

CHRISTMAS MESSAGE
LUKE 15
DECEMBER 24, 2017

I want to give you a gift this morning. I'll start with the gift of a story that may sound familiar. Some 2,000 years ago, the people of the Roman Empire were all celebrating a wonderful holiday season. As the days grew shorter and the nights got colder and the week of December 25 approached, people began to celebrate. They celebrated with gift giving. They celebrated with beautiful lights on the street. They celebrated by bringing evergreen trees into the house. They celebrated by eating treats and festive snacks. They celebrated by feasting and going door-to-door singing. They celebrated by repeating a joyous phrase over and over again. What were they celebrating on December 25? What were they celebrating with evergreen trees in their houses and feasting and door-to-door singing and gift-giving and lights?

Saturnalia, of course. Saturnalia was the celebration of the winter solstice that celebrated the fall agricultural cycle. They would hold feasts and give gifts to each other. They partied late into the evening, and they put lights and torches on the streets that were not normally there. They would bring an evergreen tree into their house to give good luck to the harvest. They would go singing door to door. During Saturnalia, they would often repeat the same phrase to each other over and over again, "Io Saturnalia." All of this happened right around December 25.

Does this sound like any holiday you might know of? You might have heard this before, but Christmas trees, Christmas gifts, Christmas carols, Christmas feasts and Christmas lights might all actually be rooted in a pagan holiday called Saturnalia. Saturnalia was being celebrated before Jesus and would continue some 300 years after Jesus. Saturnalia was a yearly festival. It began to change in the 4th century when Constantine became the Roman Emperor. With his conversion, he tried to remake Rome a Christian nation. In the process of moving from Greek/Roman gods to the Christian God, it became obvious that it was

easier to change people's religion than it was their traditions, so much of Saturnalia's celebrations were Christianized and appropriated for the birth of Jesus.

Hopefully most of you already knew this and this doesn't feel like that first hard conversation you had about Santa. The difference here is that Jesus was real and he was born, but when to celebrate and how we celebrate has almost as much to do with Saturn as it does with Jesus. Which leaves you scratching your head with one big question, "Gabe, I thought you had a gift for this morning and then you proceed to tell me my house is basically designed to honor Saturnalia. What's the gift? Where's the gift?"

The gift I want to give you today is a gift I have been opening for the last few years. It's a gift some of you have started to unpack and then quickly closed the box and shoved it back under the bed. It's a gift that will shake your faith then exponentially grow your faith. It's the same gift that Mary was given on her first Christmas and a gift she would be given several more times in her life. Let's read about the first time.

Luke 2:1-20

There are so many parts of the Christmas story worth exploring, but I want to focus on one particular moment. I want to focus on the response of Mary after the birth of Jesus. It is in that moment that you see the strange gift she has been given. As a refresher for you, Mary is a young nobody from nowhere who is engaged to a nobody from nowhere. This young couple is told of a child that will be born to them, and that child is born to them just as they were promised. It's a huge miracle. God has given his son to his people through a miraculous virgin birth. Then we find this at the end of the birth narrative.

Luke 2:15-20

Before we get to the gift that Mary was given, let me set up to you the similarities and the contrast of this passage. 1) The shepherds and Mary were both told of a miraculous event. They both were able to then witness the promised event just as it was promised. 2) The

shepherds and Mary were both of low socio-economic status. 3) The shepherds and Mary were both getting used to the pariah label. Shepherds were notorious low lifers and usually drunks. Mary, despite her claims to a virgin birth, I am guessing most people didn't believe her and whispered behind her back. 4) With all of that in mind, their responses could not be more different. The shepherds go after receiving the prophesy, they show up and confidently proclaim the prophesy and then they leave with wonder and amazement. Then we have that great verse 19, but Mary. Everyone was amazed and worshipping, but Mary. The contrast is purposeful. I have heard it said before, using the word "but" negates everything you said before it. Fruitcake is a great Christmas present, but it tastes terrible. The 49ers look like a great team, but they are 4-10. We thought it was a great idea to do six services today, but I am already tired. See what the "but" does?

Everyone wondered. All were amazed. But Mary. Treasured kind of feels like it is softening the blow, but it just means preserved or kept. Used elsewhere for keeping wine until a later date to drink or to keep someone in prison. Treasured implies a motherly affection which may be true, but a better word is kept for later. Preserved for later usage. It's not like she treasured this like a baby book, but Mary kept these things. The implication becomes clearer when it says she pondered these things in her heart. Everyone was amazed, but Mary. But Mary kept these things. But Mary pondered these things.

Everyone else has certainty and unfettered worship, but Mary. Everyone else is amazed and glorifying God, but Mary. Mary keeps and she ponders. I told you I have a gift for you today. A gift that will shake you and then grow you. The gift of Jesus and the gift of Mary. In the simplest of terms, the gift is confusion. It's the new puzzle being unwrapped and dumped on your feet. While everyone else is marveling at the completed picture on the box, you are just looking at all the pieces on the floor unsure of what it will actually look like. Mary is smack dab in the middle of a confusion sandwich. The shepherds and onlookers are marveling and wondering and worshipping, but Mary. Mary is stuck in the middle of the confusion sandwich, so she keeps it and ponders it.

Some of you in this room can totally understand. You are sandwiched by people of faith or by people whose lives seem completely orderly and in-line. They seem to pray prayers and then God quickly answers. They don't ever suffer from doubt or theological concerns. Life never burns them, and it always seems like God is good and active in their lives, but you. But you don't feel the same or see the same. But you have your moments.

I saw this video last week and it reminded me how Christmas can be a delight and a difficulty. How one big change can severely change the impact of Christmas for some.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v= Bly0iAOB6w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bly0iAOB6w)

For some people, it's as simple as that. You lost somebody, literally or a broken or severed relationship has left you with an empty seat at the Christmas table, and that feels like a *but you* moment. Everyone else is singing carols, opening presents and decorating the tree, but you. But you feel worn out. But you feel alone. If you have ever felt that, you have received the gift of Mary. And Mary continues to receive this gift. In this same chapter, some 12 years later, Jesus goes with his family to the temple and this famous scene happens.

Luke 2:41-51

The same pattern emerges. Did you hear it? The same confusion sandwich. Jesus is basically doing graduate level theology with the experts in the temple. Did you hear the key phrase again, they were amazed. People all around Mary are astonished with her boy, but Mary. Mary is astonished that her son would treat her like this, but Mary doesn't understand why he is doing and saying these things. Then it says again, Mary treasured these things. Same root word. She kept them. It doesn't mean she understood it. Everyone else is loving it. Everyone else is impressed, but Mary. She doesn't understand. She is confused, but she holds on to it.

This will happen again two more times. One when Jesus is calling his disciples, it says once again that people are awed and impressed with Jesus, but Mary. At this point in all of the

synoptic Gospels, Mary and her other sons try to come and collect Jesus in order to take him away. John puts some color commentary on this, they didn't believe in Jesus. They think he has gone a bit crazy. They think he has a bit of a messiah complex, so they come to take him away. Jesus says, "My family are the ones who do the will of God." Can you imagine Mary making the difficult decision to finally confront Jesus and maybe embarrass him in front of his tax collector and prostitute friends only to be publicly rebuffed? The final moment of confusion? At the cross, as Jesus dies, a Roman centurion proclaims, "Surely, this was the Son of God." Then the camera zooms over to Mary and a few other women without a single comment on their belief or resilience. It is likely they were sobbing and utterly broken.

Everyone has a son they can lead and teach, but Mary. Everyone has a son who grows up and does a normal job and doesn't make all of the people angry in town, but Mary. Everyone has a son that leads a quiet life and definitely doesn't get executed by the state, but Mary. The majority of her life were "but Mary" moments. Moments of confusion and loss. Moments of feeling abandoned and adrift. Mary receives this gift on her first Christmas and keeps reopening it many times over the next three decades.

Before I tell you what to do with this gift, let me tell you why it is a gift. About 1,000 years ago, an unknown poet wrote a poem called Beowulf. This is known by almost every child growing up because it is likely the oldest existing English language poem. In case you forgot, the premise is simple. A monster named Grendel is attacking a local village. Grendel, the monster, cannot be beaten until one day Beowulf and his crew attack and kill Grendel and then also his mother. Beowulf is a hero for this victory and becomes a king. Later in life, he must fight another monster, a dragon, which he kills, but he suffers a mortal injury that ultimately kills him too. It's a powerful poem because it is so simple and visceral. Life is about killing the monsters. Life is short and death comes for all of us. Because this poem is so old and because it is so simple, people have studied and written about it thousands of times, and everyone has an interpretation. Whole books have been dedicated to Grendel and what he represents. Little time was given to physically describing Grendel so people make their guesses. He was candy apple red Grendel. He was forest green Grendel. He was

banana Grendel. The amount of ink spilled on Beowulf and the amount of minutiae it explored was unbelievable.

So much so that J.R.R Tolkien wrote an essay called, *Beowulf: The Monster and The Critics*. At the heart of this work, Tolkien argued that the power of the poem had been lost under the weight of the scholarship discussing it. It had ceased being a living poem or a vibrant story and instead had become a literary corpse to be dissected and catalogued for scholarly artifacts.

For Mary, I am guessing her faith had been similarly compromised. Her Jewish heritage was rote and ritualized. The very design of the calendar year could inspire but also anesthetize. You have feasts, you have sacrifices and you have synagogue, then you do it again. You do Yom Kippur to celebrate atonement. You do Passover to celebrate God's exodus. You do Festival of Booths to remember God's provision in the desert, then you do it again. You do a sin offering and a guilt offering. You do a peace offering, then you do it again. You know what to expect and when to expect it. The rhythm and nature of religion can make it all seem quite knowable and systematized.

Then God sends Mary a gift. A gift that will make you question God because everyone thought you were holy Mary and now they think you are promiscuous Mary. A gift that won't quite make sense because while there are angels and prophecies, your baby boy is attended by lowly shepherds and you give birth in a stinking stable. A gift that will get lost in the temple for three days when he is still a boy even though he thinks he is a man. He will know far more about God than you ever will. A gift that will teach in strange and amazing ways. A gift that will make you wonder if your miracle child has gone crazy. And finally, a gift that will be murdered by the Roman state and labeled a failed heretic by the religious professionals.

All of those were gifts? They were discombobulating gifts. Moments where Mary thought it would go one way and it went completely the other. Mary who had grown up to know what to expect and how to live and the theological calendar of the year. Now, she is following a

God who zigs when she thought he would zag. She is following a God who occasionally gifts us with confusion not so we can wallow in it but so we can grow from it.

Richard Rohr famously said, “Our last experience of God is often the biggest obstacle to our next experience of God.” Once we decide how God speaks to us, and where he speaks to us, and what he speaks to us, the more entrenched and closed off we get, the less likely we are to have any new experiences with God.

So God gives these gifts. The question now becomes, “So what do we do?” We follow Mary. She treasures it and ponders it. She treasures it and ponders it. She treasures it and ponders it, and about the moment she figures it out, she is gifted with a new curveball.

For some of you this Christmas season, this might be something as simple yet tangible as a shrinking bank account. You lost your job or several unexpected expenses cropped up and you are finding yourself in a place you have never been. You find yourself unable to decide what to say. For some of you, a child is sick or wayward and you feel utterly helpless. You are finally aware that control is a myth, and you are ready to admit you don’t know what will happen next or what to do next. For some of you, life isn’t turning out the way you thought it would, and you aren’t sure which way to turn or where to go next.

In all of those instances, I want you to treasure and ponder. I want you to know this, that just as often as you have experienced those confusion sandwiches, those moments where everyone is doing well, but you, I want you to also know there is an opportunity here. An opportunity to turn the tables and flip the script and say, “But God.” Romans 6:23 says the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life. Saying “but God” negates the things that came before. Your finances are dwindling and you don’t know what to do or say, “but God.” Your child is sick or wayward and you have no control, “but God.” Your life is turned upside down and you aren’t sure of the next step, “but God.”

God offers confusion so he can offer unseen solutions. God allows roadblocks so he can offer unmatched growth. God offers a fork in the road so you can take the more joyous road less traveled.

I don't know what gifts you have opened up this Christmas season, but I want you to know God has not forgotten you, he is not surprised and he is still on his throne. I want you to know there is much more to this gift than you can see at this moment. There are some "but you" moments that will be followed by some "but God" moments.

One of the coolest parts of Saturnalia is that for a few days of the festival everyone was supposed to ditch their regular garb that connoted status and wealth and was to wear simple clothes. The point was to blur the lines between slaves, freedmen and the patrician class. Beyond that, it was encouraged for there to be a role reversal in which the masters would serve the slaves and upend the social strata. You think lights and carols and trees sounds familiar, how about a beloved son who exchanges wealth for poverty. For a master who comes to serve the lowly. For a moment where the lines are blurred between slave and free so all humanity knows their worth. When Jesus came, he came to change the world. He will occasionally confuse and surprise you in that process. Are you willing to open that gift this Christmas season?