

WHAJAGET? WHAJAGIVE? Hebrews 1:1-4 December 25, 2011

In case you didn't get it, those two words are the hastily pronounced interrogatives, "What did you get?" The other is of course, "What did you give?" Much of our post-Christmas conversation employs those questions.

There's another question not usually spoken but pondered by many. It's not such a pleasant one so soon – those presents for the kids or grandkids. Check. A gift for the spouse. Check. Something for your parents. Check. A gift card for a co-worker. A bottle of wine for the boss. Check. The paperboy (or in my case girl), your kids teacher, your secretary. Check. A second mortgage to pay for it all. Check. Check and more checks. Lots of checks.

Yes, the shopping is done, presents opened, pageants finished, parties attended, and in the wake of it all, two things are abundantly clear – Jesus was born and his birthday breaks the bank. "I'll be home for Christmas," the sentimental song is crooned . . . and it is wonderful to be there, to get and give, but I'll be broke for Christmas . . . or paying it off until sometime in February.

PNC Financial Services compiles what it calls the true cost of Christmas, that is, an accurate, tongue in cheek total of the 12 Days of Christmas items in today's dollars. This year according to their findings, the 12 Days would cost around \$100,000. Turtle doves, five golden rings, lords-a-leaping and maids-a-milking don't come cheap.

It would be rude to ask someone how much the gift they gave us cost. Sometimes it takes children a while to get it. Sometimes we find ourselves calculating how much to spend on someone based on the estimate of how much they spent on us. It can all be a bit crass.

Suppose we put such a consideration in a different framework. How much did it cost the players in the original Christmas? What did Christmas cost Mary? It nearly cost Mary her marriage to Joseph; surely it did cost her reputation in her village. It cost Mary and Joseph their home . . . when they learned Herod's soldiers would arrive on a mission of infanticide. The Magi? Months, perhaps more of arduous travel and some very precious gifts. That's a lot more than the bottom line on our January credit card statement. And what about God? What did it cost God? The answer is clear. God's Son. And the cost to God's Son. Wanting to add something special to their live

nativity scene one church had Mary placing a baby in the swaddling clothes in a manger only to later reach in to the manger and hold up a cross.

The cost in this case can't be measured in dollars and cents. No, it was far more precious. The cost (and the gain) was in relationship. Restored relationship. God surrendered God's Son to a messy complicated, dangerous world, knowing full well what would happen . . . to restore relationship. What's more precious than that? God held nothing back in God's effort to connect and restore.

The author of Hebrews said God sought to communicate with this world in many ways . . . but it was always a struggle to get humans to listen . . . so God got very close, very personal, very relational. God sent God's self in God's Son.

There are countless stories about amateur Nativity scenes enacted by churches using younger members. One woman tells about her niece Samantha who was a teacher at a Christian elementary school. She had the job of producing the Christmas play one year.

She stressed to her students that if they forgot their lines, they should ad-lib something instead of just standing there.

On the big night, all went well until the Three Wise Men made their entrance. The first was perfect. "Baby Jesus, here is your gold," the boy said.

The second boy was perfect, too. "Baby Jesus, here is your frankincense," he said.

The boy playing the third Wise Man said, "Baby Jesus, here is your . . ." and froze, having forgotten the name of his gift.

After a tense few seconds had passed, the teacher whispered out to him, "Say anything!"

The boy then peered into the manger and exclaimed, "Oh, doesn't he look just like his dad!"

Well, he does look just like his Dad, says the writer of Hebrews. Christ "is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being . . ." That doesn't mean that Jesus looked like God, of course, but it does mean that Jesus showed us everything we

need to know about God – God’s self-giving love for all people.¹

Christ did His job. Yes. But Christ continues to do His job . . . in and through us . . . through relationships. If as we said last night, He must be born in us, then we would want the same things said of us. We are (increasingly) looking like God’s Son. If God so loved the world, then so must we.

Will Willimon writes the Gospel is not a story about what we ought to do before it is a story about what God has done. Whatever we do is secondary, derivative . . . and transformative. When we get this wrong . . . when we think we must earn it or justify ourselves, we think we are only loved if we’ve been loved. We can’t live the good life before grace. We don’t do good things in order to get someplace with God. It is not if you do these things you will be right with God . . . accepted and loved. And that changes everything. It’s like parents who urge their child to behave, not in order to become their child, but because he/she is their child.

That established; that our hope; that our joy, let me close with a familiar poem by Howard Thurman.

*When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with the flocks,
then the work of Christmas begins;
to find the lost,
to heal those broken in spirit,
to feed the hungry,
to release the oppressed,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among all people,
to make a little music with the heart...*



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¹ Dynamic Preaching, Vol. XXVII, No.4, pgs. 93-94