

You are the Gift!

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The season of Christmas is above all a season for giving and receiving gifts. In Christmas, we celebrate the most important gift of all; the gift of God's coming into the world in human form to point the world toward wholeness, justice, healing, salvation and peace. We call it the mystery of the Incarnation, or God taking on human flesh. It is a mystery, because the truth of the incarnation cannot be explained as much as it needs to be experienced.

And what we experience is the abundance of gifts! Not just on Christmas morning when many of us are inundated by toasters, socks, neckties and jewelry that we really don't need. But rather, Christians have the abiding sense that we are surrounded — literally engulfed — by a gift, manifested by the overwhelming gifts of love, of family and friends, of food and shelter, and of life itself.

Sadly, though, we are painfully aware that for far too many of us there is little evidence of the gift of Christmas. For many people throughout Maryland this season, there are no chestnuts roasting on the open fire; there are no colorful presents displayed under beautifully decorated trees; there is no warmth of a cozy home with a fireplace, no gathering of family and friends bringing boxes of satin-wrapped presents. Not this Christmas, nor any other for the foreseeable future.

For unto us this day:

- A young woman in Baltimore is crying as she dreads the coming of the New Year when her job at the store will be eliminated. Where will she work, and how can she house and feed her kids on a minimum wage job that pays below the poverty level? What is the Christmas gift for her?
- A migrant worker in western Maryland is experiencing chest pains but he cannot afford to go to a doctor because he does not have health insurance. He must keep on working, because his family at home needs his income, and there is no "safety net" for them save his hands and his strong back. Is he engulfed by gifts?
- An elderly woman in Bel Air sits in a chair in her nursing home room, staring out the window beside the telephone that will not ring. She hasn't been visited since the last Christmas when a church youth group came; her children are too busy to call, and her grandchildren hardly know who she is. She cannot understand why she's still here, and what her purpose in life is anymore. What is Christmas for her, except another day that reminds her that she is alone here?

- A battle weary Marine from Annapolis who serves in Afghanistan is ordered to bust down another door in a ramshackle dwelling, searching for weapons that have been reported to be inside. What he finds instead are three children huddled in a corner, crying and shivering in fear that they will be yet another uncounted casualty of war. He looks at them for a moment and wants badly to tell them that he's a casualty too, but he doesn't have time to explain. He doesn't even think he could explain it if he had the time. He, too, is overcome by grief and fear; he too is weary of the violence. He nobly does his duty, but he can't wait to go home. Is he surrounded by Christmas gifts today?

How can you allow yourself to think of the gift of Christmas when the circumstances of your life do not fit the Hallmark greeting card image of Christmas cheer? What if you have no gifts this Christmas to give or receive, is there still a Christmas for you? Perhaps there is.

If you find either yourself or those you love on the downside of life this season, please know that you are not alone, because God himself stands with you. The mystery of the Incarnation is that God chooses to become poor in human form for our sakes. And for those of you who lack no material comfort this year, but are spiritually poor — that is, you are empty of the divine love and generosity that incarnated Jesus, then help is on the way. Jesus has come to be incarnate in you also.

For Christmas is not for those who have everything, and want everything; rather, the power of Christmas is its power to lift up those who have nothing. In fact, the greatest gift that you can possibly receive this day is the gift of you — the real you, the one whom God has come to save and to make whole again. You are the gift! For your life is invaluable, and in Christ you can do anything — even change the world.

Helen Keller, that famous woman whose ashes are interred in the Washington National Cathedral, was incapacitated by the physical blindness that threatened to rob her of all of life's possibilities. Yet she once said, "I am only one; but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something; I will not refuse to do the something I can do."

What a gift she was! What a gift you are, if you allow the Spirit of Christ to be reborn in you. Unwrap the gift, embrace the gift, become the gift!