

I wonder how you prepare to celebrate Christmas? Put aside all the pressures we might feel with the gifts, gatherings, the end of year loose ends to tie up, all of this aside how do you prepare for Christmas? Amy and I loved to spend evenings in the days after Thanksgiving putting lights on the tree and hanging greens and putting wreaths on the house, and the last piece that brought it all together was setting out our nativity scene. This first year celebrating without Amy it was especially important to me make our home festive, warm, and inviting. I suppose I'm sort of trying in my own way to carry on Amy's gift for making everyone feel welcome—even if it is just for folks driving along N Miami Street.

This time of year we think a lot about preparing to welcome, family, friends, gatherings of loved ones. But how are we at preparing for God's arrival, renewing that place in our hearts and rekindling the sense of expectancy.

There is so much to think about, all of it can be given space in our lives, so that not only is Jesus denied a room at the inn in Luke, but Jesus can easily see a no vacancy sign alit in our lives too. With all the festivities, all the food, all the gifts we can lose track of the giver from the gift. It's easy to lose track of the one we're celebrating, from all the celebrating we're doing, even in our best intentions we can grow forgetful of what God is doing in us at Christmas.

One of my favorite Christmas tales this time of year is Jean Shepherd's *In God We Trust, All Others Pay Cash*, you probably know it better from its film adaptation *The Christmas Story*. Ralphie Parker's singular longing for the one thing that will make his Christmas meaningful, the Red Rider BB Gun. His Christmas hung in the balance whether he got that BB Gun, it's a cautionary tale for all of us. If we look for meaning in people and things, even the most trustworthy and reliable people and things, then we ought to heed the warning of Ralphie's mother's—you'll shoot your eye out.

Once again, we read 14 more names this morning, don't worry only one more week in the genealogy and then we can move on. We're almost there. There's one name in there I want to lift out, King Hezekiah. Hezekiah was 25 when he became king, Hezekiah restored Jerusalem to faithful life and worship he tore down the idols and kept the commandments of Moses, he did seemingly everything right. And was the first good one in a very very long time. You can his account in 2 Kings 18-19.

And yet even one of the good ones, even one who helped restore and bring prosperity to Israel, making it a place, once again where people wanted to live, a place of bringing security and abundance, even Hezekiah failed.

Along came a delegation of Babylonians. From a far it seemed they brought generosity and good wishes, but in reality it was a trojan horse—and the Prophet Isaiah knew it. And in a foolish gesture Hezekiah conducts a tour of the palace, pointing to the grandeur of his treasures: silver, gold, weaponry, food supplies. Giving the enemy an inside tour of Israel's storehouse Hezekiah foolishly overestimates and places his trust in the greatness of his small kingdom. Foolishly Hezekiah trusts that the wealth and security that he'd surrounded himself with were enough to assure Israel's life in the face of their enemy.

All Isaiah can do is shake his head in disappointment at Hezekiah: what in the world is going on here? Yahweh is angered at the king's charade of worldly wealth and force. Hezekiah mistakenly had come to believe that what was precious about him was what was in the storehouses, and not the promise and the name. Hezekiah mistook the gifts for the giver.

Christmas is the perfect opportunity for us to sort of recalibrate our vision of who we should be looking for. For Hezekiah the greatness was not in what they had in the bank, but what took place in the temple, worship, identity. That was where Israel was drawn back to the giver of the gifts—and not only gifts but identity, place, life. Later, there was another who might have been tempted to put his own greatness on display, are you the one we should be looking for? John the Baptist knew that he was only a reflection of the greater glory that was coming into the world. I baptize you with water, but he will baptize you with Holy Spirit and Fire. He is the giver and the gift.

Do you know what makes each and every one of you special beyond measure? It isn't what you do, what you have, or have been able to accomplish, not the degrees, not the promotions, not the way you planned or strategized each stage of life. Because when someone comes to see about you, and that's what you show them, it would be like ol' Isaiah shaking his head, foolish. You are special because you've been given a name, you have an identity that's far more valuable than anything you've got in the storehouse.

I remember a number of years ago learning that a pastor and mentor of mine had to check himself into rehab. He had quietly been spending his evenings after his family was in bed spiraling down into alcohol abuse. I remember reading his letter and feeling somehow betrayed by the news. I told my dad what I felt, and he looked me in the eye and said, "He's fragile like we are. Remember, he's not God, he's not Jesus, and struggles just like we do. He's vulnerable and imperfect just like we are."

I had mistakenly fixed my gaze on the gift instead of the giver. He was not the savior, nor was Hezekiah, or the wealth and security he had created, each of them were a reflection and their role was to point to the faithful one the giver of all good gifts, God's anointed, Jesus the Messiah.

As we prepare for Jesus to be born in us once again this year remember what our preparations are all about. Remember who the gift and the giver are, for they are one in the same. O come O come, Emmanuel, ransom, rescue, renew, and restore our vision of you, the only one for whom we need make preparations this Christmas.