

“Whose Birthday Is It?”
The Advent Conspiracy, part 5

(For Children’s Time) Jesus’ birth is good news. When we tell others the good news, sometimes we need to make a lot of noise. Today we are going to use bells. (Song: Come on Ring Those Bells)

Luke 2:1-20

(Prayer)

I just turned forty-six years old on Wednesday. I know, a lot of you are thinking, “He’s still a baby!” Forty is the new thirty, right? That’s why I love my children. They constantly remind me, “Dad, you’re so old.” I need that extra dose of humility!

I always felt like I shared a birthday with Jesus. My mom brought me home from the hospital on Christmas Eve, in a stocking a nurse sewed out of a bedsheet. It was a wonderful time for our family, but I have to admit, my four-year-old older brother was a little confused. During his children’s pageant on Christmas Eve, he told everyone, “Good news! The new baby is at our house! Come and see!” I love his enthusiasm, but I am definitely NOT the Son of God. Let’s just get that straight right now. I am not perfect or sinless. Forty-six years of life has only proven that I am human in need of grace.

Of course, having a late December birthday also means you get a lot of presents. Or, when your parents wise up, you get one present for Christmas and your birthday. I’m OK with that, now. But it got me thinking: why do we give each other presents at Christmas time, when it’s not our birthday?

Don’t get me wrong. I love presents. When presents are meaningful, they are gifts of love, of time, and of energy. A really good gift makes you pause and think.

But so much of our Christmas is spent stressing out, not pausing and reflecting. We worry about the food, the house cleaning, the right gifts, and of course, the relatives coming over. We have to put anti-acid tablets on our Christmas shopping list! Our stress is reflected in the story about the little girl who prayed for the Christmas dinner. She asked, “What should I say?” They told her, “Just say what Mommy always says.” “OK. Dear Lord, why did I invite all these people over here for dinner?”

Tonight is different. Tonight is a time to let all that stress go. Tonight is a night to pause and reflect, to remember whose birthday it really is, to remember the gift we were given.

One of the traditions we associate with Christmas gifts is the legend of Santa Claus. We’ve probably all seen some great Santa movies, sung “Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer”, and even taken our kids to the store where they could climb up on Santa’s lap and tell him how “good” they’ve been. (cough, cough.)

But did you know there actually was a real person named St. Nick? Saint Nicholas, actually. He was a bishop in the early church around 300 A.D. Nicholas was born in the third century in Patara in Asia Minor – now the southern coast of modern-day Turkey – to wealthy Christian parents. His parents died during an epidemic when Nicholas was still young. “Obeying Jesus’ words to ‘sell what you own and give the money to the poor,’ Nicholas used his whole inheritance to assist the needy, the sick, and the suffering. He dedicated his life to serving God and was made Bishop of Myra while still a young man.”¹ Nicholas was imprisoned for his faith, but was eventually released and attended the Council of Nicaea in AD 325. This was the council who gave us the Nicene Creed, which took a strong stand on the divinity of Christ.

“Bishop Nicholas became known throughout the land for his generosity to those in need, his love for children, and his concern for sailors and ships.... One story tells of a poor man with three daughters. In those days a young woman’s father had to offer prospective husbands something of value—a dowry. The larger the dowry, the better the chance that a young woman would find a good husband. Without a dowry, a woman was unlikely to marry. This poor man’s daughters, without dowries, were therefore destined to be sold into slavery. Mysteriously, on three different occasions, a bag of gold appeared in their home, providing the needed dowries. The bags of gold, tossed through an open window, are said to have landed in stockings or shoes left before the fire to dry. This led to the custom of children hanging stockings or putting out shoes, eagerly awaiting gifts from Saint Nicholas.”²

¹ www.stnicholascenter.org/who-is-st-nicholas

² Ibid.

St. Nicholas, because of his faith in Christ, was a giver. Nicholas took the gift of faith and eternal life he had been given in Christ, and he gave it away to others, literally, by giving away his money. So friends, this Christmas, I want to ask, do you, like Nicholas, know the gift that God has given to us?

Let me tell you the story of the greatest gift ever given. The Bible tells us God created us for a relationship with him. God placed us on this earth. Everything was beautiful. Everything was good. Everything lived in harmony.

But sin entered the world. Humans turned their backs on God. While the world still is beautiful, it is also broken. We know this. We ache for peace, for justice, for wholeness.

God saw our brokenness, our sin, our rebellion. We were hopeless to try to save ourselves. All of our good works, all of our trying on our own, could not solve the brokenness. But God didn't leave us hopeless. God sent hope into the world, in the form of his very own son, Jesus Christ.

God gave us a gift: Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Jesus was born to poor parents, grew up to be the greatest prophet the world had ever known, and died on a cross 2000 years ago to be our sacrifice. Christ redeemed us once and from all of our brokenness and sin. And God raised Jesus from the dead and lifted him up, exalting him above everything on earth and in heaven. This Wonderful Counselor, the Prince of Peace, extends his invitation to everyone to enter into a loving relationship with him.

Christmas is Jesus' birthday, and in the most ironic story the world has ever known, it is Jesus who gives us the gift of eternal life in God's love.

(Show the box.) We have two choices with this precious gift. Open it, or leave it unopened. A gift is no good if a person doesn't receive it. With Jesus, it is the same way. God's love is available to us all, but each one of us chooses to receive it or reject it. We don't have to be rich, we don't have to be saints. We simply have to embrace the gift of eternal life, like these people did: *(Take the cross out of the box.)*

Mary, an unmarried teenager, embraced the gift.

Joseph, the step-father of Jesus, embraced the gift.

The shepherds, the poor and outcast, embraced the gift.

The Apostle Peter, an uneducated fisherman, embraced the gift.

The Apostle Paul, a murderer and enemy of Christians, embraced the gift. St. Nicholas, who rejected his wealthy status and served the people in Christ's name, embraced the gift.

Jesus didn't come because we were perfect. Jesus didn't come because we deserved his love. Jesus came because God first loved us. (1 John 4:19) Tonight is your chance to embrace God's life-giving, world-changing, self-sacrificing love. Christmas is more than just a good story. It's more than a tradition. Christmas is the beginning of a new life, something worth celebrating all year long. Tonight can be your chance, maybe for the very first time, to tell Jesus the most important words you can ever say. "I love you. Thank you for your gift. I accept it." (*Set the cross back in the box, place it in the manger.*)

Paul once said, "We entreat you, on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God." (1 Cor. 5:20) This is our greatest hope tonight, that you would fully know the love of Christ, the love that saves you from sin, that makes you into a new creation, the love that says, "My child, come home." God is for us, not against us. That is what the story of Christmas tells us.

If you have never opened this gift before, I invite you to pray with me tonight. The prayer is simple. "Thank you, Jesus, for all that you have done to save me. I am a sinner, and I confess my brokenness to you tonight. Come, enter into my life, and make me a new person. I believe you died on the cross to save me, and I believe that nothing, not even death, can separate me from your love. Show me how to trust you with my life. Show me how to love the world the way you love it. And Jesus, as I begin to walk with you, step by step, mold me into the person you created me to be, so that I can share my love, my resources, and my faith with others who still walk in darkness. Thank you, Jesus for the gift of eternal life. I accept it fully now. Amen."

If you prayed that prayer with me tonight, I would really like to know. My Christmas wish is that all would begin a loving relationship with Jesus Christ.

(Invite the band to come up. Pray. Lights. Sing Silent Night, 3 verses.)

Blessing: May you be filled with the wonder of Mary, the obedience of Joseph, the joy of the angels, the eagerness of the shepherds, the determination of the

magi, and the peace of the Christ child. And may Almighty God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit bless you now and forever. Amen. Merry Christmas!

Ideas for giving Jesus a birthday present.

- Living Water International (<http://water.cc/advent>)
- Heifer International (<http://www.heifer.org/>)
- World Vision (<http://www.worldvision.org/>)
- Compassion International (<http://www.compassion.com/>)
- United Methodist Committee on Relief (UMCOR)
(<https://umcmmission.org/umcor/>)

Memory verse

“Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.”

Luke 2:11

Reflection questions

1. Have you ever thought it ironic that we give gifts on Christmas when it's not our birthday? Why do we give gifts, then?
2. What is a good gift for Jesus?
3. How is Christmas good news for all?
4. Have you ever felt you needed to be perfect before coming to God? Why do you suppose that is?
5. Is Jesus the Lord of your life? Have you made room for him in your heart? Why or why not?

More information and ideas are available at www.adventconspiracy.org