word. He was gentle – especially with his children and grandchildren. Their first child Wendy came into the world with special needs. Walt loved her unconditionally. Even as an adult she loved to sit on his lap and gaze into "his gorgeous blue eyes." He was delighted to also welcome his other children: Holly, Christy and Walt. Walt enjoyed all the tasks of caring for children. He set a wonderful example for how to be a husband and dad. He joyfully welcomed their spouses and he was absolutely thrilled with each of his nine grandchildren.

After the graveside service we gathered at a local restaurant. Carol told me, "Wendy always likes to give a toast. We don't know what she will say but I just want to prepare you for it." I said that would be great. At first, it appeared Wendy was too sad with grief to speak. But then, to everyone's surprise, Wendy stood to give the toast. She welcomed everyone. And then Wendy did what no one expected. She raised her glass and said, "Dad, welcome home."

Tonight: welcome Jesus and one day, He will welcome you home.

