

^{2:1} In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her

heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

In the movie “Christmas Vacation,” Clark W. Griswold keeps waiting for his Christmas bonus to arrive from his job. From each of his past sixteen years, he has an idea of how much it will be. And this year, he has written a check for the installation of an inground swimming pool in the spring time. But he needs the Christmas bonus in order to cover that check. What Clark W. Griswold did not realize was that the boss – Mr. Shirley – had decided to do away with Christmas cash bonuses. Finally, late in the evening of Christmas Eve the company messenger delivers the envelope from Clark’s company. The whole family gathers around, while Clark both announces what he is going to do with the expected cash bonus history, and opens the envelope. Inside is a membership card to the “Jelly of the Month Club.” His cousin Eddy (who Clark describes as having a heart bigger than a brain) says, ***“Clark, that’s the gift that keeps on giving throughout the whole year.”***

And here we come again to the stable – to the manger – seeking – seeking a gift that will keep giving to us through the whole year. Over the past four weeks we have been getting prepared for this GIFT in lots of activities and tasks. (Actually, these tasks and activities may have distracted us, more than prepared us, for the GIFT.)

What is it? What is THE GIFT?

Well, that's a simple question, preacher – it's Jesus. Duh!

But what does it mean?

Cousin Eddy was right – about it being the Gift that keeps on giving, but it's not just a GIFT that keeps on giving through the year. It keeps on giving throughout our whole life. And today, I want to tell you what it looks like, so you can receive it.

It begins at the moment of our birth – when God is with us, and holding us. And then God continues to long to hold us through all of the seasons of our life. Perhaps this important notion is best described in our “new favorite hymn” from the new hymnal – page 2051: **“I Was There to Hear Your Borning Cry.”**

I was there to hear your borning cry,
I'll be there when you are old.
I rejoiced the day you were baptized,
to see your life unfold.

I was there when you were but a child,
with a faith to suit you well;

In a blaze of light you wandered off
to find where demons dwell."

"When you heard the wonder of the Word
I was there to cheer you on;
You were raised to praise the living Lord,
to whom you now belong.

If you find someone to share your time
and you join your hearts as one,
I'll be there to make your verses rhyme
from dusk 'till rising sun."

In the middle ages of your life,
not too old, no longer young,
I'll be there to guide you through the night,
complete what I've begun.

When the evening gently closes in,
and you shut your weary eyes,

I'll be there as I have always been
with just one more surprise."

"I was there to hear your bawling cry,
I'll be there when you are old.
I rejoiced the day you were baptized,
to see your life unfold."

One **metaphor** that has helped me describe this Gift is that of a **card**. Not a Christmas greeting card – but a **Christmas Membership Card**. It's already been made. And it's ready for you. **All we have to do is to receive it.**

We are made in the Image of God. And WE ARE ACCEPTED AND LOVED BY GOD. There is nothing that we can do to make that happen – by being good or anything else. All we can do is to accept it.

Each one of us here has done some things that we are not proud of. But the GIFT OF JESUS CHRIST is the GOOD NEWS that those are **just things we have done**. They are **not who we are**. **We ARE children of God, made in God's Image.**

We don't have to hunt and scrape and scratch and hustle and buy and save and build and earn ACCEPTANCE – as we spend our whole lives doing.

The GIFT – has already been made, has already been given. It is from God. It is a card. It simply says, You _____ [fill in your name] are my beloved child, precious and beautiful to behold. You are accepted, just as you are. I love you. Welcome Home.

And throughout all of our life – as we work and play, laugh and cry, celebrate and grieve – we are blessed with this GIFT – even when we don't or won't accept it, and instead go looking for love and acceptance in all the wrong places.

[TALK ABOUT THE ADVANTAGE THAT I HAVE OF BEING WITH LOTS OF FOLKS AS THEY PREPARE FOR DYING – HOW ALL OF THE THINGS IN WHICH WE INVEST SO MUCH OF OUR LIFE, ARE STRIPPED AWAY FOR THEIR UNIMPORTANCE. AND IN THAT FINAL PREPARATION, I AM ABLE TO SEE PERSON AFTER PERSON FINALLY GET TO THE POINT WHERE THEY CAN QUIT WORKING, QUIT TRYING, AND SIMPLY ACCEPTING THIS GIFT THAT HAS BEEN HERE ALL ALONG.]

But today – perhaps for the first time – today -- we can receive it. Just perhaps, something will happen that will save us from

having to wait until the last days of life to receive the Gift that keeps on giving.

Perhaps there is something today that will come and go – in the **music**, in the **warmth**, in the **love**, in the **gathering of the family or friends**, in the **receiving of the Body and Blood of Jesus** – something that will help us to come and kneel at the manger – and receive this GIFT.

It is a **GIFT** from **GOD**. This means that is **powerful enough to change our lives because it is from God Almighty**, And it means that **it is here for the taking, because it is a Gift**.

I pray that each of our **eyes may be opened**, our **hearts be made receptive**, and our **minds be altered** – just enough that we can receive it.

All of the things we have done in our lives, up to this point – they are just things.

They are not who we are.

Who you are; who I am – a child of God, indelibly marked as such in our Baptism, fully loved and accepted.

This is the Gift. Thanks be to God.