

“The Greatest Gift”

Luke 2:1-20

Series: It's a Wonderful Life 6. Your Life is a Present

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The Woodside Church

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It's almost Christmas and if you are still seeking a gift here are a few suggestions:

- Mom Battery Low T Shirt – Sorry Mom can't talk to you now her battery is dead.
- Inflatable Unicorn Horn for your Cat – there's no chance your cat will be on board with this but you'll never get more “likes” on Facebook.
- Socks that say on the bottom: If you can read this it's your turn to walk the dog.
- A box of Nothing – Tell them “Hey, it's what you said you wanted.”

What's the craziest gift you ever received for Christmas? For me it's easy. You've all heard my struggles with the squirrels. They eat all the bird seed, bite threw my Christmas lights, and use my patio furniture for a chew toy. Maybe that's why Ralphie wants a Red Ryder BB gun for Christmas. Some years ago my shed in the backyard had holes in the siding. Occasionally I'd open the door and find a gang of squirrels in there. “What are they doing in there?” I asked my wife. She knew. She said, “At night they turn your shed into a disco.” I laughed about it for some years until the Christmas morning I opened a box and discovered a Disco Ball. The tag said, “Now every night can be Saturday Nut Fever.”

There are a lot of gifts at Christmas and not all come in “packages, boxes or bags.” It's great to get together with family, get a break from school, get away on a trip. You go out with friends, take in the Christmas lights, sit down to a feast. There is the joy when someone opens your gift and eyes go wide, tears well up, words fail to say what's felt in the heart.

Christmas also brings some things which are not pleasant and definitely not presents.

- You don't fit in at school. You feel like the puzzle piece that got mixed up in the wrong box.
- You're dreading the tension, the arguments, the silent scorn at the family gathering.
- You celebrate the baby born in the manger and wonder why you can't have a child.
- You worry about your child. How did it get so bad? Did you do something wrong?
- You fear rumored layoffs might be true. Or maybe the rumor just happened to you.
- You never thought you'd be divorced. Now you're sailing new and sometimes stormy seas.
- You're counting down the treatments. It's going well. But you're scared about the next scan.
- You started the year with your loved one. You're ending the year without her or him.

At Christmas these problems seem to pile up like FedEx boxes on your front porch. Maybe this Christmas Eve you feel weary and worn out. Some may even wonder, “Why was I even born?”

George Bailey wonders the same thing on Christmas Eve. *It's a Wonderful Life* is the story of a man who longs to travel the world and build great skyscrapers but winds up stuck in Bedford Falls. After a lifetime of giving up his dreams and caring for everyone else, he is falsely accused of corruption and may go to jail. His nemesis Mr. Potter convinces George he is worth more dead than alive. So George thinks the only solution is to jump off a bridge and end it all. That's when heaven shows up as Clarence, George's guardian angel. When George wishes he'd

never been born, Clarence shows him a world without him. George sees how his sacrifices saved countless lives. In one scene he visits a subdivision he built and finds, instead, a cemetery.

Clarence: Are you sure this is Bailey Park?

George: Oh, I'm not sure of anything anymore. All I know is this should be Bailey Park. But where are the houses?

Clarence: You weren't here to build them.

George sees a tombstone. Feverishly George scrapes away the snow covering the rest of the inscription, and we read: In Memory of Our Beloved Son Harry Bailey 1911-1919.

Clarence: Your brother, Harry Bailey, broke through the ice and was drowned at the age of nine.

George: That's a lie! Harry Bailey went to war! He got the Congressional Medal of Honor! He saved the lives of every man on that transport.

Clarence: (sadly) Every man on that transport died. Harry wasn't there to save them because you weren't there to save Harry. You see, George, you really had a wonderful life. Don't you see what a mistake it would be to throw it away?

This Christmas God wants to give you a wonderful life. That's why God came to earth this Holy Night. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full." (John 10:10) Your life is a present from the Lord. Like all presents, you have to open it.

To live a wonderful life you must first **Open Your Ears**. Open your ears and hear God calling your name. The prophet Isaiah gives us this message from the Lord:

Hear, you deaf; look, you blind, and see! Fear not, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name; you are mine. For I am the Lord, your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior; Since you are precious and honored in my sight, and because I love you, I will give men in exchange for you, and people in exchange for your life. Do not be afraid, for I am with you. (Isaiah 42:18; 43:1, 3-5)

Many of us listen to the wrong voices. We get depressed, stressed and fearful because of what others say about us or, worse, what we say to ourselves. Recently I took a break at the gym and a guy said to me, "Hey you're thin. You must have a high metabolism." I was about to thank him when he added, "Don't get used to it. Your metabolism will change and the first thing you'll get is a pot out front just like my brother." "How old was he when that happened?" I asked. "56" the man replied – the exact age I am now. Maybe next Christmas you can see my pot. Voices outside and inside constantly call our names and tell us – you're not good enough, smart enough, tall enough, thin enough, strong enough, pretty enough, young enough, old enough. When we listen to these voices we start to believe them and feel bad – so bad we turn to the wrong things for comfort. We start to eat too much, drink too much, work too much, spend too much. We indulge in painkillers, drugs, porn, affairs, gambling. We fall into depression and sometimes, like George Bailey, feel there is no way out. A lot of people today say, "I'm spiritual not religious." When I hear this I wonder: which spirits are you listening to? All these spirits are calling your name and offering comfort that's false and destructive.

Open your ears and hear your Heavenly Father calling your name. He formed you. He made you. He unconditionally loves you. He wants you to know you are more than enough, you

are His beloved child, He wants you to have a wonderful life. He wants to set you free to be a new creation from the inside out. After a lifetime of listening to the wrong voices it may be hard to break free from the old patterns. That's why at Woodside we are starting off 2019 with a sermon series called "New Year New You." Research shows 80% of New Year's resolutions fail by the second week of February. Why? We don't have the power to sustain long term change. The good news is God does. God wants you to be healthy physically, emotionally and relationally. Join us in January and discover how to Live Fit, Live Fearless, Life for Others.

In the 1960s Mary Ellen Rothrock was a grad student in English literature at the University of Wisconsin. She writes,

Despair seemed to permeate the student body. A fellow student said, 'Playwright Samuel Becket is right. Man is just a piece of trash in a universe that's running down.' In college, atheism became my religion. Yet when I got into grad school, I found myself seeking to fill a spiritual void in my life. I began practicing meditation with a guide. After a year or so of meditating, something in my mind kept repeating "Hallelujah! For unto us a Child is born ... And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

My guide told me to ignore the words but they kept coming. I told myself, "These aren't just random thoughts." It suddenly hit me. This was an invitation from a personal God to seek him! Within months, I met a Christian who explained how to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. As I heard the words from the Bible, the Holy Spirit convinced me of the truth: the God I'd hungered for, the personal God, loved me.

Open you ears. God's calling your name. He wants to fill you with a wonderful love.

Second, to have a wonderful life, **Open Your Hands**. God asks you to open your hands and bless other people. The love God pours into you must not stop with you. He asks you to pass it on, to give it away. Many people know John 3:16 but not many know I John 3:16:

This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth. (I John 3:16-18)

Love is not love until you give it away. George Bailey's life was wonderful because he invested it in helping his neighbors. Many give to a charity at Christmas. Yet what if you made giving and helping others a year-round lifestyle like George Bailey?

Givers are the most wonderful people. How do I know? I see them all around me at Woodside. In January you can shelter our homeless neighbors through Code Blue and help homeless families through Family Promise. You can encourage people who seek freedom from addiction and recovery through the Recovery Cafe, worship services and prison ministries. You can feed hungry neighbors through the Cast Your Cares Ministry, Aid for Friends, or the Dinner Ministry. You can help us build a Habitat for Humanity house in Morrisville. God may be calling you to join one of our mission trips to Haiti, the Dominican Republic, the Bahamas, or here in the US. There are a multitude of ways to open your hands and make loving others a lifestyle.

The Bible says Jesus is the Light of the world (John 9:5) and then it says His followers are the light of the world (Matthew 5:14). Which is it? Both. Remember my Disco Ball? When the sun shines on it scatters beautiful specks of light around my office. The disco ball has no

light of its own. It can only reflect what shines on it. Jesus wants you and I to reflect His Light in a thousand dark and hurting places. Open your hands and love others.

Finally, to have a wonderful life, you must **Open Your Heart**. Jesus didn't just come to earth to be born in a stable. He came to live in your heart. He wants to cleanse away all the hurt, sin and pain. He came to give you a wonderful life now and open the door to eternal life. The angel told Joseph:

Mary will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins. (Matthew 1:21)

The angel told the shepherds:

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:10-11)

Jesus came not to be a warrior or a teacher but a Savior. My daughter-in-law Jackie was telling my three-year-old grandson Isaac the Christmas story – how Mary gave birth to little Baby Jesus. Isaac corrected her. “Mary didn't have a little Jesus. Mary had a little lamb.” In a sense Isaac is right. In Jesus' day people placed their sins on a sacrificial lamb. The lamb took the punishment in their place. Yet this took endless herds of lambs. So God sent one spotless Lamb. John the Baptist said about Jesus: “Look the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.” (John 1:29) One life. One lamb. One world. All the sin. Jesus was born to die on the Cross. His blood was shed so we would be forever free of sin, so the door to eternal life would be open to us.

One year ago around Christmas, 6-year-old Grace Lowe was suffering with leukemia. She desperately needed a bone marrow treatment yet her siblings were not a match. After more searching they found the perfect match – her 8-year-old cousin Scott Lowe. They are double cousins – both moms and dads are siblings. But the question remained: would this young boy submit to the painful procedures. Scott admitted, “I was scared going in for the operation.” Thankfully, Grace has improved so well she returned to school this November. When asked, “Why did you give her the transplant?” Scott replied simply, “I wanted to save her life.”

That is why Jesus came – to give His life to save your life. He went through hell for you because He did not want to go to heaven without you. He opened the door to eternal life for you. Now you must walk through that door. God offers you the greatest gift – a wonderful eternal life – but you must open your heart and let Him be your Lord and Savior. Some refuse to walk through that door. Some miss the door because they are too busy. Some feel unworthy to walk through the door.

Do you know there is a lost ending to *It's a Wonderful Life*. While everyone celebrates on the inside of the Bailey house there is a lone figure outside their door.

It is still snowing. Potter, muffled in a heavy overcoat, is at the door. He looks at an envelope in his hand. It is Uncle Billy's money. From inside comes the Christmas carol. Potter is about to knock, but he can't. Something tells him he is unworthy to be with those inside. He sits on step, fingering money—a lonely, beaten man.

Maybe you feel mean old Mr. Potter deserves to be punished. Yet I think if George Bailey opened the door he would say, “Why Mr. Potter, come on in out of the cold. Let me help you with your wheelchair. Have some punch.” I know that's what Jesus would do. Why? Because that's what He does for me and you and everyone on earth – all who seek Him find Him. For all

who knock, the door will be opened (Matthew 7:8). Tonight you can receive God's greatest gift – the gift of a wonderful eternal life. It begins with a simple prayer of opening your heart to him.

I normally lead about 6 funerals a year. This year, for whatever reason, I served at twice that many. In fact, I've officiated at 6 services just since the end of August. Many say to me, "I don't know how you do this. This must be the hardest thing you have to do." It is. Yet it's also a great honor. Like the movie *It's a Wonderful Life* I'm allowed to tell a person's life story. I seek to make each one unique because every life is special. Yet I end nearly all of them the same way:

There will come a day when God will be with us. When He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. When disease and death will be no more. When God will make all things new. And we will be reunited with those we love who, by faith have gone ahead of us into our Father's House. It will be the greatest family reunion of all because no one will ever have to say goodbye again.

I wonder why I well up with tears during the end of *It's a Wonderful Life*. I think because it's a taste of what heaven will be like. All my friends and family who've gone before me will be there to greet me. Steve and Kim and Tom, Clay and Nedson, my grandparents, my in-laws Ralph and Estrid and my Dad. They'll all be there to say "Welcome home" and sing to the newborn King. And I'll look back and say, "Truly, it was a wonderful life. But the best is yet to come."