

Here are things to say about a Christmas gift you don't like:

1. Hey! There's a gift!
2. Well, well, well....
3. Boy, if I had not recently shot up 4 sizes this would have fit.
4. This is perfect – for wearing around the basement.
5. Gosh. I hope this never catches fire! It is fire season though. There are lots of unexplained fires this time of year.
6. If the dog buries it, I'll be furious!
7. I love it – but I fear it will inspire jealousy.
8. Sadly, tomorrow I enter the Federal Witness Protection Program.
9. To think – I got this the year I vowed to give all my gifts to charity.
10. "I really don't deserve this."

It came to pass that the most powerful man in the world sat on a throne in Rome. He was devoted to acquiring and to extending his control. The world had never seen anything like it. His holdings stretched north to England, south to Africa, and east to Asia and covered more than three million square miles, more territory than mainland United States. And he had palaces all over the place.

This man literally ruled the known world. He ruled the rulers. He was 'king of kings.' His control was so unchallenged that the world was in the midst of the *pax romana* – the peace of Rome. Of course, not everyone wanted to be ruled by Rome, but his army was so strong no one could challenge it.

He was very dangerous to his enemies. When that man was 16, the Roman orator Cicero said of him, "Octavian is a talented young man who should be praised, honored, and eliminated." But one by one, he eliminated all his rivals, until eventually he was named by the senate Caesar Augustus – we still talk about an *august* person – someone whose status is grand and majestic.

His government built statues of him for the people to venerate. By the end of his life, people were worshiping him. Ever have that happen to you? Come in to work, go to your cubicle, have coworkers bow down to you saying: "Most worthy, most worthy, most worthy...." It happens to me at the office all the time. You know maybe this COVID thing is beginning to get to me! But it happened to Caesar.

At one point, Caesar had a standing army of 500,000 soldiers – that took a lot of money. Caesar was a smart man, and we're told by an ancient historian that one day Caesar had an idea for how to pay his many soldiers: "And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed."

At this time, Caesar was around 60 years old. Perhaps no human being before or after ever held so much control over so much of the world so tightly for so long. "There went out a decree...." He just lifted a finger, said a word, and the whole world scrambled to obey.

Yes, Luke, the historian we just quoted, says, watch what happens now. Now things start to get interesting. Author Tom Wright puts it like this: "This man, this king, this absolute monarch lifts his finger in Rome and 1500 miles away in an obscure province a poverty-stricken couple undertake a hazardous journey,

at the whim of a king.” Notice the result: a child is born in a little town that – oh, by the way – just happens to be the one mentioned in an ancient Hebrew prophecy about the coming of the Messiah.

The ancient prophecy said the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. But Joseph and Mary didn’t live in Bethlehem. They never would have gone there. Except – “it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus....”

Why did it come to pass?

Caesar would have told you it was because of him. Caesar made a call. Caesar was in control. But Luke raises a question: What king is at work here? Whose will is actually being done? Who is the real Master of the Board?

This gospel account is really a tale of 2 cities. Rome is the site of one kind of kingdom, peace, and glory. Bethlehem is a kingdom of another kind. Money, soldiers, palaces, titles, Boardwalk and Park Place are all in Rome. Bethlehem was all stables and mangers and donkeys and shepherds.

But the angels weren’t singing in Rome. They were singing in the little town of Bethlehem. Caesar thought his throne in Rome was as secure as a throne could be. But the real kingdom was lying in a manger in Bethlehem.

Caesar has one palace left in the world. It’s not in Rome but in Las Vegas. The baby in the manger is enthroned in hearts and lives and houses of worship on every continent in the world. And this gospel story tells how it has all come to pass. (John Ortberg, WHEN THE GAME IS OVER, IT ALL GOES BACK IN THE BOX)

OK, that was a bit of background. There is always so much going on in these texts if we dig into them just a bit. But so what? This night (day), a baby, a wonderful baby, has been born into your family and mine. By that baby, that wonderful baby, we have been made family. Now maybe you are here tonight by yourself. Maybe you don’t have much family, maybe you have lost the family you had, or perhaps COVID keeps your family from gathering.

But do we hear that rustling in the pews? It’s our family – the whole human family – taking their places around the manger? Do we feel these folks becoming brothers and sisters taking place around the table? The Word has become flesh – and dwells among us. What is that WORD? “See what love the Father has given us that we should be called children of God. And so we are.” Barbara Brown Taylor imagines God addressing humanity with this impassioned plea: “I am so crazy in love with you that I will come all the way to where you are to be flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone. I will do it all, and all you have to do is believe me – that I love you the way you are, love you enough to become one of you, and I love you to death.” (MIXED BLESSINGS, p. 50)

Theologians use 2 phrases to describe what is happening in the mystery of Christmas. *Admirabile commercium*, the wonderful exchange – we give our human wretchedness for his divine blessedness, as Martin Luther would say. It’s there in the Eucharist, at the preparation of the gifts, when the priest places a small amount of water into the chalice of wine and prays: “Through this water and wine, may we come to share in the divinity of Christ (represented by the wine), who humbled Himself to share in our humanity (symbolized by the water).”

Which brings us to the second phrase: “All things commingle.” That mixing of the water and wine is called ‘the commingling.’ Christmas means that what was once in heaven has now walked on the earth. What

was exclusive to God has now been joined to humanity. It means, as Thomas Merton once wrote, “That everything that is, is holy.” And that includes me – and you – and every other person in the world, all of our brothers and sisters, even with all of our sins.

Which brings me to the heart of the matter and my third point. When God gives of Himself, one of 2 things happens: either flesh is inspirited or spirit is enfleshed. It is really very clear. God’s will is incarnation. And against all of our godly expectations, it appears that for God, matter really matters. That’s what we celebrate at Christmas. In the birth of a baby.

Every Christmas something climbs up from our souls that is asking for a Christmas gift from God. To see that the hopes and fears of all the years are met in the coming of a Savior. And the discovery of Christmas is so humbling that I’m taken back to my grade-school days learning the holy stories and mysteries for the very first time. Precisely because this story is from the gospel, it wants to surprise us. We just have to shuffle off the heavy cloak of cynicism to see it once again as a wide-eyed child on Christmas morning. “A baby who is God-with-us? Really?” “Yes, really!” Look at this! Look! Can you believe it?” Or as the first messengers of God said, “Behold! I bring you good news of great joy.”

And because He lived among us – Jesus knows us all too well. After all, He came to a couple that was probably more worried about finding a place to spend the night than giving birth to the salvation of the world. And maybe that’s the way God’s hope is supposed to show up – as a Christmas surprise that quietly pierces through our anxieties, plans, and offers more hope than we can see today because, frankly, we’re too busy celebrating it – or distracted because this is not likely to be the best-ever-Christmas we’ve had. But this newborn hope will grow into our salvation, if we but open our hearts to receive Him. “Come, Lord Jesus, Prince of Peace.” HODIE CHRISTUS NATUS EST (PRO NOBIS)! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! HODIE SALVATOR APPARUIT! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! TODAY CHRIST IS BORN FOR US! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA! TODAY THE SAVIOR HAS APPEARED! ALLELUIA! ALLELUIA!