



CHRISTMAS GIFTS: THE DIVINE ALARM CLOCK

Mark 1:1-8

December 3, 2017

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In our times, a gift is a trinket or bauble we purchase for someone else at the store. This task has become increasingly irksome because a) we don't know what people already have b) we're not sure how much to spend c) we cannot stand the notion of buying one more piece of junk to fill up someone else's house, knowing ours is already overflowing with more stuff than we know what to do with!

But gifts, true gifts are not purchased at the store. In Romans, Paul explains that, "Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights ..." (Romans 11:29) Biblically, gifts are a blessing from God, not Home Depot or Walmart.

As you do your Christmas shopping this year, I propose we shift the way we think about gifts and gift-giving and we spend some time each Sunday considering a more Biblical approach.

As we all know, the true purpose of this time of year is to prepare us to receive the most beautiful and sublime gift of all. So, we will spend this Advent exploring 4 of God's gifts: the Divine Mailbox, the Divine Map, the Divine Child, and this week, the Divine Alarm Clock.

Think about all the people God sent Israel over the ages: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Ezra – the list goes on and on! Essentially their message was the same: *"WORSHIP ONLY GOD; obey him; and treat one another with love and respect"*. Time and again, God sent them; time and again, God's people rebelled.

This time, God was going to do it differently. He wasn't sending just any messenger, he was sending the Son. But the people weren't ready. They were asleep. Someone needed to wake them up!

My nephew, Alex could sleep through anything. And I mean anything. Not just any alarm clock would do the trick. On one visit, I discovered just how deep this talent was.

His mother got this clock as a gift to try and help him get to school on time; to start the day. It was a gift meant to help his life (and let's face it really annoyed him too!) but it did not work, that is, except on me!

After a delightful night's sleep, suddenly, I thought we were being invaded. It was the loudest, most annoying, alarm clock you could ever imagine! It was like the sound of a tornado, earthquake, and bombing all wrapped up into one! I promise you, it sounded like an air-raid siren blasting right in my ear.

You better believe it woke me up and not in the slow gentle way, but the sit-up-straight, adrenalin rush, no sleepiness left, ready to go way!

That is John the Baptist. The loud fingernails on the chalkboard, completely necessary, and utterly annoying, Divine Alarm Clock. Mark's gospel begins not with Jesus' birth, but with John. That is how important getting ready and preparing ourselves properly is!

John did not want Israel to look past Jesus in their slumber. The big cheese was arriving. It was time to wake up! The time to get dressed and be ready was RIGHT NOW!

It is like the president or queen is showing up or the big date was coming to the door or the big interview. You wanted your hair to be just right, your breath fresh, your eyes awake and vibrant, but you had slept in!

Do you remember the Hugh Grant movie, *Four Weddings and a Funeral*? Despite the rough language, the opening scene is classic. Hugh Grant's character is the best man at his friend's wedding. But he slept in! In his stupor, he throws on some clothes and it's not until he is standing next to the groom, as the vows are taking place, that he realizes he forgot the rings! Finally, the

congregation coughs up a skull-covered ring for the groom and some horrific, plastic one for the bride!

John the Baptist did not want us to forget the rings! He wanted us to be ready for the bridegroom, as Jesus referred to himself.

And getting ready, according to John, waking up for Jesus, meant repenting and being baptized. It is the spiritual way of combing your hair and taking a breath mint, so we don't stink in the presence of the one, true Lord; to make ourselves presentable to him.

John knew the Israelites were looking for a different gift – earthly freedom. He knew their anger was, rightly, directed at Rome. But he also knew God had something greater in mind for them. Not liberation for their bodies, but salvation for their souls.

Thus, John does not tell them to get ready for battle with Rome but rather to look in, to see their own sin, to repent and be baptized. He reminds us that whatever external problems we face, our greatest victory will not be found in defeating earthly enemies, but being reconciled and reunited with God in our spirits.

We would do well to remind ourselves of this in light of the madness gripping our world. We can try desperately to fix this world with all the programs, laws, protests, and more, but they will never work. Certainly, we do need to try. We need to work hard to make a better society. But like a Tylenol codeine that only numbs the pain of cancer, such responses will never reach the root of the problem, and it will always come back. That is why God sent Jesus. To take care of the root of our soul disease once and for all.

That sin, that guilt we carry with us, is debilitating and soul destroying.

Elizabeth Kubler Ross who gained fame with her book *Death and Dying* writes,

“Consciously or not, we are all on a quest for answers, trying to learn the lessons of life. We grapple with fear and guilt. We

search for meaning, love, and power. We try to understand fear, loss, and time. We seek to discover who we are and how we can become truly happy.”

John teaches us true happiness is not found in more things or even in a more-just world, but in the love of God. The act of repentance John calls for is our way of turning to God and saying, “I have made a mess of my own life, Lord please take over!”

And yet, despite the sharp edge to John's message, repentance is not actually a message about how miserable you are! It is about how wonderful Christ is!

With the gift of the Divine Alarm clock, another follows right after it!

Once we are cleansed and forgiven, we suddenly have the spiritual armor to withstand anything, because baptism is the best kind of gift. It is the gift that keeps giving, 12 months out of the year, and is a 2-for-1 deal!

In Acts 2:38 Peter tells us, “Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.”

This Holy Spirit is indeed the best gift anyone can get! It is better than supersonic ears that let you hear voices of friends from far away, because this gift allows you to hear the voice of God all the way from heaven. It is also better than any beautiful piece of music. Perhaps you, like me, have several go-to pieces when you are feeling frazzled and bent. For me, it is Handel's *Water Music*. I remember all the way back in high school, if I had trouble sleeping because of a big test or a hot date (more often it was the big test), I would put on that LP and soon find my mind swimming in serene splendor. But, with the Holy Spirit, you don't even need a record player!

The Holy Spirit is that reassuring voice in your ear that tells you, no matter what troubles you are facing, indeed, as the old hymn tells us “All will be

well!" This is what Ephesians declares, after warning us away from the works of darkness:

*"Sleeper, awake!
Rise from the dead,
and Christ will shine on you."*

Christ's arrival means the love and glory for God is here. Unlike John's fingernails-on-the-chalkboard voice, Jesus' voice is that of the Good Shepherd, whose voice we find assuring and welcome.

The hymn by Philipp Nicolai reminds us of this wonderful voice. It opens, *"Sleeper Awake the voice astounds us!"* It astounds because of its majesty, power, and love. So, let's do all we can to be ready. This year, let us prepare ourselves to receive this indescribable gift of life, turning away from those life-draining practices, whatever they might be, by turning to God in Jesus Christ.