

Christmas Eve 2009, 3:00

*“Gifts”*

Isaiah 9:2-7, Luke 2:1-14

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“Only one dollar and eighty seven cents! What am I going to do?”

The morning, the morning, of Christmas Eve arrives. Young Della feels dread as she anticipates her first Christmas with her husband, Jim. She knows just which gift she wants to give to him, but her funds fall woefully short.

This Christmas Eve story occurs a long time ago, when a dollar was a dollar. Young Della and her husband, Jim, pay eight dollars a week to rent their little studio apartment. Money does not grow on trees. Della and Jim work hard to meet their financial obligations. Their big splurge for Christmas Eve dinner... a pair of lamb chops.

Della and Jim, short of money as they are, do possess two great treasures. Jim's treasure, his pride and joy—a gold watch, his grandfather's gold watch, passed down from his father. If King Solomon kept all his wealth in the apartment across from Jim and Della's, Solomon would pluck his beard with envy each time Jim pulled out that beautiful, gold watch.

Della's treasure, her pride and joy: thick, lustrous, long auburn hair, inherited from her mother. If the Queen of Sheba lived in the apartment across from Della and Jim's, the Queen would weep covetous tears for Della's fabulously luxuriant hair.

Della ponders...what would the perfect present for Jim be? Then, inspiration fires her imagination. Whenever Jim draws his watch from his pocket, it captures everyone's attention as the light glitters off the gold. But Jim keeps his watch on a dull leather strap, for he owns no decorative chain for it.

The ideal gift...young Della scours the city for a gold watch chain. She finds the perfect one at a downtown jeweler. But the price?! Her dollar-eighty-seven is eighteen dollars short. What to do?... Wishing, wishing there was a way... An idea comes to young Della.

Christmas Eve... presents all purchased? Has anyone any last minute shopping to do? The gifts...all wrapped? Think back to when you were a child: What was your favourite Christmas present? Again, remembering when you were a child: What was the best Christmas present you ever gave? And this year... What gift are you especially looking forward to giving? Whose face do you look forward to seeing when she or he unwraps that gift? Presents and Christmas go together like the Fourth of July and... fireworks, like Thanksgiving and... turkey, like pie and... ice-cream, like mashed potatoes and... gravy.

Giving gifts does not begin with Macy's and Nordstrom's. Giving gifts does not begin with Saint Nicholas. Rather, this season of gift-giving begins with...God. God gives us the gift of life. How wondrous, how amazing... here we are. How marvelous that we sit together in this time and in this place. I cannot help but wonder with joy at journeying with members of my family, those with me now, and even those far away. I journey with those I love: Tod, our kids: Thandiwe and Mandla, my friends, with all of you, even with the strangers around us. God gives this amazing gift of life.

But we can feel the gift of life's sweetness soured by the bitterness of death. We can feel separated from God, the eternal, by our own mortality and the mortality of those we love. When tempted by death to stay bitter and estranged from God, we remember that God not only gives us the gift of life, but the gift of accompaniment in life and death. God journeys with us, and those we love, in life and death.

There's a Hindu word which means “God appearing in human form.” It's been adopted into English. Anyone know it? I'll give you a clue...It's the title of a film currently in a theater near you.

Yes, “Avatar.” Hmm... A film called *Avatar*, -- avatar—God appearing in human form-- released at Advent... makes you think – someone in Hollywood is pretty clever. But for us God does not merely appear in human form, as in the movie or in the Hindu concept of Avatar. Our God does not just pretend to be human. The incredible story, the Christmas story... God becomes human, joining us in full humanity. God invests God's own self, blessing and sanctifying life. God approaches us at our own level, in life and in death. In the Bethlehem baby, we recognize the sign of “God with us.” I reckon all great gifts, the really good gifts, have a part of the giver invested in the gift, whether that investment is time, money, or one's very self.

Which takes us back to our Christmas story of the early 1900s, Della finding the ideal gift for her husband Jim. Remember, what is Della shopping for? [*gold watch chain*] And what is Della's great treasure? [*her long, lustrous hair*] Who knows this O’Henry story of Della and Jim? Raise your hands? What does Della do? She goes to the wig shop. She unpins her hair and asks the wig-maker, “What will you pay me for my hair?” The wig-maker feels those beautiful tresses. She hefts the hair in her hand. “I will pay you twenty dollars,” says the wig maker.

“Done!” cries Della. “Cut it quickly, before I change my mind.”

That evening, Christmas Eve, Della nervously awaits Jim's arrival. She feels his footsteps as he climbs the stairs. Her heart beats with excitement and anxiety as she hears his call of greeting, “Darling I’m home.” Jim pauses at the rack to hang his coat. He turns to gather his beloved in his arms, and he gapes. After looking at Della, his eyes wander around the room, searching, as if Della's beautiful hair has been set aside somewhere for only a moment.

Della rushes into Jim's look of confusion, explaining, “Oh, Jim, my hair will grow back. I cut it so I could buy your present. I searched all over town and found the perfect gift.” She hands Jim a long slim box. “I just know you will love it!”

In a daze, Jim takes the box. He unwraps the gift. A look of **deep** consternation crosses Jim's face. Then a look of **deep** love replaces Jim's look of consternation. Jim extracts from his pocket a small, gift-wrapped box. He tenderly hands it to his adoring wife. “Open it,” he says.

“For me?” exclaims Della. As Della feels the weight of the gift she says, “Oh, Jim, wherever did you find the money for a gift for me?” Upon opening the box, Della gasps with joy, then she shrieks with despair. For there in the box nestle a pair of matching ivory hair combs for pinning up her long, lustrous hair, her **once** long hair.

Jim flops on the couch with his hands knit behind his head. With a smile he says, “Della, let us put away our gifts and keep them for awhile. They are too nice to use just at present. I sold my watch to get the money to buy those combs... And now suppose you put the lamb chops on.”

Della and Jim, foolish or wise like those three kings from Orient of whom we sing? And God, foolish or wise, nevertheless, made known to us that first Christmas and always in the manger child, in all children. Foolish or wise, I reckon all great gifts, the really good ones, include our very selves.

Let us pray. God, thank you for the gift of life, for all those we have journeyed with in life and death. Thank you for the life of Jesus of Nazareth whose arrival on earth we celebrate today. Thank you for loving us so much that you gave of yourself that we might know that love and learn to give it to others. Bless us this Christmas, that we might be a blessing, too. Amen.