

**A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church**  
**“The Gift of Our Savior”**  
**By Eric Howell**  
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The church is probably the only place where Christmas isn't over yet. In fact, in church Christmas is just getting started. For two Sundays after the Big Day we still sing and remember and celebrate the coming of our Lord into this world. Does that mean we haven't gotten the memo that it's over? Not exactly. We know the Big Day is over. We just ignored the memo that that means it's all over. Church just goes a little slower and asks us to keep our attention just a bit longer on some things while the world is packing them away back in boxes. Easter is like that, too. Easter is one day to celebrate the resurrection of Christ. But in church Easter is six more Sundays. Lent is like that. Good Friday is one day to remember the crucifixion of Christ, but in the church Lent is 40 days to prepare for it. It's a little strange sometimes, but that's ok. It's a discipline that invites us to have a little longer attention span.

I was thinking back to our Christmas morning when we were opening presents from one another with great grandparents and grandparents and little kiddos bouncing around the room like pinballs. And someone said to someone else when they opened up a present, “If you don't like it, you can return it.” And then a minute later the same thing “If you don't like it, you can return it” was said from someone else to someone else. And then . . . it got funny. And it got said with every present. “If you don't like it, you can return it.” Someone suggested that we should just post a sign that you point to every time someone opens your gift, “If you don't like it, you can return it.”

There's a pretty reasonable psychological explanation for why we say that to one another. On one hand, it's part of the gift. The gift is intended to make you happy. So if the pants are little snug (after all that pie), get what you need. If you prefer a different color, get what you want. The gift is your happiness, so please get what makes you happy. On the other hand, that phrase, “If you don't like it, you can return it” is a little bit of caution. Sort of like saying, “I hope you like this. Because I'm a little uncertain about it, I'm going to hold back a little bit of confidence to give you room to criticize it without letting my feelings get hurt.” Now, by this time, I know I'm way overanalyzing something so simple.

But I was thinking of how the little baby Jesus was a gift from God to the world. It was grace. That's what grace means. It means free gift. Jesus was a free gift to the world. This gift was of unequalled value, unsurpassed sacrifice, unfathomable riches. We heard a lot of things when we received this gift. We heard, “This is good news.” And “You will find a baby all wrapped up like a present.” And “He is lying in a manger.” That last one sounds normal to our ears now. “He's lying in a manger.” But how odd that must have sounded to those first hearers, to hear angels in the sky majestically singing, “We have great news of a great joy that has come to all the earth. In the city of David is born to you this day a Savior, Christ the Lord. And right now, He's lying in a cow trough.”

But that's the sort of gift this was. It was strange and odd at first. Wise men worshipped Him. The King tried to kill Him. His parents had to flee south before they

moved back north. He would grow to be a child who would marvel adults and grow further to be an adult that loved children. He was a wandering preacher who could look power right in the eye and speak hard truth. He had friends everywhere, but nowhere to lay his head. He had a mother who, on a tremendous act of faith, accepted the word of God to bear this Son, but who would later hear Him say, “I have no mother, I have no brothers, all of my disciples, my followers are my mother and brothers, my family.” This is a strange gift after all. He is hit, but doesn’t resist. He is condemned, but doesn’t respond. He dies, and yet He lives.

The world heard many things from angels and prophets when He was born, but we didn’t hear, “If you don’t like this gift, you can take it back.” We reject this gift or receive it on its own terms. We don’t get to resize it or reshape it or trade it in for a different color. He is who He is. And thank God. Imagine what we would have done if we could have traded Him in for a messiah of our better liking. We might have made Him blue eyed and golden haired. We might have made Him a national mascot. We might have made Him support our politics, our ideologies, maybe even our favorite sports team when they needed a winning field goal. We would have done all sorts of things had we been left to return Jesus to the messiah store to get what we preferred. We might have chosen a genie in a bottle to grant all our wishes, or a good teacher who wouldn’t go on so much about miracles and demons. We might have traded Him in for one who would stay dead once He was killed. At least that way we could venerate His tomb since we would have had no imagination that resurrection might be possible. We certainly would have kept Him a baby, all wrapped snug under the trees in swaddling clothes, sweet baby Jesus, so innocent, so pure, with his golden-fleeced britches. All of this we humans might have done once we unwrapped Him from His swaddling clothes and took a good look at what He would become and what He would say and do.

Thank God we couldn’t trade Him back in for a God made in our own image. We would have really messed that up, wouldn’t you say? Thank God that in God’s wisdom we have the messiah we needed, the one who is fully God and fully man, the one whose sharp tongue and open arms challenge and invite us to live lives that are different than what we might have led if we didn’t know Him. And challenge us and invite us to imagine a world more just, more loving, more redeemed than we would have created had we not known Him. The world isn’t there yet, but sometimes we get a glimpse into the world as it should be . . . as it will be.

Several years ago, a professional basketball playoff game between the Portland Trail Blazers and Dallas Mavericks began like all games do with pregame warm-ups and then the singing of the national anthem. The teams lined up on the sidelines like always with pregame sweat pouring off of them. They were ready to go and their minds were already on the opening tip. The coaches were focused and ready, going over game plans in their minds. The stage was set. On to that stage stepped up a 13-year-old girl who had been chosen to sing that song that is universally recognized to be one of the hardest tunes to pitch and some of the hardest lyrics to sing. The internet is full of videos of people who really messed this up on big stages. As later revealed, this girl had been fighting the flu and was still sick the day of the performance. Maybe that partly explains her pale face and trembling hands as she began—a cappella to sing. Her voice was the only one heard echoing around the otherwise silent stadium. “O Say can you see,” she began. And she was off. There’s no going back now . . . and then it happened. You know ‘it’—when your brain blips and then freezes. ‘It’ happened to that poor girl, battling the flu, all

alone in front of thousands and on national TV. ‘It’ happened. She couldn’t dial up the next word. “What so proudly we hailed at the . . . uh oh.” The stars? The stars early light? The red glare? She had no words. And she was stuck there all alone. Freeze her there for a moment.

This is humanity’s moment. We are going on, singing our song, living life and then we forget the words, we stumble over how this is supposed to go, we lose sight of what this is supposed to mean. We are lost. And we are all alone. We can’t blame anyone else for this. We got ourselves in this predicament. But that knowledge doesn’t make things any easier. Peter and Thomas and James and John and all the disciples had their moment. So did Job and Joseph. David did, too.

If you have observed anything about humanity or anything about how these moments with the song usually goes, you’d think you could write the rest of the story. It would go something like this: Things spiral out of control from there, wrong notes are sung, words are all jumbled up, the crowd turns ugly and starts to boo, ‘crucify her!’, tears start to roll down flushed red cheeks. What started off as good turned bad and then turned ugly and then turned desperate until it ended with a whimper instead of a bang.

This was not to be her story. See what happens next. Into the frame of the unblinking camera lens steps the coach of the one of the teams, Maurice Cheeks.

Later on, he would reflect, “You know, I don’t know. I think as I saw her stumble on the words, she looked helpless, and I just started walking. I had no idea what I was going to do, what I was going to say. But as I approached her, I just wanted to help her, and I didn’t know if I even knew the words. . . . You know, I just wanted to help her out. I didn’t want her to stand there helpless, nothing to do. So I just wanted to help her out.”

He gracefully steps up next to her and whispers the words of the song in her ear. And that helps a bit, but not enough so he begins singing it with her, and that’s better. And then, everyone in the stadium spontaneously joins in, cheering and singing together: fans, players, referees, the other stony-faced coach even mumbles the words (bet he wishes he was the one who walked over!). And when the final note of the now thousands-member choir is drowned by their thunderous ovation—not just for her, not just for him, but for the moment of grace that everyone had experienced—the rescued, relieved, inspiring 13-year-old heroine buries her head in the arms of her new friend, this gift, in that moment in some way, her savior, and says, “Thank you.”

That’s just the sort of gift this is. It’s one we needed before we knew we needed it; we hungered for it before we even know it was possible. It’s a gift that begins with a baby’s whimper in a cow trough and ends like this, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with people. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away” (Revelation 21:3-4).