

Title: The Greatest Gift of All

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, we gather in awe of the great mystery of your incarnation; we celebrate and give thanks for the birth of Jesus and look forward to peace on earth, through him who took our flesh, lived among us, and died for us, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

Sara Wood and her son, Landon, were facing a bleak Christmas this year. Landon is five years old. They were sleeping in the same bed at her parent's home. Her husband and his father, Staff Sgt. Scott Wood, died four weeks ago due to complications of injuries he sustained in combat. Sara said of Landon, "He knows daddy's in heaven, though I don't know if he fully comprehends what that means. He knows daddy's not coming back."

Scott's favorite team was the Houston Texans of the NFL. Scott was buried with an Andre Johnson jersey beneath his military uniform.

Last Sunday, the team decided to help Sara and Landon with gifts and honor the memory of her husband. The team brought Sara to the game under the pretense that she and her son would be part of a halftime ceremony in which Landon would receive a bike and Scott's memory would be celebrated by the 71,500 in attendance. Sara and Landon had never been to game before.

What they didn't know was the presentation of a really big gift. The organization, Operation Finally Home, gave Sara and Landon a new mortgage-free house. When the gift was announced on the stadium loudspeakers, the crowd roared in approval. The house will be built in Alvin, Texas.

Operation Finally Home solicits donations of land and materials to build homes for disabled veterans and war widows. It was founded by Houston builder Dan Wallrath. Thirty-two vets and widows have benefited from the charity, so far.

The celebration of Jesus' birthday is known to us as a time of gift giving. Sara and Landon certainly received a really big gift. But the tradition of Christmas giving is a fairly recent one.

Gift giving at this time of year may have begun in ancient Rome. It was a tradition to give gifts on New Year's Day. These were simple gifts that usually had an association with one of Rome's gods.

Even with the fall of Rome, gift giving at the beginning of the year continued. The church tried to banish the practice to no avail. So church leaders tried to find a way to incorporate the custom with church tradition, which is how we get many of our church traditions.

The justification for gifting was found in the story of the magi and their gifts that they brought for the Christ child. Since the coming of Christ into the world was a gift from God, giving us the gift of redemption and everlasting life, we, too, might give of ourselves to others.

Giving gifts at Christmas has its roots in Victorian England. Giving gifts became a way of expressing kindness with the celebration of the season. Presents were gift wrapped to hide what they were. In-home mazes were made for people to go through to find their gift.

This tradition came across the Atlantic to the U.S. We added the Dutch tradition of Santa Claus. Santa Claus came into people's homes leaving stockings full of goodies. Then Coca-Cola cemented the image of Santa Claus with the holiday. Then the commercialization of Christmas was well underway.

Something grand like the giving of a house to Sara Wood brings the spirit of the season back into focus from all the ads and from the excesses of events like Black Friday. Certainly the gifts of magi were also grand.

The birth of a baby is always a great gift. We are here tonight to celebrate a special birth. We don't know what time of year Jesus was born. The church co-opted a Roman solstice holiday to shift the culture from a pagan celebration to a Christian celebration. Even though we don't know what time of year Jesus was born, the church thought it important to observe Jesus' birth.

This is the Feast of the Incarnation: God entered history in human form. God thought of us so much, loved us so much, to be with us. Jesus came to right our course. Our future is one of peace and harmony. Jesus pointed us to that future. And so we observe his birth, reminding ourselves of his message. Even the angels declare peace on earth in announcing his birth. Jesus is also called the Prince of Peace. Churches are named Prince of Peace.

It was the prophet Isaiah who said that the messiah would be the Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6-7) Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, calls us to peace.

For us and for Scott, Sara, and Landon Wood, Natalie Cole sings about what she wants for Christmas, her “Grown-up Christmas List:”

“No more lives torn apart  
And wars will never start,  
And time will heal all hearts.  
Everyone will have a friend  
And right will always win,  
And love will never end.  
This is my lifelong dream,  
My Grown-up Christmas List.”

Text: **Luke 2:1–20** (NRSV)

**2** In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup> Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup> He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

<sup>8</sup> In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,<sup>a</sup> the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> Or *the Christ*

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,<sup>b</sup> praising God and saying,

<sup>14</sup> “Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”<sup>c</sup>

<sup>15</sup> When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” <sup>16</sup> So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup> When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup> and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>b</sup> Gk *army*

<sup>c</sup> Other ancient authorities read *peace, goodwill among people*

<sup>1</sup> *The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. 1989 (Lk 2:1–20). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.