



CHRISTMAS GIFTS: THE DIVINE MAILBOX

Luke 1:26-38

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As a young boy, one of the most exciting parts of December was racing to the mailbox when I got home from school to see if it had arrived yet. Before the internet, the source of endless choices for a young boy's imagination to think about what Santa might bring was the weighty and substantial Sears Catalogue. Each day during school I wondered what new fantastic delight would be splashed across the pages and be the "big" present I would ask for. One year it was a motorized car (which I never got by the way!) and another it was a ten-speed bike (which I did!).

These were the hopes of a five-year-old child. But for some the mailbox becomes a lifeline. The blog article by Elinor Florence, "The Morale Squadron' Made Mail Their Mission during WWII", says,

...Imagine saying goodbye to your husband or son, knowing that you will not see his face or hear his voice for years -- maybe forever... The isolation of the men overseas, the hardships, and the homesickness was alleviated only by the presence of a letter from home.... And never more so than at Christmas...

(<http://elinorflorence.com/blog/ww2-mail>)

A letter from a spouse, parent, or friend was often the only gift received at Christmas, but it could do more to lift their spirits than a dozen meaningless trinkets.

In Jesus' times, they didn't have mailboxes or much mail at all, but they did have mailmen – only we know them as angels. *Angel* means messenger and they are God's divine couriers to deliver the Lord's most important messages.

This divine messenger, like all mail carriers, served a profound purpose. In this case, the Messenger brings 5 gifts, all wrapped in one message, for Mary.

Sergeant Simeon A. Tierce, of Camp Bailey, at Dutch's Island, wrote in 1863,

My Dear Wife,

I now take my pen in hand to let you know that I am well and hope these few lines will find you the same. I am well at present. I have got over the neuralgia in the head.

Nothing was harder for a spouse to deal with then simply wondering whether their loved one was alive or dead. In only a few words, hearts that pounded with desperation could find reassurance and peace.

Notice how the angel greets Mary, "the Lord is with you!" Mary had no need to worry about the nature of the message, because right away the angel gave her the gift of reassurance. This was going to be a message of hope. The first gift was reassurance.

The gift of the messenger's words not only reassure us of our loved one's health but can help us in the midst of separation.

Orson Welles, of all people, wrote this in a letter to Rita Hayworth:

Dearest Angel Girl:

...I suppose most of us are lonely in this big world, but we must fall tremendously in love to find it out You are my life – my very life. Beautiful, precious little baby – hurry up the sun! Make the days shorter till we meet. I love you, that's all there is to it.

Your boy, Orson

When the Angel arrives, at first Mary is uncertain of the purpose of the visit or what it means so the angel tells her, "you have found favor with God."

The word used here for favor is connected to the words for grace and joy. Mary received the blessed gift of learning that God found joy in knowing Mary. This is the second gift God gave

Mary through the message – knowing she was loved.

But these messages go beyond reassurance and love, to direct purpose, when the person cannot physically be there.

One soldier had this to say to his wife:

*There is a young man coming home with me
when I come – I don't know when that will be
– by the name of Mr. Johnson. Tell Mary (1) to
have her cap set for him when I come home as
he is the handsomest man on the ground.*

The message given by God was about more than favor. It was about a commission, a job that God gave Mary. “And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.” The third gift is one of purpose. Mary was given a job, a part to play in the greatest plan of all – God’s salvation of the world.

This Divine message was a heavy burden, so God tells her “your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.” Mary would rush to visit Elizabeth because it would be a source of encouragement to see her miracle and find wisdom as well. So, when God gives a burden, he finds a way to help us carry it out. The fourth gift in the message was support, support to carry out the call.

I use a lot of email and texts, as many of you do as well. But there are still people who not only hand write notes, but have their own stationery, good penmanship, and use certain salutations. For them, letter writing is an art form and to receive such as gift truly inspires.

Charles Darwin’s wife Emma wrote this poignant letter during his physical suffering,

*I cannot tell you the compassion I have felt for
all your sufferings for these weeks past that
you have had so many drawbacks. Nor the
gratitude I have felt for the cheerful &
affectionate looks you have given me when I
know you have been miserably
uncomfortable.*

For Charles, I am sure being able to hold the expression of her love in his hand was the greatest balm for his sometimes deep and unbearable physical pain. Any of you that have ever held such a letter knows that even the feel of it in your hand is a special blessing from God.

Thus the 5th, and the greatest gift, God gave in this message is the messenger, the angel himself. The presence and hope of God found in that person willing to be present and share God’s love, that person willing to give a message of hope. More than the words in the message, the heart and love of this messenger would have been Mary’s greatest source of hope. It is the most common way, in this world, we feel the love of God.

Whenever we communicate the blessings, the glory, the truth, and/or the power of God, we are God’s angels – God’s messengers. When you do your Christmas shopping this year, perhaps you might give the gift of an angel – the gift of expressing what is on your heart and the gift of your presence, the gift of sharing the love of God with another.

You are called to be that Angel. Whether it is by putting pen to paper or showing up at the door. Share God’s truth in love with someone who truly needs it.

You may recall that Charles Darwin was an atheist. And one of the factors that drove him to this conclusion, more than any other, was the death of his beloved daughter, Annie. He could not reconcile the conflict between a loving, all-powerful God with all the suffering in the world; that conflict so many of us struggle with.

But his wife never gave up on him. She was his angel, that messenger from God seeking to share the truth of God’s power and love. She did so, not out of judgement but, out of the deep affection she had for her beloved Charles. In that same letter I read earlier, she wrote these words,

*... I am sure you know I love you well enough
to believe that I mind your sufferings nearly as
much as I should my own & I find the only*

relief to my own mind is to take it as from God's hand, & to try to believe that all suffering & illness is meant to help us to exalt our minds & to look forward with hope to a future state.

Emma knew she could not be too direct with Charles. She would not convince his mind, but she might sway his heart and his inner hope. Emma saw suffering as a means to find renewed hope in that day God would heal all wounds. In Jesus' resurrection, she saw the power of God to raise his precious child Jesus into renewed life. She had that same hope for her daughter. I do not know where Charles was on his death bed, but I do know Emma was his angel.

This is the gift of the child Jesus, who loved and was loved by his father. God knows the pain of a parent who has lost his precious baby. But it does not and will not end in pain. Christmas is the gift of renewed hope in our greatest sorrow. No matter what we have lost.

For someone who has lost, be their Angel, be their divine messenger. People will receive this hope most powerfully and wonderfully through you.

This is the gift we must give, especially at Christmas time, that Christ's coming means those who have lost so much can believe, can find joy, and can live with hope through the power and love of God. Amen.