

# JOHNS CREEK UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

## Prepare for Hope

### 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:3-9

Sunday, November 27, 2022

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It was the day after Christmas at a church in San Francisco. The pastor of the church was looking over the nativity scene when he noticed that the baby Jesus was missing from among the figures. Immediately he turned and went outside and saw a little boy with a red wagon, and in the wagon was the figure of the little infant, Jesus. So, he walked up to the boy and said, "Well, where did you get Him, son?" The little boy replied, "I got him from the church." "And why did you take him?" the pastor asked. The boy said, "Well, about a week before Christmas I prayed to the little Lord Jesus and I told him if he would bring me a red wagon for Christmas I would give him a ride around the block in it."

So, what are you asking for this Christmas? What do you want for Christmas? It is a good question. How we answer the question says a great deal about who we are. If you really want to know more about a person, ask them what they really want. What do you want for Christmas?

Well, I don't mean to spoil your fun, but I already know what all of you are getting for Christmas! I hope it matches what you really want. It is very much like me to know what you are getting. I must confess that I was one of those kids that snooped around the house to find where my parents hid the presents. I wanted to know not only what I was getting but also what my sisters were getting.

I have snooped around and discovered what you are getting for Christmas. No, I didn't follow you around as you shopped this weekend or ask your loved ones what they were getting you. All I did was look in the Bible!

You see, you may not have realized it, but our scripture lesson today tells us what we are getting for Christmas. This is one of the lectionary texts for this First Sunday of Advent and in this little nugget from one of Paul's letter we are reminded of what to expect at Christmas. We are told what we will receive. And all I have to say is "Wow!" You will not believe what you are getting this Christmas! Here is what you are getting:

#### The Gift of Grace

Part of verse four says, "...the grace God has given you in Jesus Christ."

Steven Spielberg's movie, **Saving Private Ryan**, tells the story of an Army captain named John Miller (played by Tom Hanks) who in the aftermath of the World War II D-day invasion at Normandy Beach is ordered to find a solitary private among thousands of displaced soldiers. He must return Private James F. Ryan home to his mother, whose other three sons have just been killed in action.

Captain Miller and the small group of men assigned to him successfully locate Ryan, but then are forced to defend a strategic bridge against enemy tanks and troops. Captain Miller is fatally wounded. In his dying moments, he reaches out to Private Ryan, and with great emotion says, "Earn this! Earn this!"

Many years later as an old man, James Ryan stands in a veteran's cemetery tearfully looking at the tombstone of the man who saved his life. He wonders aloud if he has indeed earned the great gift he received.

Michael Lester wisely states that "Two thousand years ago Jesus Christ died on the Cross that we might live forever. In his final words he did not suggest that we could ever earn such a gift. Instead he cried triumphantly, 'It is finished!'"

You see, at Christmas we remember that if our greatest need had been information, God would have sent us an educator; If our greatest need had been technology, God would have sent us a scientist; If our greatest need had been money, God would have sent us an economist; If our greatest need had been pleasure, God would have sent us an entertainer; But our greatest need was forgiveness, so God sent us a Savior.

You know what you are getting this Christmas? You are getting the gift of grace! Now, do you really

know what that means? Do you appreciate this kind of gift? Grace is God's unmerited favor. It is his unconditional love. It means that whatever you have brought into this place today, God loves and God forgives you! It doesn't matter what you have done, thought or said – God loves you and forgives you. Yes, even that one thing no one but you knows about – God still loves you and forgives you. This is why we call it good news! I know, I know, we say it a lot in church, but do you believe it? God loves you and forgives you! Feel it and experience it because it is true!

When Billy Graham was driving through a small southern town, he was stopped by a policeman and charged with speeding. Graham admitted his guilt, but was told by the officer that he would have to appear in court. The judge asked, "Guilty, or not guilty?" When Graham pleaded guilty, the judge replied, "That'll be 100 dollars."

Suddenly the judge recognized the famous minister. "You have violated the law," he said. "The fine must be paid--but I am going to pay it for you." He took a 100-dollar bill from his own wallet, attached it to the ticket, and then took Graham out and bought him a steak dinner! "That," said Billy Graham, "is how God treats his children when they come to him after doing wrong!" (Progress Magazine, December 14, 1992.)

Why? Because we have a God of grace! Unbelievable grace! It does not mean he does not care if we keep sinning; it means he loves us too much to allow us to stay in our sin. So, by his grace he cleans us up and loves on us and says, "Now go and be the person I created you to be. Go and love yourself the way I love you. Go and see yourself the way I see you!" Love came down at Christmas to give us grace!

### **The Gift of Hope**

In verses 5 and 7 Paul tells us that we have been enriched by God in every way so that we don't lack any spiritual gift or resource as we wait for Christ to be revealed! This means that God has given us everything we need to live the abundant life he has called us to live. He has given us everything we need to succeed. He has given us everything we need to live out our potential, and our potential is huge!

I remember singing about this as a kid. My sisters and I would sing the old Gaither chorus, "I am a promise. I am a possibility. I am a promise with a capitol P. I am a great big bundle of potentiality. I am learning to

hear God's voice. And I am trying to make the right choices. I am a promise to be anything that God wants me to be."

Now, how often have we heard this, and how often have we not believed it? How often do our attitudes keep us from living our life to the fullest, to living our days the way God created us to live them - with joy, with peace, with hope with passion and love! How often have we missed those opportunities that God has thrown our way because we simply don't believe that we were made to be more and to do more?

Chuck Swindoll tells the story of a Native American who found an egg that had been laid by an eagle. Not being able to return the egg to an eagle's nest, the next best thing to do was to put it in the nest of a prairie chicken. The result was predictable. The hen sat on this eagle's egg, along with her own eggs, knowing nothing of the addition.

By and by the little eaglet was hatched alongside the prairie chickens. All his life, the changeling eagle, thinking he was a prairie chicken, did what the prairie chickens did. He scratched in the dirt for seeds and insects to eat. He clucked and cackled. And he flew in a brief thrashing of wings and flurry of feathers no more than a few feet off the ground. After all, that's how prairie chickens were supposed to fly.

Years passed. And the changeling eagle grew very old. One day, he saw a magnificent bird far above him in the cloudless sky. Hanging with graceful majesty on the powerful wind currents, it soared with scarcely a beat of its strong golden wings. "What a beautiful bird!" said the eagle to his neighbor. "What is it?"

"That's an eagle--the chief of the birds," the neighbor clucked. "But don't give it a second thought. You could never be like him." So, the changeling eagle never gave it another thought. And it died thinking it was a prairie chicken.

What a parable for many people's lives. How often I have met people who were born for greatness, blessed by God in every way. But they got older. They got cynical. They developed bad habits. They started believing what other people told them and never became what they were destined to be! Please hear this: God's expectations for your life may be a lot higher than you are willing to believe! And it doesn't matter how old you are. It is never too late to be the

person God wants you to be! This Christmas God is blessing you with possibility!

So, my advice is to start listening to God and stop listening to the negativity and cynicism of the world!

Want examples? The poetry editor of *Atlantic Monthly* returned a stack of poems to an aspiring poet with this note, "Our magazine has no room for your vigorous verse." The poet was Robert Frost.

The University of Bern turned down a doctoral dissertation as "irrelevant and fanciful." The writer of that paper was Albert Einstein.

An English teacher noted on a teenager's report card, "A conspicuous lack of success." The student was Winston Churchill (*Signs of the Times*).

What about Jan Paderewski, the great concert pianist. When he was young, he left Poland to play his first recital in London. Before he left, he asked an influential compatriot to give him a letter of introduction to a leading figure in Britain's musical world, who might be of assistance should anything go amiss.

The letter was handed to him in a sealed envelope. He hoped that everything would proceed smoothly and he would not have to use it. He did not; his debut was a success and no snags developed. Some years later, while going through his papers, he came upon the letter and opened it. It read: "This will introduce Jan Paderewski, who plays the piano, for which he demonstrates no conspicuous talent" (*Bits and Pieces*, Jan. 9th, 1992).

What if Paderewski had opened the letter in the beginning? He may not have believed that he had the gift God had blessed him with. He may have not performed that first recital. He may not have become who he was created to become!

I dare you to stop listening to the negative and cynical voices around you and inside you and start listening to God. I dare you to become the person God created you to be. He has blessed us with everything we need. He has blessed us with possibility this Christmas!

### **The Gift of Strength**

Verse 8 says, "He will strengthen you to the end."

Now, this is a gift we all can appreciate, especially right now. We enter Advent at a time when our country is

weighted down by division and violence, and we need God's strength to sustain us and empower us. And you may have come to church today feeling weighted down by life. There is more going on in your life than you admit to others. But you did your best to be here because you knew that this is where you needed to be. You need strength!

Oh, God's strength is there for you. It is closer to you than your very breath. I know. There have been difficult times in my life, and I know that I would never made it through if it wasn't for God's strength.

I have learned, however, that this gift of strength from God can only come if we make room for it. God will never force his strength on us. We have to get out of his way, make room for him to work, and stop thinking we can do things on our own strength. You see that is the real key to this gift – we must surrender to God's power. Don't expect power unless you are plugged into the power source! Don't expect strength unless you have chosen to hold on to the strength!

The story is told of a little boy and his father. They were walking along a road when they came across a large stone. The boy looked at the stone and thought about it a little. Then he asked his father, "Do you think if I use all my strength, I can move that rock?"

The father thought for a moment and said, "I think that if you use all your strength, you can do it."

That was all the little boy needed. He ran over to the rock and began to push on it. He pushed and he pushed, so hard did he try that little beads of sweat appeared on his forehead. But the rock didn't move — not an inch, not half an inch.

After a while, the little boy sat down on the ground. His face had fallen. His whole body seemed to be just a lump there on the earth. "You were wrong," he told his dad. "I can't do it."

His father walked over to him, knelt beside him, and put his arm around the boy's shoulder. "You can do it," he said. "You just didn't use all your strength. You didn't ask me to help."

The world in which we live tells us that it is all up to us. It tells us that we have to be strong and independent. It tells us we can't and shouldn't count on anyone or anything else. And yet, what faith tells

us and what Jews and Christians have known forever is that we have a ready resource in God, strength for those who ask.

Some of us need to pray, “I have tried to open the door, but there is accumulated rust of years upon the bolts. You must do it for me, Lord. Break through! Smash that rusty lock, Almighty God!” God will!

Johns Creek, this Christmas expect a downpour of God’s gifts of grace, hope, and strength. I hope you like your gifts! Amen.



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