

God's Greatest Gift

Isaiah 52:7-10

John 1:1-14*

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Last week I asked what was then greatest gift you had ever gotten for Christmas? Since then several of you have told me of special gifts,
a loved home from the War,
a pet that loved you for years,
a bride for the next 50 years,
oranges in the deep winter.

I remember one year a big red wagon was under the tree, a wagon they couldn't get me out of, another special Christmas was a set of cowboy costumes that we took turns wearing, but the most special was my first bike. That bike and I became inseparable. I rode it everywhere in New Orleans. Tulane University with its open spaces and sidewalks just next door, Audubon Park two miles away, the levees by the River—only hills in New Orleans, even downtown and all through the French Quarter—as long as it was daytime. I was free and exploring and ranging and growing and becoming street wise. That bike was such a game changer—it brought a new freedom and new adventures. That bike marked the way my life was going to be ever after. Changed, active, on the go, into stuff, willing to try new things, go new places. That part of me really hasn't changed.

But one thing did change. In time I learned that the gift I thought was so great, was really great, but it wasn't the best gift ever. And, I have to be honest with you, that I thought along the way, I had found

that best ever special gift several times, but each time another one came along and stepped in front, and for a while it was so special. I remember my military service---so gung-ho, so into it--coming through a time of war in this country and being active in the military and the reserves through that period looking back seems like a miracle I'm still here, that I had made it to the end and survived. So many of my friends didn't. So many had lives changed or were injured and damaged forever. I was fortunate—looking back, it's obvious the good Lord was planning something different. I later thought my career as an attorney, especially with the career I had, was so special. I represented corporate America. I was in demand. I went to 47 different states to work. I tried over 400 cases in 12 states and in all but 9 of the state and federal courts in Virginia. That was special. I was recognized nationally. I even taught lawyers how to do the job of trying cases. I numbered the United States Congress and the Supreme Court as clients.

What a gift I was given of being able to try cases and to do it effectively, but it wasn't the greatest.

I sometimes thought God's gift of this world and all the things in it was the gift. Enough water, enough sunshine, enough food, enough resources, God had given us such a miracle, a self replenishing world that met our every need in every generation, if we were only good stewards. What a gift, filled with so many special places, and special people. We visited and traveled, we stayed long and short times, we met the world, learned the world, each was a gift, and then another, but still even all of this was eclipsed by God's greatest gift, that I hadn't yet realized I had gotten.

I even vainly thought God's call of me in mid-career as an attorney to change my focus from law to religion and law combined was a next

special step, a better gift. It was, and in helping so many churches and people of faith in trouble, getting them out of messes, giving them hope, that was a special gift, but it wasn't the one that I have finally come to see as God's greatest. That greatest gift came suddenly in the middle of the night, in a back-woody place called Bethlehem, to a family just beginning its journey together. The gift was a child, symbolic of the depth of God's love, important to be seen as a gift needing my involvement and yours, a special gift that God made life, eternal life, available, not as a visitor, but as a member of God's family and God's kingdom.

The gift was wrapped and under my tree every year, but for so long, I didn't open the gift fully. Oh, I sang and prayed and did all the fa la la las, but I didn't use the gift as God intended. You see, this gift begins with the baby Jesus, a helpless, precious, babe in a manger, that made heaven jump for joy and sing about our father in Heaven. I'm sure that choir sang over and over as the life and death of Jesus unfolded before them...just think about the highlights:....a devil resisted, a baptism to show us God's imprint and approval with water, clean water meant a clean slate, forgiveness. Forgiveness for my running away from God, then heaven must have beamed to see a healing here, a feeding there, an inclusion here, a rejection of hypocrisy and blindness there. We see again heaven troubled by a cross only to turn Friday's page to a morning more glorious than anything imaginable—Easter....all gifts, all special, all leading to the greatest gift of all. Ready for it? It's simple, but oh, so special

God loves me, me, the mess that I am, and God and will not let me go.

And even better, God wants me to be with Him.

God came here that Christmas morn so I would not miss what God feels about me and what God has in store for me, and for ...you.

God saved me that I might live.

God called me to serve.

God fed me rich manna and the wine of a communion table.

God watches my going out and my coming in.

God is waiting for me and has prepared a place for us to be together forever.

Not because I earned it.

Not because I deserved it,

Not because I am good or on someone's list.

The greatest gift is the second chance, and the third chance and the fourth chance that God has given me...and you. I have stumbled, you have stumbled, many times and in many ways, but God has picked me and you up each time, dusted us off, forgiven us, and said try again; I'm not through with you yet. As long as you breathe, I have need of you

I know this to be true: While our time together here is drawing to a close. God gifted me by bringing me here and giving me you, the incredible you that you are and together—you and God—have made my life so special here. But God is not through with either of us. You have work yet to do, and so do I. That is the greatest gift, that God still calls us, still needs us, still sends us, still uses us, still wants us, still loves us. We both have one more box to open this Christmas—the one that says: what's next.

Let us look again with awe at God's greatest gift—God's love of us
and never letting us go!

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Isaiah 52:7-10 (KJR)

- 7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings Good News,
Who proclaims peace,
who brings Good Tidings of good things,
who proclaims salvation,
Who say to, Zion, "Your God reigns!"
- 8 Listen you watchmen and lift up your voices;
With their voices they shall sing together of joy,
For they shall see eye to eye when the Lord brings back Zion.
- 9 Burst into songs of joy together you ruins of Jerusalem,
for the Lord has comforted His people.
He has redeemed Jerusalem.
- 10 The Lord will lay bare His Holy arm in the sight of all the nations
And all the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

John 1:1-14

- 1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the word was god.
- 2 He was with God in the beginning.
- 3 Through Him all things that were made; without Him nothing was made that has been made.
- 4 In Him was life and that life was the light of all mankind.
- 5 The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness cannot overcome it.
- 6 There was a man sent from God whose name was John,
- 7 He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him, all might believe.
- 8 He himself (John) was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.
- 9 The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.
- 10 He was in the world and though the world was made through Him, the world did not recognize Him.
- 11 He came to that which was His own, but His own did not receive Him.
- 12 Yet, to all who did receive Him, to those who believed in His name, he gave the right to become children of God,
- 13 Children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision, nor of a husband's will, but born of God.
- 14 The Word became flesh and dwelt 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.