

The Faith of Christmas
Luke 2:15-20
Advent 2

You may not remember Tom Southerland, but you know his story. Tom Sutherland was held captive in the Middle East for four years... much of his time was spent solitary confinement. In his speech after his release he asked, "Do you know what it's like to be in prison? To be held hostage? To be a captive? It's very lonely and you worry that people will forget you. I felt abandoned. I didn't think anybody even knew I was in prison."

During his imprisonment, Southerland could hear the BBC on a radio that the guards had, and every day he would listen intently to the newscast... hoping that he might hear his name... praying that the newscaster would talk about him on the air and tell the story of his imprisonment and his innocence. But his name was never mentioned so he assumed that nobody in the US even knew that he was being held hostage.

When released after 4 years of captivity, the US flew his wife, Jean, to the area so they could be reunited. A few days later, they flew home together to San Francisco. As they were getting off the plane back home, Southerland was amazed to see a huge crowd at the airport, lights and cameras, reporters and people holding signs.

He turned to his wife and said, "Jean, look at all these people. There must be a celebrity on the plane with us. Look around and see if you can spot who it is." And Jean said, "Honey, they're all here for you! This is all for you!"

When his wife told him that, Tom Southerland started sobbing and couldn't stop. He couldn't believe it. He said, "I thought everybody had forgotten about me. I didn't think anybody knew I was in captivity. I felt completely abandoned. I didn't think anybody cared. Thank God I was wrong."

The shepherds at the first Christmas must have felt something like that. Society had cast them out, pushed them down to the lowest of rungs on the social ladder. They were considered unclean - physically and spiritually - and must have felt abandoned and forgotten. They believed that nobody cared about them.

But then, on that first Christmas night, they learned that they were wrong. That somebody did care! That the One who counts the most cared! That God was there for them! Of all the people on the face of the earth, the Angel of the Lord appeared to them.

And as they made their way to Bethlehem to see the Miracle of Christmas, they discovered in the process three great gifts that Christmas gives to us. Three great gifts that money can't buy. Gifts available to you and me today. Let's see what they are.

First of all, there's **the gift of acceptance**. The Shepherds found the gift of acceptance. When Terry Bowden was in his first year as head coach of Auburn (1993) he won the Bear Bryant Coach of the Year Award. What made the story so amusing is that his

father Bobby Bowden (head coach at Florida State) was nominated for the same award. There was a lot of good-natured joking and teasing at the banquet about this father and son being considered for the same prestigious award... and of course when Terry Bowden won... nobody in the room was happier or more proud than his dad.

In his acceptance speech Terry Bowden thanked his team, his fellow coaches, Auburn University, and then he thanked his family. "I owe so much to my parents," he said. "Many of you in this room know my mother and you know how special she is, but let me tell you about my father. My parents always took us 5 kids to church. Even when we were on a trip, they took us to church.

Once while on vacation, we went to this church that was a little more emotional than we were used to. The minister was shouting and pounding the pulpit... and he began to look around the congregation for someone to single out... and he spotted my father.

"Mom and Dad had marched us down to the front pew. Mom was on one end, Dad on the other end with us 5 kids squeezed in between to be sure we would behave in church. The preacher pointed dramatically to my Dad and the conversation went like this:

'You there... Do you have faith?'

'Yes, I have faith,' Dad answered.

The preacher said, 'If I put a 2 x 4 board down there on the floor, do you have enough faith to walk across it?'

'Yes, I could do that.'

'But,' said the preacher, 'what if I took that same 2 x 4 board and placed it across the top of the two tallest building in New York City... would you have enough faith to walk across it then?'

'No, I don't have that much faith,' Dad answered.

'But what if somebody were standing on the other end,' said the preacher, 'dangling one of your children off the side... would you cross the board then?'"

Terry Bowden said his father turned and looked down the pew at his 5 kids, and said, "Which one?"

Funny story, but the point I want to make is this: God Our Father doesn't say, "Which one?" He doesn't say, "Which one should I lay my life on the line for?" God so love the world... that He wants to bring us all into the circle.

He comes with the open arms of acceptance to each one of us and says, "You are valued. You are included. You are wanted. You are precious to me. This is for you." And then it's our turn to do our part. To accept his acceptance. To receive this gracious gift He offers. To welcome him into our hearts and lives with faith.

The first great gift of Christmas that money can't buy is the gift of acceptance.

Second, there's **the gift of forgiveness**. Steven Spielberg's movie, "Schindler's List," is a graphic, shocking, unflinching depiction of the 20th century's most staggering horror – the methodical, brutal extermination of millions of humans in the death camps of World War II. Oskar Schindler was a most unlikely hero... but through the efforts of this one man, some 1200 persons were saved from certain death. He put them to work in his factory, protecting them.

One of the most powerful moments in the movie is when Schindler has a conversation with the commander of the labor camp in Krakow, Poland. They're talking about power, and the commander (in his swaggering way) brags about the authority he has over these people, to kill or exterminate if he so chooses.

But Schindler says, "Oh no, Commander, you're wrong. That's not power. Anyone could do that. But to have a man come before you and to say, 'I could take your life if I so choose but no... instead I pardon you! I pardon you!' That, Commander, is power!"

Indeed. Power...real power is found in forgiveness... and that's the Christmas gift God offers us. God comes into the world offering the gift of forgiveness... "I pardon you. I forgive you. I want to reclaim you." That's the gift he offers, but we have to do our part.

We have to accept His gift in faith. And when accepted, offer forgiveness to others and live in the spirit of forgiveness. Only then are we doing a God-like thing, offering a Christmas present wrapped in Heaven... the gift of forgiveness. There is the gift of acceptance, the gift of forgiveness.

And third, there's **the gift of Christ**, God's gift to the world... the gift of the Savior... a gift money can't buy. That's really what it's all about, isn't it? Socrates taught for 40 years, Plato for 50, Aristotle for 40, and Jesus for only 3. Yet the influence of Christ's 3-year ministry transcends the impact left by the combined 130 years of teaching of these greatest philosophers of all antiquity.

He painted no pictures, yet the finest painting of Raphael, Michelangelo, and Leonardo da Vinci received their inspiration from Him. He wrote no poetry, but Dante, Milton, and scores of the world's greatest poets were inspired by Him.

He composed no music; still Haydn, Handel, Beethoven, Bach, and Mendelssohn reached their highest perfection of melody in the hymns, symphonies, and oratorios they composed in his praise. Every sphere of human greatness has been enriched by this humble carpenter of Nazareth. The gift of Christ is the best Christmas gift of all.

Patrick Henry understood that in the way he closed his will. He said, "I have now disposed of all my property to my family. There is one more thing that I wish I could give them and that is Jesus Christ... If they had Christ... and I had not given them one shilling, they would be rich indeed; and if, they had not Christ... and I had given them all the world, they would be poor."

I began this sermon sharing how Tom Southerland thought he'd been forgotten and that nobody cared, and when his plane landed in San Francisco and he saw all the people and lights and cameras... he thought there was a celebrity on board the plane... and his wife said to him, "It's you! This is all for you."

Well, that's what I want to say to you this morning about Christmas... it's all for you! The Christmas Gift of Acceptance, the Christmas Gift of Forgiveness, and the Christmas Gift of Christ... they are all for you!