

“The Greatest Gift”
December 12, 2010
Grove Presbyterian Church

What is the greatest Christmas gift you ever got?
What is the greatest Christmas gift you ever gave?
What gift do you really want?

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Let me tell you a story of a young boy.

99.9% of his younger years remain a mystery, but we can assume a few things about his growing up.

He likely grew up much like any other boy. Playing games with his friends. Wrestling matches. Seeing who could run faster. Throwing stones.

No doubt he had plenty of chores to do, working with dad when he became old enough, and when his younger brothers and sisters started getting born and demanding mom and grandma’s attention.

There alongside dad he learnt the family trade: working with wood and stone, how to chisel and plane a yoke, how to fit a keystone in an arch.

You can tell by the stories he later would tell how close he was to his father. How much he respected his father. Never do you hear him tell anything bad about fathers.

He likely traveled a lot too, often visiting his mother’s sister and his cousins, John and James, in the village of Capernaum. Capernaum was lovely spot, a lakeside town, small but cosmopolitan. Just an easy 20 mile walk from his town -- his town a dustier town, an insignificant town filled mostly with Jews, his own kind. There in Capernaum he and his cousins would sail out on the boats, go fishing, skip rocks.

In Nazareth, the boy grew up on the other side of the tracks. Three miles away was the prosperous town of Sepphoris, high on hills, the beautiful and wealthy commercial center of Galilee with its theaters and markets, Roman villas and artwork. It was destroyed by the Romans around the time of Jesus’ birth but was quickly rebuilt as the seat for Herod’s princely son.

Maybe Jesus and his father helped construct some of the villas and lay the tile.

It is little wonder our young boy, who grew up naturally speaking Aramaic, would have learnt to read Hebrew (then a dead language), and probably gain a fair facility with Greek

and maybe Latin.

Neither was he a stranger visiting Jerusalem with all the big city's commotion, there visiting and staying with his other cousin John who was busy studying to become a priest like his father. We see John and his father walking to the Temple from their home in the suburbs, John then shooed off to school in the Temple precincts.

For those trips to exciting Jerusalem he travels with lots of others – including his father and cousins – all of them filled with the bustle of the great festivals. Jerusalem would triple in population. Excited by the adventure of traveling these 70 miles to Jerusalem. Excited by all the different people he'd see coming from all corners of the Roman world. Thrilled by all the news.

How many times did they hear the report of another revolt by people from where they lived crushed? The Galilean rebels, invariably, killed in battle, or those captured crucified outside Jerusalem's walls. His father might have remembered having seen men crucified. Two years after our young boy was born, over 2000 insurgents were crucified. These Romans are very efficient.

Of course, wherever they went they'd see these Roman soldiers with their armor, shields, and swords. Bringers of the Roman Peace. Pax Romana. A peace established by fear and money, military and law.

*Think of this boy's world as Afghanistan minus the gunpowder and roadside bombs.*

Did he and cousin John talk about all that they saw? Did they, trained in their people's story – one by Temple, one by synagogue -- talk about how they wished they could help their people?

Both boys must have sensed in themselves -- and in each other -- a sense of obligation, a mission. Did they also suspect the special gifts they each had? When did they come to appreciate their special insight into their people's story, struggle, suffering, purpose?

We see him now back in Nazareth sitting in the synagogue, listening to the elders, discussing with the Rabbi. For when not doing his chores, he'd be studying with the other boys his age.

There must have been a deep struggle inside himself, a dawning realization that there was something he must do. But who was he? Just a kid from Nazareth.

But he had to. But he couldn't do it right away. It wasn't time. Did his father die, leaving him, the eldest son, responsible for taking care of the family and the family business? He, of course, had to provide for the family, but he must have made another decision too. He would continue until his brother James and his other brothers would accept the responsibility that fell on the first born son.

There's nothing to prove it, but it makes sense. In his early thirties, he does something daring. He leaves behind Nazareth, and with it his mother, siblings, and his responsibilities. He leaves behind his position in the synagogue.

He moves to sub-tropical Capernaum. A pleasant town along with sea with pleasant breezes. There he buys a house. There he sets up business as a contractor, plying his trade as a carpenter and stonemason. With his cousins he attends the synagogue. But he, despite only being in his 30's, gains a reputation for teaching that surpasses the Rabbis in town and region. He brings to those who listen radical insights never heard before. This goes on for several years. From Capernaum and his business, he takes day trips as he tours the Galilean region and teaches. He listens. Starting with his cousins and their business partners, he develops a following of men and women eager for this new vision of Israel and God.

His cousin, he hears – or maybe as they agreed -- is doing something similar in Judea but his cousin doesn't take it far enough. His cousin John didn't so much reject the temple as lament its corruption. His cousin John still works inside the box of religion, which he Jesus begins to feel suffocating, limiting. Jesus wants to push beyond religion.

When his cousin John is arrested and killed, it is time for Jesus to really step up.

A new way is announced. If the people would really see, it is a way based upon what God intended for his people from the very beginning. Positive. Freeing. Universal. Loving. Casting off the tyrannies that enslave the soul and make us afraid.

This is what Israel means. It is a way of living. This is far more significant than geography or changing government. John shouted about obedience to the law. Others talk about overthrowing the Romans. Change begins inside. Yahweh works inside. The kingdom starts within. John didn't go far enough. We must recover what it means to be truly Hebrew. It means more than the law. More than regulations. More than rituals. John wanted to correct the Temple and purge corruption. John wanted to restore true religion. Jesus believes the Temple irrelevant. We worship in truth, in Spirit. We walk in hope. We love because we are loved. We live in the Word and the Word in us.

*Imagine a young promising Imam of the Taliban slowly realizing he must help his fellow Muslims love each other and the Americans. They must treat women with equality. They must avoid condemning others. They must get beyond the trappings of religion. They call them trappings for a reason. How long would this young Imam last?*

Jesus hones his message and his message hones him. It begins to be more important than his trade. But how to take it to the next level without falling into the same trap that the other liberation movements had?

They played with power. No wonder the powerful hated him. He has to show God's greatness in weakness, in renouncing the tired and futile methods of the world. It is with

the outcasts he casts his lot. Where else would God be but among the suffering, hurting, ignored?

They use control and domination. He has to show what it means to be free from all control. Faith, rather than an absolute, is very particular. He must teach in particulars. Faith is far more than race and ritual.

Yet, this is a restless time for Israel. And dangerous. The people, angry at their own rulers and the army that oppresses them, demand someone strong to make it right. Someone to save them. He knows he mustn't become what they want him to become.

He accepts it as his burden, his calling to show them a different kind of salvation. A different kind of resistance movement entirely, even if those closest to him still think of him as they want him to be, in the old mold. Them still carrying swords ready to kill for their definition of right, eager for the holy war.

They'll learn. He'll show them the only way anyone can win.

He knows the danger he's getting into. It is quite deliberate. Even his teachings press, probe, and vex. His stories twist assumptions and demand a personal response that always is painful. And there be the joy.

He knows he is setting himself up to become the blame. The excuse. The example. Israel has failed to be the Israel God means it to be. He will become Israel. He becomes the failure and judgment. How they respond to him, how they treat him will expose to them themselves. There lies the hope and salvation. Deliverance through suffering for the sake of others for God's sake.

Then our God will inspire the people to rise up with a new heart and a new vision and a new way. God will surprise us by raising up a new Israel.

So the boy born in Bethlehem sets his face toward Jerusalem.

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What gift do you really want?
The real gift is the giver, the giver is the gift.