

Hope in a Plain Brown Wrapper

Luke 1:47-55

This is the season of wrapping paper but modern technology is making it harder and harder to unwrap Christmas. It has given us shrink wrap, which defies all attempts to tear it. We have fiber strapping that some knives won't cut. And we have adhesives that you can't get off with dynamite. And toys are wired into packages so pieces don't inadvertently disappear.

Half the fun of Christmas morning is seeing the excited look on everyone's faces as they look at all the brightly wrapped packages under the tree. The other half is opening those packages. Some you savor and take your time opening; others you just rip your way through. We know from the packaging and the wrapping paper that this is something special.

In an old "Family Circus," by Bil Keane, Billy is standing in front of a calendar that reads December 18, and he says: "Only seven more hoping days 'til Christmas." And in a very real sense, he's right. These are our hoping days. This IS the period of anticipation and hope. The packages are piling up under the tree. And come the 25th, that hope will become a reality. But if we're not careful, we might just miss the most extraordinary gift of all. You see, this gift is wrapped in plain brown wrapping paper.

It's always under the tree, but because it's wrapped in plain brown paper, it's often overlooked, forgotten, or cast aside as not being worth very much. You see, while we can tell what season it is by the wrapping paper used, we also think we can tell the worth of a gift by how it's wrapped.

But in the Kingdom of God, that's not true at all. In the Kingdom of God, God turns everything on its head. And what we discover is that the gift that looked the least promising, the one that was the most plain looking was actually the greatest gift of all.

On Christmas day, the hope of the world was born. God's gift of grace to the world came packaged and wrapped NOT in the splendor and glory of Heaven, but in the plain brown wrapper of our human flesh and blood. The Hope of God, the Hope of Humankind, the Hope of Salvation and Forgiveness came wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger. Our Hope came in the plain brown wrapper of the Christ child, the people and the events surrounding his birth.

I think it's extraordinary how God always uses the ordinary to do the extraordinary. That's one of the things that fascinates me about God. God can take the simplest thing, the least likely person, the one who would go unnoticed by anyone else and lift them from obscurity into eternity.

We get distracted by all the glitter and glamour. We get distracted by the wrapping paper of the world. But God always reaches for the gift in the plain brown wrapper first.

Look who God chose to be the emissaries of this world changing event. Even the setting could have come in a plain brown wrapper.

Look at Mary. She wasn't a beauty queen. She wasn't a star. She wasn't noted for anything. There's no footnote about how glorious she was anywhere that would cause God to choose her. She was just a young, everyday sort of girl, filled with faith. We don't know much about her other than she had an cousin named Elizabeth and she too was chosen for something special.

But that's about all we know about Mary, other than the genealogy we find in the gospels. God wrapped the birth of God's Son in the plain brown wrapper of Mary.

The same holds true for Joseph. God could have chosen someone who was wealthy. God could have chosen someone with money, fame, and influence. The message might have gotten spread quicker. More people might have believed it.

Instead, God chose the plain brown wrapper of Joseph. And he was just a carpenter. Worked with stone, iron, copper, and wood. It wasn't a trade to make a fortune in, but it kept food on the table and a roof over their heads. It was steady work. And the carpenters of that day were respected and needed.

Then there's Bethlehem. A town of not much repute. It's not far from Jerusalem, half days journey on foot. It's now like a suburb of Jerusalem. Only mentioned briefly in Scripture. It's where Ruth and Naomi settled. It's where Jacob had Rachel were buried. It was the birthplace of David, who later used it as his home. That's why it's called the city of David. It's the birthplace of the prophet Micah. But by the birth of Christ, it was of little consequence. The Temple had been built and it outshone everything.

The prophet Micah wrote: "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days."

Bethlehem was just a small town, Its name means "House of Bread." God took the plain brown wrapper of Bethlehem and made it a Jewel of hope.

And what about the stable. Surely god could have come up with something better than that for this special gift. And yet this simple stable and manger changes the world. Who but God would have thought of it. Who would have thought that something as simple as a manger could melt hearts that have frozen and re-frozen through the years. Hearts that have forgotten the origins of love and grace, hearts that have built walls to keep themselves from getting too battered and bruised. Hearts that have seen so much grief and tragedy on television and in life itself, that most of us suffer from compassion fatigue.

God uses the plain brown wrapper of the birthplace and the birthing place of Jesus to melt our hearts.

And there was the baby, God, entering the world as an infant. There is nothing more ordinary or more hope filled than the birth of a baby. God took something as simple as the birth of a baby to usher in hope. Christmas reminds us of the hope we felt at our own children's and grandchildren's birth. Somehow, during the year, that hope gets lost in the pile of dirty diapers and wads of paper towels used to clean up the mess. Somehow, during the living out of our daily lives throughout the rest of the year, the Hope of the that birth gets buried beneath the toys and clothes and the accumulation of stuff and the accumulation of years.

But this season of the baby lets that Hope be reborn. We hear the baby cry from the plain brown wrapper of the manger and our hearts find their place and their peace once again.

Today we come face to face with a mind-boggling, bumfuzzling idea and story. It's a story that is almost incomprehensible in its simplicity and truth. It's a story about a gift. It is a gift wrapped up in a plain brown wrapper. But it is the most exquisite gift imaginable. This gift was left for each of us, under the tree of life over 2,000 years ago by the one whose birthday we celebrate today. The gift was withheld from no one. Some have left their packages unclaimed. Some have accepted the gift and carry it around but have failed to begin unwrapping and thus have failed to discover the hidden splendor and grace of God's love. The packages are alike: in each one is a scroll on which is written, "I love you!" and it's signed God.

Won't you reach out and accept the gift which God has for you? Won't you reach out and receive God's love and forgiveness in this plain brown wrapper and begin that lifelong adventure of faith. Receive God's gift to the world as your own.