

Sermon – All Good Gifts

Do you remember the Sears Catalog?

It was a fixture in many of our homes for years. And, oh what a day it was when the Christmas Wish Book arrived! It seemed to appear at just the right time; in November as the weather was beginning to cool and thoughts were moving towards the giving and receiving of GIFTS.

For those of us of a certain age, that Sears Christmas Wish Book seemed like it was two inches thick and full of wonders that we never knew we really wanted or needed. My brothers and I logged some pretty good time turning over those pages and seeing a toy or game that was quickly added to “the list.” Can you relate? Maybe you watched your children do the same thing. Maybe you laid down on your stomach in the living room and thumbed through page after page. Maybe you are sitting there and are wondering what Sears is and why anyone would print a two-inch-thick catalog when you can just search for it online. Or better yet just check your Amazon account and see what “You might also like” because you purchased something else.

Well, the Sears catalog is a thing of the past but businesses and advertisers are still putting their good gifts in our path. Sometimes it is through general ads and sometimes through very direct and specific marketing. Just take a look at this stack of catalogs that have been delivered right to our door. They sure have us figured out. You too? But we are too smart for that, right? I never knew I really needed this non-stick mini stuffed pancake pan. Don't get me wrong it's a great pan. But I really didn't need it.

The truth is, many of us could have a truckload of things removed from our home and we would still have so much

more than most of the people in the world. Should we be feeling guilty at this point? No. But we do need a reality check every once in a while.

In our lesson today, James reminds us that it is not WHAT we have that should be our focus, but rather WHO gave it to us.

Let's check in with James. Many scholars believe that the author James is the half-brother of Jesus and that this letter was written in around 48-49 A.D. It was likely the first New Testament book to be written. James was writing to a group of believers outside Jerusalem. He writes to the 12 Tribes in the Dispersion; those scattered abroad; to Christian Jews living outside Palestine. It is also clear that these early believers were being persecuted. James encourages their faith with the letter. Let's face it; we all need encouragement when we are faced with challenges. (v. 17) ***“Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift, is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.”***

Now that's a word of encouragement! God is the giver of every good gift in creation. God does not change, not at all, not even a little bit. God's goodness is so pure that there is no "shadow of turning," no "Dark Side." That should make us pause and take note. That should make us stand up and shout, "Amen." Or at the very least nod our heads and maybe, just maybe give a heartfelt, "Um Hum." We are, after all. Presbyterians.

What it probably does most is make us ask ourselves, "What are the good gifts from God in my life?"

It should make us answer...

Let's hear them...

Sermon preached?

Well, let's continue because James had a little bit more to say to us here. James answers a couple of questions for us. The first is, "Who is God?"

Who is God?

James tells us that these good gifts are...

(v. 17) "...from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

God is the Father of lights. And God said, "let there be light." And what else...and God said, (Genesis 1:14-17) "Let there be lights in the dome of the sky to separate the day from the night; and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and years,¹⁵ and let them be lights in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth." And it was so.¹⁶ God made the two great lights—the greater light to rule the day and the lesser light to rule the night—and the stars.¹⁷ God set them in the dome of the sky to give light upon the earth."

God created light. God created the sun, the moon, and the stars. This is the God of all creation. That is where these good gifts come from.

This idea of God's first words of creation captures our imagination. It is dramatic and humans have attempted to reflect that moment of creation through music and the arts for generations.

- Each year in September, I take between 75 to 100 students and parents to Washington, D.C. For most of the trip I focus on the counting of heads and don't really pay attention to the sights. But there are a couple of places where I trust everyone is together and I take a moment to notice the wonder of a place. Inside the Washington National Cathedral is one of them. Over the west entrance is a rose window entitled, "Creation." It is 26' in diameter. With over 10,000 individual pieces of faceted glass, the window reflects light throughout the day. As our tour moves through the cathedral, I turn back and look at the window and think, "Let there be light." The light from that window bathes the nave with such a glow. But if you visit, be sure to slow down enough to follow the single shafts of light that play on the limestone walls and illuminate individual carvings or arches. God's light shines everywhere and is a good gift throughout creation. God's light also shines down on individuals. It shines on you and on me. God's attention is everywhere and at the same time it is very personal as the Creator fills each one of us with God's presence so that we have a personal relationship with the one who loves us most.
- People have also tried to capture the image of creation through music. In *The Creation* by Haydn, the archangel Raphael sings the opening words of Genesis, "In the beginning God made Heaven and Earth." A few moments later the chorus joins him in a quiet, almost inaudible whisper, "God moved upon the face of the waters; and God said: Let there be light. And there was..." then a slight pause and in full fortissimo joined by the entire orchestra ...LIGHT." A goose bump moment if there ever was one.

Put 'em on your bucket list.

James continues to tell us more about who God is. **(v.18) In fulfillment of his own purpose he gave us birth by the word of truth, so that we would become a kind of first fruits of his creatures.”**

God has a purpose and to fulfill that purpose, God created us. James may also be referring to a spiritual birth so we might become ‘first fruits.’ The word of truth gives us birth. God spoke creation. God breathed the breath of God into man and woman. But it is more than physical life. God sends a new birth to us, a life in the Spirit. This new life is a life in relationship with God. Why does God do this? James tells us it is so that we may become “first fruits.” As first fruits, we belong to God. We are wanted; we are claimed.

James also deals with a second question: Who are we?

Who are we?

James does not go easy on us. He gets right up in our faces and challenges us. The challenge is to live a life of active faith.

(v.22-25) But be doers of the word, and not merely hearers who deceive themselves. For if any are hearers of the word and not doers, they are like those who look at themselves in a mirror; for they look at themselves and, on going away, immediately forget what they were like. But those who look into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and persevere, being not hearers who forget but doers who act—they will be blessed in their doing.

James is all about walking the walk. He says that hearing God's word is not enough. We must also be 'doers' of the Word.

We are asked to imagine ourselves standing in front of a mirror. So let's do that. When we look in a mirror it is usually for a purpose. Does my tie need to be straitened? Do I need to comb my hair? Do I need to touch up the lipstick? How bad is that mustard stain from lunch and will people notice?

So we check out our reflection in the mirror. If the answer is "yes" to any of these questions and we walk away from the mirror and do nothing, what was the point of looking into the mirror in the first place? James implies that if we just look into the mirror and do nothing, we forget what we saw. If we only hear God's word and do nothing, we forget what we heard.

Let's take another look into the mirror. This time, let's not look at superficial things like lipstick, wrinkles, weight, or stains. Let's persevere; look deeply and see ourselves through God's perfect law, the law of liberty. That law is the law of love, God's love that brings us freedom from sin and loneliness and despair. It frees us to know that we are loved by the creator of the universe, that God claims us and wants to have a personal relationship with us. And in that knowledge we respond. We act out our faith. We act it out in our personal lives, in our life with family, friends, co-workers, strangers.

But I want us to look into the mirror one more time. This time what do we see? We see one another. You see - God calls us to live out our faith together; to put our faith into

action with others. God has also given us the good gift of the church.

What about our life together as a community of faith? We have so many good gifts from God. As I was thinking of illustrating one of the many good gifts we share together, something kept happening in my mind. I kept hearing music, but not just any music. Hymns! We share the gift of singing hymns together and let me tell you, I love hymns.

As we worship together we raise our voices in singing hymns and songs that lift and soar like our opening hymn today, or like *All Creatures of Our God and King*. They help us to let the praise of God out of our hearts.

There are hymns that can quiet and center us and prepare us to be listeners for God's still small voice such as *Peace Like a River*.

There are hymns we can rock out to like *Shout to the North*.

(All of these hymns can conveniently be found in our new hymnal)

Regardless of what type of hymn we sing at any given moment, they all help us to deepen our relationship to each other as a community of faith, as a family. They help us to strengthen our faith. The words of scripture that inspire the poetry of the verses can and do draw us closer and provide the '**music**' for meaningful moments in worship and out in the world as we each experience our own faith journey.

An early memory for me is being picked up to go to Sunday school. Grandma and Papa lived across the street and sometimes they would take my brothers and I to Sunday

school before worship. Grandma drove and Papa was in the back seat...and the boys piled in. Papa sang in the choir and he would open up his choir folder and sing or hum his part of that morning's anthem as we drove. Loads of these anthems were hymn arrangements. I am sure this is one of the reasons I love those old hymns. Those moments were gifts. They were good gifts from God.

Those hymns trigger memories of other good moments; other good gifts from God. There are those times of being together with family in church. Times where we remember the wonders of creation all around us: the flowers, the sparrows of the air, the beauty of a sunrise or sunset, the great ocean in its power, or a quiet place with a tree planted by streams of water.

And sometimes it is simply the words and music of a hymn that come back to you at just the right time and the gift of singing in a final moment with someone you love.

My grandmother loved to sing, too. She didn't sing in the choir though. She sang just about everywhere else. She would sing us to sleep on nights that she sat so my parents could get some much deserved time away from the three boys. She sang some songs that I just don't remember today. I do remember that she sang one particular Scottish song titled *A Wee Deoch and Doris*. I never understood what it meant until relatively recently. Turns out a Deoch and Doirs are Gaelic for a drink at the door! She was singing us to sleep with a drinking song!

But what she sang most of the time were hymns - and the hymns she sang to us the most were *Amazing Grace* and *Jesus Loves Me*.

What a good and precious gift from God those moments were.

My grandmother suffered for many years from conditions that took her mind from us far earlier than we wanted. One day my mom called me and let me know that if I wanted to visit her again, I should come. I hadn't seen her in quite some time but despite what her illnesses had done to her body, I still felt HER presence. She was unresponsive and her breath labored. Mom gave me some time alone with her. I spoke to her and prayed with her and then silence. I had no more words. But the gift of hymns that God had put in my heart and head came. I sang for both of us. *Amazing Grace. Jesus Loves Me.*

And one more. *Great is Thy Faithfulness.* What a great gift to sing those hymns just hours before her life here on earth with us was over and moments before she joined that heavenly choir singing *Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord.*

Friends, why this testimony? God's good gifts are all around us. Let us be slower to speak and listen for the gifts. Let us open our eyes and look for the gifts.

And when we see the multitude of gifts from God all around us, lets always focus on God's greatest good gift to us. God the Father gave us Jesus Christ to be our personal savior. God gave his Son for you and for me. This gift cost you nothing. Yet God gave this greatest of good gifts to us freely because God loves us. God loves you and wants you to be in relationship with God. Jesus Christ loves you and claims you as his own. The gift is given; we only need to accept it.

Maybe you have heard of this good news all your life and you accepted the gift long ago. Maybe you are hearing it for

the first time today or hearing it with a fresh and open heart. God wants you to accept the gift of love, the gift of Jesus - to know Him and to walk with him. How do we accept the gift of Jesus Christ? We ask him to enter our hearts and our lives.

Thomas Chisholm accepted the gift and responded. He wrote the words to one of the beloved hymns of the church; *Great is Thy Faithfulness*. He was inspired to live out his faith by hearing the word and doing.

Verse 1 speaks of **God's faithfulness revealed in God's Word.**

We find that is inspired by James...no shadow of turning with thee. And also what Jeremiah wrote of in Lamentations remembering that God's mercy or compassions fail not and they are new every morning.

Verse 2 tells us of **God's faithfulness revealed in creation.**

The seasons, the sun, moon, and stars all continue on their courses perfectly, orderly, quietly – guided by God's faithful hand, God the Father of lights, without any help from us.

Verse 3 reminds us of **God's faithfulness revealed in our lives.**

God pardons all our sins, fills us with a peace that passes our understanding, assures of God's presence, gives us strength, hope, and blessings to numerous to count!

Friends, all good gifts come from God. Sometimes God sends those gifts out for everyone to see and to share and

sometimes God sends the gift through very direct, specific, and personal ways.

Whatever challenges, trials, or disappointments you might be facing right now, this hymn reminds us that God's promises are true, that God never changes, that God's compassions never fail, and that God's faithfulness to us in Christ Jesus is more than just a good gift —it's a GREAT GIFT!