

## **Good News of Great Joy: An Extravagant and Expansive Gift**

Tonight we celebrate the “Good News of Great Joy,” that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was sent by His father God into the world to save and redeem humankind. He brings light to a world shrouded in darkness, life in a world surrounded by death, hope to the hopeless, love to the unloved, kindness when so many want to put forward hate, and a completely counter-cultural way of life. His birth is truly and amazing gift from God.

I want to take a few moments right now to consider two characteristics of this gift of Jesus: its extravagance and its expansiveness.

### **Extravagant:**

Merriam-Webster defines “extravagant” as exceeding the limits of reason or necessity, lacking in restraint, excessively elaborate, and unreasonably high in price. I love the word extravagant. It’s a five dollar word; the word “extravagant” even sounds “extravagant!”

Emma Tapping, from the Isle of Man near Britain, has made the news for the last two years because of the extravagant number of gifts she buys for her children. Last year she purchased 87 presents for each of her three children, a teenager, a 9 year old, and a toddler. This year, she decided to up the ante, purchasing 96 gifts for each child, spending a whopping \$1500 pounds or approximately \$1568 on Christmas presents. Many

have criticized her decision to do this, saying that she could better demonstrate generosity to her children by giving some of the money to charity, while she defends this, saying that she works and saves all year to be able to spend on her children. No matter how we might choose to judge her decisions, Emma Tapping is a perfect example of commercial Christmas extravagance.

We celebrate our love for friends and family at Christmas through the giving of gift to one another. Ultimately, though, it is about celebrating a different kind of extravagant gift. That is the gift of Jesus Christ, His son, through whom the entire world is offered salvation, not only from their sins, but from a purposeless life chasing after the fleeting things offered by the world.

The gift is extravagant because, according to the definition of extravagance, it is unreasonably high in price and it exceeds the limits of reason. First, God's gift of Jesus is unreasonably high in price for God. Before Jesus, the only way that people could be made right with God was to perform a strict series of sacrifices according to the law. The sacrifices all had prices that people would have to pay, however much it would be to buy that certain animal, or to buy that amount of grain or oil. And the sins that they would pay for had prices, so that the steeper the sin, the steeper the sacrifice. Ultimately though, the wages of sin, as Paul tells us in Romans 6:23, is death. And nothing we could do would ever take that price away permanently. God wanted to create a permanent way for His people to be with

Him, so He sent His own Son Jesus to be the ultimate and final sacrifice for the payment of sin. For God, the price was extremely high; he had to briefly break relationship with His own son in order to be reunited with us!

The gift had a high price for God, but for us it is free. Now, what free things do we actually receive in this life that are any good? Maybe a pen with a business logo on it, maybe a keychain or a magnet. Oftentimes when we get “Free” offers from businesses, there are strings attached. We don’t give away things of value for free, yet that’s exactly what God did with salvation through Jesus. Paul continues in **Romans 6:23** “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” According to our standards and logic, it makes no sense to give away something so valuable for free. But because God’s gift is extravagant, it exceeds the limits of reason.

**Transition:** The birth of Jesus is not only an extravagant gift, but it is also an expansive gift.

**Expansive:** Salvation, for thousands of years, was mostly limited to the people of God, the Israelites. Now, this wasn’t God’s plan, they were supposed to share the Gospel message with the world. But for various reasons they circled the wagons and kept God to themselves. Through Jesus, God expanded the bounds of those who could receive this Gospel message to everyone in the world, regardless of nation, ethnicity, social and cultural status, wealth, and past.

We can see the expansiveness of this gift in those God chose to involve in the birth of Jesus and how He chose to redeem their impossible situations. First, we have Zechariah and Elizabeth, of the priestly class but put to shame because Elizabeth was barren. God chose to redeem her situation by giving them a son in their old age. And that son would pave the way for Jesus the savior. The Good News of Great joy would be for everyone, regardless of age or physical challenge. For Mary, God decided to use a young girl who, in that time and place, would not have especially amounted to much, financially and politically speaking, and give her the honor and distinction of being the mother of the savior because of her faith. The Good news of Great Joy would be for even those that culture might consider average and unspectacular. For Joseph, who had been planning on getting married, would have been building the house that he and Mary would be living in, and was imagining what His future life would look like, God took at potentially embarrassing situation, fiancée pregnant with someone else's child, and used Joseph's faithfulness as well as his family line in order to fulfill his purposes. Remember that Joseph was a descendent of King David, and the Messiah was prophesied to be in the line of David, so God used Joseph as Jesus' adoptive father to fulfill prophecy. The Good News of Great Joy is for those who might be considered normal, and it also is for those whose lives may take dramatic shifts in direction. For the Shepherds, God chose to reveal His son first to a group that would have never received honor from their own culture, who were viewed as dirty scoundrels unfit to worship in the synagogues unless they went through some seriously difficult cleansing rituals. The

Good News of Great Joy would be for the lowliest, the unwanted, the undeserving, and the castaways. For the Wise Men, God revealed himself to non-Jewish people, letting loose the gospel message to the whole world. The Good News of Great Joy would be for all nations, tongues and tribes.

In **Luke 1:46-55**, Mary speaks a beautiful song about the expansiveness of God's good news of great joy through Jesus that we often refer to as The Magnificat. In it, she says:

### **Luke 1:46-55**

"My soul magnifies the Lord,<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.<sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,<sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

Listen to some of these phrases: "he has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful from their thrones, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry with good things, sent the rich away

empty.” God’s extravagant gift is expanded to those who would not normally receive much in life, and at the same time is used to humble those who, in this world, receive much. Mary understood the incredible shake-up that God was doing through Jesus, in that He was extending salvation, not just to the religious, to the ethnically elite, or to those who seem to deserve it, but to everyone.

This week, I got to see a truly incredible glimpse into God’s extravagant and expansive gift. On Tuesday I attended the Adriel Christmas Program that Erin directed, and I had an opportunity to see a group of youth act out the Nativity Story. It was funny, it was heartwarming, and it was a little chaotic at times. But one moment really touched me in a way that I was able to truly see the measure of God’s expansive and extravagant gift. Erin led the choir in singing some traditional Christmas carols, and then she led in the hymn “My Soul is Filled with Joy.” This hymn comes from the Magnificat, and though we don’t often think about it at Christmas, it really has an incredibly appropriate message. One of the things Erin does in order to encourage the kids to share their talents is allows them to do solos in some of the songs, so several girls sang the beginnings of verses from “My Soul is Filled with Joy.” One of these girls stood up and sang the words “I am lowly as a child, but I know from this day forward, that my name will be remembered, for all have called me blessed.” She was probably just a year or two younger than Mary would have been when she had Jesus. And in many ways shares characteristics of the characters in the Nativity story. Not well

thought of, according to society and unseen by many. Easily forgotten up on the hill, and because of her difficult circumstances and behaviors, not always the easiest to work with. Sounds a lot like Mary and the shepherds. And yet, as she sang these words, all I could think was, this IS the extravagance and expansiveness of God's gift. That Jesus came down for the lowly, for the forgotten, for the unworthy. And that he came down for me, and for you, and for everyone, to bring light into the darkness of my heart, to redeem my unworthy qualities, to bring hope when I feel forgotten.

And the wonderful news about this extravagant gift is that it's not just for me to keep, or for you to keep, but it is for us to share with others. As we get older at Christmas, I believe the joy of receiving gifts begins to diminish a little as the joy of giving gifts increases. And this gift of Jesus Christ is the greatest gift that we could ever give to another person. So as we go from here this evening to our friends and families, let us consider how we might be able to share this extravagant and expansive gift and in doing so give to others the same life and light that we have received.