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All I want for Christmas is...



*“Every good gift and
every perfect gift is from
above, coming down from
the Father of lights.”*

James 1:17

A Congregation of

 THE
LUTHERAN CHURCH
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An Advent Devotional
December 1 – 6

All I want for Christmas is...

Patience

Read 1 Timothy 1:12-17

When Paul looked back on his life before he was a Christian, he wondered at what he calls the “perfect patience” of his Lord Jesus. Before his conversion, Paul had argued against Jesus’ disciples. He had stood by and given his approval to the first murder of a Christian. He had chased Christians from their homes with orders for arrest.

When he considered all he had done and marveled again that God would give him the privilege of being an apostle, he wrote that Jesus must have “perfect patience.”

When our patience is tried, we often begin to show our frustration. We fidget. We roll our eyes. We pace. Through frenetic motion, our bodies play out the desire to see something finished more quickly.

There is none of that with God. He and the angels did not look down on Paul, with all his mispent missions against Jesus’ church, folding and unfolding wings. They knew there was a plan and a time. As Ecclesiastes 3:1 says, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven.” Paul would see the light, and his conversion would become a great picture of the power of the cross, where even the most brutal enemies are forgiven and given the chance to live anew.

It is not quite fair, we think. God knew. It is easier to wait when you know it will happen. But we know, too. We know by faith. We know that God has ordered all things. We know His perfect plan sets us where we need to be every moment.

So the next time you are pacing because your order has not arrived or your appointment is late—do not ask, “How much longer?” Ask, “What does God have for me here?” Patience is simply the sight of faith, watching for God’s plan to unfold.

We pray

Father, forgive my self-centered view of the world, a view which spills out in impatience. Open my eyes to see how you are at work everywhere and let my day be filled with moments of praise and thanksgiving for your glory. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

All I want for Christmas is...

Chastity

Read Ephesians 5:5-8

The idea of chastity seems to belong to a forgotten era, to a time when people spoke of things like “chivalry” and “valor.” But we are in the 21st century now, in a Western culture that is awash in sexual imagery, language and actions. Recent fictional literature has promoted the idea that Jesus was married, that he had a girlfriend of some sort, or was at least tempted in that direction. They declare that He could not, certainly, have been “chaste.” Many are comfortable with the idea that God is far more interested in issues of justice, peace, and equality than the sexual lives of His creatures. People understand “you shall not steal” and “you shall not murder,” but “you shall not commit adultery” seems like a commandment with no practical, modern application. Like our appendix, we will leave the Sixth Commandment in as long as it does not cause any discomfort. But if it does, we cut it out, throw it away, and get on with our lives.

Yet the Lord’s prophets and apostles tie our sexual identities as men and women intimately with our relationship to God. The prophets speak of God as husband to his wife, Israel, and the apostles continue the comparison as they speak of Jesus the Bridegroom and the Church, His bride. To run after other gods is to commit adultery. To desire another to whom one is not pledged is to commit idolatry. Chastity, then, is as much an issue of the First Commandment—“You shall have no other gods”—as it is an issue of the Sixth Commandment.

Jesus, the God-man born of a virgin, chaste Jewish woman, has reserved Himself for us alone. He is the light who is pure and clear, who by His shed blood brings us out of the darkness of promiscuity into the light of faithfulness. Because of this one chaste man, we have been named children of light.

We pray

Stir up chastity within us, Lord Jesus, and come soon that we might be freed from the darkness of this idolatrous world and brought to freedom in the brightness of your light forevermore. Amen.

All I want for Christmas is...

Hospitality

Read Genesis 18:1-8

The writer of Hebrews learned this lesson from our reading: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares” (13:2). On the other hand, should you have the opportunity to host your extended family this Christmas, including those dirty-fingered, turbo-powered nieces and nephews, you might wonder if you have entertained the opposite kind of spiritual creatures—and been all too aware of it.

It is certainly easier to say this sitting secure in a study, rather than in the moment when the table seems to be a setting short, but this is what is wondrous about hospitality—it pulls us out of our own self-centered smallness. Being host forces us to drop our agendas and attend to others. It invites us to grandness, to enlarge our world for others.

Would that we could live life this way all the time! Would that our attention and our focus *constantly* searched out the needs and desires of those around us. When we live for our neighbors, we are delightfully blind to what we imagine we lack.

It is not wrong to say that practicing hospitality is like playing God. Usually, when we hear that phrase “playing God,” we think of someone trying to control something. But God does not have to *try* to control things. He simply is Almighty, without struggle or strain. He is the graceful and effortless host whose power is put into service for us.

Hospitality reflects the true face of our God, He who cannot wait to share His treasures with us. See the eagerness of our Brother and Lord Jesus: “In my Father’s house are many rooms.... And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself” (John 13:2-3). This is His great plan and desire, to host us forevermore.

We pray

Glorious Father, what an invitation you have sent us through your Son! Do not tarry to bring us home to you. And as long as we are here, may we overflow with your grace to make those you send our way feel at home—all for your glory, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God now and forever. Amen.

All I want for Christmas is...

Compassion

Read Ephesians 4:29-32

If you have spent any time in the South, you are no doubt familiar with the all-purpose expression, “Bless his/her heart.” The expression can mean so many different things, depending on use. It may convey an explanation for someone’s actions: “She never really recovered from that car accident, bless her heart.” It may express sympathy: “He really misses his dad, bless his heart.” Or it can be used to soften what is really a vicious comment: “That poor soul is as dumb as a brick, bless his heart.”

Jesus says that what comes out of the mouth has first come out from the heart. What comes out of the heart, Jesus says, are “evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, [and] false witness” (Matt. 15:19). Paul might even be thinking of this teaching from the Lord, because he moves immediately from the problem of corrupting talk to concern for corrupted hearts from which come “bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor.” These ought to be replaced by kindness, tenderheartedness, and forgiveness.

Compassion, in contrast to empathy, is a concern for the pain of others that leads to action. Having compassion does not lead one to merely wish someone else’s heart be blessed; it means desiring to bring that blessing one’s self. When St. Paul urges his readers to speak things that “build up” and “give grace,” when he urges displays of kindness and tenderheartedness, he is evoking compassion.

God in Christ is a compassionate God, a God who so wishes to bless our hearts that He would be willing to die in our place. God forgives us and shows us grace in Jesus out of compassion. At His return, when we arise to meet Him, we will at last know the full depth of that incomprehensible, unsearchable compassion for us.

We pray

Stir up compassion within us by your Spirit, Lord Jesus, and come soon, that as you have shown compassion to each of us in your sacrificial death for our sin, we might in turn show compassion to others in place of malice and slander. Amen.

All I want for Christmas is...

Hope

Read Romans 8:20-25

"I hope you do well today!" We use the word "hope" so often, yet in our conversations it often has a conditional connotation to it. It indicates our desire for a certain outcome but with a note of expected defeat. When we leave ten minutes late, we probably think, "I hope I can still make it," knowing full well there is no such hope.

The aspect of uncertainty that has been attached to our modern use of "hope" comes from the fact that God's promises are often slow (by our human vantage point) in fulfillment. We look for signs of God's salvation in our world, and all we see are wars, natural disasters, disease, crime, and ultimately death. St. Paul reminds us, however, that hope is a trust in things not seen: salvation, redemption, forgiveness of sins, and ultimately eternal life.

In the Scriptures we encounter the word "hope" quite often. The Psalms call us to "Hope in the Lord." This encouragement comes in the context of difficulty. Psalms 42 and 43 are cries of anguish: "My adversaries assail me and mock me – Yet I will hope in God and shall yet sing His praises." The Psalmist could only see death and turmoil, yet by the strength of the Holy Spirit, he continued to trust in the deliverance of His Savior. When the Scriptures speak of hope, there is no uncertainty in this word. Though we are assaulted by sin, death and the devil, our Savior Jesus will deliver us, for He has already granted us His gift of salvation.

As we near Christmas, there is no better picture of hope than that of Jesus in His manger. The shepherds gazed upon a crying, fussing baby who was using a cow's feeding trough for a bed. Who would ever look for the Creator of the universe in the poorest shelter of a rural town? Yet, filled with the words of the angels, they saw their hope of salvation in this helpless child, as do we.

We pray

*Once He came in blessing, All our sins redressing;
Came in likeness lowly, Son of God most holy;
Bore the cross to save us; Hope and freedom gave us.
Amen. (LSB 333:1)*

All I want for Christmas is...

Truthfulness

Read Isaiah 25:1-8

A 2002 study found that the average adult lies at least once in any ten-minute conversation, and 60% lie multiple times. "We didn't expect lying to be such a common part of daily life," Robert Feldman, head psychologist of the study, said.

Honestly (pun intended!), it can be difficult to go through any day without telling at least one little fib or stretching the truth just a little. This sad truth is dismaying. We have trouble believing anyone anymore and know that we too often lie.

Jesus often prefaced his remarks with "I tell you the truth." The Greek word Jesus used, translated as "assuredly" or "I tell you the truth," is "amen." Jesus is saying, "When I speak, I only speak the true truth. That is what I came to do, tell the truth."

God tells us the truth, because God cannot lie. Some of it will not be easy to swallow. But in telling us the truth about ourselves, Jesus can lead us to the truth of who He is and why He was born.

The truth is that Jesus hung on a cross because we are sinners who lie. Jesus hung on the cross to tell us the truth. His death has no meaning unless the truth is that we are sinners.

But that is not the whole truth, for the resurrection must be included. Without the resurrection, the crucifixion is a lie. When we understand why Jesus has done this, though it is painful to face, we understand the truth that sets us free.

In Isaiah 25:1, the Hebrew word translated often as "truth" or "sure" is also "amen." God is the God of amen, the God of faithfulness and truth, the God who tells the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. He does it because of His great love for us.

We pray

Heavenly Father, full of grace and truth, in this world where it is so difficult to believe anyone, you have stepped in and told us the truth about ourselves and about your love. May we always hear your truth so that by it, we may be set free. And may all our prayers end with that word that speaks the truth, amen.