

## “Unwrapping the Gift”

Introduction: I’m pretty sure that by now, all of the gifts that were sitting under your Christmas tree early last Wednesday morning have now been opened. Some, already, might even have been returned, and possibly, your tree has already been taken down, the pine needles vacuumed up, and your living room furniture put back in place!

But no matter how far removed you already might be feeling from Christmas, think back if you can to the time of opening your gifts. What kind of opener are you? Do you shake the package first and try to guess what’s inside? Do you remove the tape carefully so that you can reuse the paper? Or do you just tear the paper off, too excited to go slowly? Do you wait your turn with other family members, or do you all just open everything at once? There are certainly lots of ways that unwrapping your gifts can be done.

How about the gift of Jesus? Speaking of Jesus at one point the apostle Paul refers to him as an “incredible gift” (2 Cor. 9:15). How do you unwrap him? How do you open and take in what is incredible? To help us think about that, let’s head out into the fields outside Bethlehem and observe how the very first recipients of the gift of Jesus – the shepherds – began to unwrap what they had been given. We’ll see that they took time to explore the gift, they shared the gift, and they worshipped the Giver of the gift.

### I. Shepherds

A. Last week we thought a bit about the background of Mary so let’s do the same for a minute with the shepherds. They were actually the primary players in the most important industry in first century Palestine – sheep. As fish are to Gloucester, and antiques are to Essex, sheep were to Bethlehem. They were used for meat and milk, for clothing and for sacrifice. The shepherd’s responsibility was to make sure the sheep were well fed, watered, and protected from predators.

B. However, while shepherds were important, and while they enjoyed great relationships with their sheep, it was not so much with the rest of the population. They were rough and tumble characters. They lived outside for most of the year and rarely bathed. They ate food that the religious community considered unclean. And they had a reputation for stretching the truth. As a result, while they provided the animals for the sacrificial rites in the temple, they, themselves, were not welcome there, nor were they able to testify in a court of law. In general, they were considered to be a kind of necessary, but not really welcomed class of people. On a football team they would be the folks that washed the dirty uniforms. In a restaurant they would be those who bussed tables. In an office building, they would be the people who came in at night to vacuum the floors and empty the waste baskets. You couldn’t do without them, but they probably wouldn’t be on the top of your Christmas party invitation list.

C. And yet, they were the first to receive the news that Jesus had been born. Maybe it was because this announcement by the angels declared that Jesus had come to be the savior of all people and that the shepherds were a helpful way to picture this. Jesus had come for Gentile as well as Jew, women as well as men, servants as well as kings.

Importantly, the shepherds didn't hesitate to head out and investigate. They could've argued about who would stay back and watch the sheep. They could've said, "we don't have anything to wear or any presents to bring." But instead, they just hurried off to explore all that they had just heard.

## II. Unwrapping

A. And this is the first way we see the shepherds unwrapping the gift that is Jesus. Unlike the innkeeper, who was too busy and so ignored the gift, and Herod, who was too paranoid and so tried to destroy the gift, the shepherds went off to explore the gift. What they found was a baby, lying in a manger, which was just as they had been told. It served as confirmation, both for them, and, I would think, for Mary and Joseph. The angel, as it turns out, was right. Further, this child was not to be a secret; there were others who knew about him.

While we don't have an actual word made flesh lying in a manger to go to, we do have the word of the Bible, which reveals a great deal about this baby, to which we can go. If we just leave Jesus in the Bible, and do not open it to explore what we learn about him there, we will miss out on the gift we've been given. In God's word, there is much to treasure and ponder as we take in all that we're told about this Jesus.

B. A second way we see the shepherd's unwrapping the gift of Jesus is that when they had confirmed for them the amazing gift that he is, they spread the word. Why do we spread the word about anything? I think it's because we think it's of such importance that others need to know it and share in it. In fact, how many of you, when you hear good news, are able to keep quiet about it? If a grandchild is born in your family, or the Patriots win another Super Bowl, or you get an "A" on your final exam, or were accepted into the college of your first choice, it is likely that you can't help but share such news.

What was of such great importance that the shepherds just had to share it? "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord." Know that the world of the first century shared many of the problems of our own day. Listen to how the apostle Paul describes life at that time:

People will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money, boastful, proud, abusive, disobedient to their parents, ungrateful, unholy, without love, unforgiving, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not lovers of the good, treacherous, rash, conceited, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God . . . (2 Tim. 3:2-4).

It's not a pretty picture but it's also not far from the place in which we live. It's a sad picture of great brokenness from which we need rescuing. And the shepherds recognized that this coming Savior, Messiah, and Lord was the One who was going to get this rescue operation that God had promised, since the days of Abraham, underway.

Making sure others know about all that God has done is a way of unwrapping that gift. We don't have to be a prophet or pastor to spread the word about this incredible Savior. It's a gift worth sharing, and not keeping to ourselves.

C. A third way we see the shepherds unwrapping this gift of Jesus is that they return home glorifying and praising God. If you think about it, we praise things, or people, all the time. "What a

splendid sunset!” “What a beautiful child!” “What an incredible catch!” “What a magnificent meal!” It is C.S. Lewis, I believe, who once observed that our delight in someone or something is incomplete until it is expressed in praise. Imagine seeing that sunset, gazing at that child, marveling at that catch or meal, and saying nothing! The shepherds completed their delight in God’s indescribable gift by giving him glory and praise—by worshipping him.

In addition, to glorify or praise something or someone is to acknowledge its true worth. In this regard, if we could ask God – the giver of this incredible gift of Jesus – what he wants for Christmas, it would be just that – our worship. You might be inclined to think this to be rather self-centered of God, reveling in our worship of him. And it would be, if God were not the greatest good. Then worshipping him would be a form of idolatry as something else would be greater than he. But since God is the greatest good, glorifying and praising him—giving him the gift of our worship—is not only entirely appropriate, it is a way that brings the gift home to our heart and keeps our focus on the greatness of the One who gave it.

At the heart of the Christmas season is the mystery of the incarnation, of God becoming human in the birth of Jesus. And so our faith is, at the same time, both material and mystical. It is material in that God became *flesh and blood* and made his dwelling among us. It is mystical in that *God* became flesh and blood and dwelt among us.

So may we, no matter where we go or who we are, continue to unwrap this indescribable gift. May we explore and learn more about its material and mystical components. May we share what we learn with others. May we celebrate what we’ve been given in praise and worship.