

CHRIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SPARTA, NC
CHRISTMAS I, DECEMBER 27, 2009
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"What Did You Get For Christmas?"

"What did you get for Christmas?"
Now there is a question that many of us have answered during the last week! No doubt you replied by describing the biggest, or most expensive, or most impressive gift that you received! You might have mentioned a toy, a pair of gloves, a computer, or even a new car. Probably no one, however, would think of saying, "I got a Savior!" Responses to that statement might range from "a what?" to "get serious!" Even "serious" Christians might say, "Well, technically you are right; but let's not overdo this religious part of Christmas!" Others might remind us that Christmas is over and want to know about our New Year's resolutions.

"What did you get for Christmas?" is probably not a question that would have been asked by the early Christians. They didn't celebrate "Christmas" as such. They were living in the light of the resurrection and thought that the end of the world was coming soon. It didn't matter to them how, when or where Jesus was born. But as the decades passed, someone realized it might be a

good idea to write some of this down. But even then, only two of the gospel writers chose to put down accounts of the birth of Jesus; Luke did it from Mary's point of view and Matthew from Joseph's point of view. It is obvious to us that both writers felt that these narratives about the birth of Christ were important to the faith! After all, even a savior has to have a beginning, so maybe the how, when and where are important!

For most of our society, Christmas is over. Here in Sparta I saw many Christmas trees out on the front porch Saturday morning, stripped of all decorations. The entire commercial world has gone "on sale!" In many homes, batteries have worn down, parents can't wait until school starts again and cooks are applying themselves to the perennial problem of how to be creative with the leftovers! But for Christians, this first Sunday after Christmas is a bit of a holding pattern. In reality, we are midway between two great Christian festivals, Christmas and Epiphany. For us the full realization of "what we got for Christmas" will not come until twelve days after when we celebrate the Epiphany, when we will hear the message that Christ came for all people. Epiphany, or

“manifestation”, proclaims that everyone “got” a savior for Christmas! Perhaps it was this message that Matthew wanted us to understand.

Holding patterns can be useful; they can prepare us for a smoother landing. Even when our anxiety levels are raised, we can use the time to think about important things. This “time between times” is a pause that is not empty; it is a time used for preparation for that which is to come. The time is coming when you will want to “use” the gift you got for Christmas. How will you prepare for that? Perhaps Matthew can help.

Matthew tells us why we should pay attention to dreams. Imagine being sound asleep when you are told to get out of town! So it was with Joseph, who was warned by an angel of the wrath of Herod. Herod thought this child Jesus might somehow threaten his kingdom. So this angel, posing as an extraterrestrial travel agent, suggests Egypt for the get-a-way, and the family leaves immediately and by cover of night. The angel puts them in a holding pattern until bad old Herod is dead. Then the angel comes to Joseph in another dream and says: *“Get up! Your vacation is over!”* On the way home

Joseph hears that Herod's son Archelaus is now on the throne. Figuring "like father, like son," Joseph takes a detour and goes north to Galilee. There he takes up a quiet residence in a small town called Nazareth. Notice that throughout this mysterious intrigue, Matthew inserts a theme: "[This happened so] that what was spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled." Matthew has gone out of his way to assure us, and especially his Jewish readers, that Jesus *is* the long-awaited Messiah and fits all of the prophecies of the Old Testament. Jesus did not just suddenly appear; he was not just "gotten" as a Christmas gift on the morning of December 25th! Rather his coming was predicted and planned for since the beginning of Hebrew history.

But let's return to gift giving. Do you think anyone ever ask Jesus what he got for Christmas? Probably not! In fact, Jewish families did not even celebrate Hanukkah in those days; at least, not as they do now. So what did Jesus do? Well, if we jump over to Luke's story, we find that Jesus was in a holding pattern! In fact, it was a holding pattern that would last thirty years! During that time Jesus learned what it was like to be hungry, to work

for a living, to be misunderstood, to be separated, to lose a loved one in death (his father Joseph). Then as the eldest son, Jesus learned about being financially responsible for the welfare of a family.

During this time, Jesus also developed his religious training and customs, as did every Hebrew child. He probably memorized most of the Scriptures we call the Old Testament. He knew worship and religious education were important and, as indicated in the Gospels, he attended the synagogue regularly on the Sabbath. In short, during this thirty year "holding pattern", Jesus did everything he possibly could to prepare himself not for the "getting" of a gift, but for the "giving." He took a thirty-year "pause" to wrap the ultimate gift; the gift that would bring us into a saving relationship with Almighty God!

So what *did* we "get" for Christmas? What exactly was the gift that Jesus gave? Most Christians could give a whole string of proper theological answers: his life, for our salvation; his power, for conquering sin; his body and blood, for spiritual nourishment; etc. But the real gift, as C.S. Lewis suggests, is Faith! "Faith," Lewis

says, "is the art of *holding on* to things your reason has once accepted, in spite of your changing moods." [Mere Christianity, p.123] It's another kind of "holding pattern!"

Did Jesus have "mood swings?" Of course he did! First there was the twelve year old in the temple; then times when he was "snappish" with his mother and with the syro-phonician woman at the well; not to mention when he lost his temper during the cleansing of the Temple! But because of his training during the thirty-year holding pattern; because of his extended preparation, he *never lost faith!* He never lost sight of the idea that this life is special, and that God has something special planned for each of us.

What did you get for Christmas? What special thing has God planned for you? Perhaps it's not a gift that you have *received*, but a gift that you will *give!* Perhaps this pause, this "holding pattern" between the festivals of Christmas and Epiphany is for your preparation, not for a gift, but for a giving.

What did you get for Christmas? You got a savior, and there is an angel on

its way to tell you in a dream how to
share him!