



Christmas Eve, December 24, 2014
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What do you want for Christmas, Jesus?
My World!
John 3:16-17

How many here are Christmas Eve present-openers? How many are Christmas morning present-openers? Whichever the case, within the next few hours, all mysteries will be revealed. The wrapping will be piled high on the floor and everyone will be fingering their new favorite gift.

But have any of you ever opened a present only to discover that it was broken? If I was your gift-giver, you might have... on purpose. When I was a young minister in Bakersfield, California, our church staff had a white elephant Christmas party. You know what a white elephant is, right? An ugly, worthless, gift that you would never use...so you re-gift it to someone else... Well, this is what I got for Christmas in 1982: a glass ballerina Christmas ornament. Remember, I was a young single guy who was lucky if I propped up a Charlie Brown tree against the wall decorated with soda cans and colored golf balls. What was I going to do with a glass ballerina Christmas ornament?

You know what I did. The next year, I put her right back into the staff party gift pool. Only thing is... along the way, I managed to snap off one of her arms. So I just tossed the arm into a box along with the rest of the ballerina, wrapped her back up and re-gifted her. And thus began a tradition. For years, that ballerina kept reappearing at the staff Christmas party with more and more parts broken off.

Finally, I moved away from Bakersfield, and I thought I had escaped the curse of the ballerina... until my first Christmas here, I received a box from friends in Bakersfield. Guess what? The ballerina. One arm and two legs snapped off... all of the parts wrapped up together in a pile of glass shards. I gave up. I just hung it up on the tree and kept hanging it up until it finally disintegrated. It wasn't my favorite Christmas gift!

Over the last few Sundays, we've been asking the same question of some of the first Christmas characters: What do you want for Christmas? Joseph wanted a quiet divorce. Herod wanted to hold onto his power. Mary wanted her reputation back. But there is one person in the Christmas epic of whom we have not yet asked this question. And He is the central player in the story. So this evening, we ask, "What do YOU want for Christmas, Jesus?"

Of course, as a baby, he couldn't answer that question. But years later, Jesus made clear why he came to earth in the first place. We find it in what is probably the most famous Bible verse in the New Testament: John 3:16. This might seem like an odd Christmas Eve reading, but listen carefully and see if you can answer the question, "What do you want for Christmas, Jesus?"

¹⁶“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. ¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

So what is the answer to our question? According to this familiar passage, what did Jesus want for Christmas? The world! "God so loved the world..." When John writes those words, he's not talking about the planet. He's talking about you, and you, and you. This is Jesus' shorthand way of saying, "God loved the human beings on this globe so much that he sent his very own son to earth."

That's what we believe all this Christmas stuff is about. Not Santa and reindeer and elves and egg nog. Christmas is the reminder that God, the Son, left heaven and came to earth as a human baby... God incognito.

But let me ask this. What was the state of that world? When Jesus showed up in a manger 2000 years ago, how was the world doing? Were people treating each other kindly? Were governments ruling justly? Were folks living in a way that made God happy? Not hardly. The world was in horrible shape. In fact, it was very broken. And we get a hint of that in our text, don't we?

¹⁷For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

You don't save something that is in good shape. You save something that is in trouble. You save something that is broken and helpless! In God's opinion, the world was broken and needed saving.

How many of you will have toddlers among those in your family who are opening presents? I came across a list of toddler gift rules that might be worth remembering. Here they are:

If I like it... it's mine.

If it's in my hand... it's mine.

If I can take it from you... it's mine.

If I had it little while ago... it's mine.

If I saw it first... it's mine.

If you are playing with it and you put it down... it automatically becomes mine. (and finally...)

If it's broken... it's yours.

Does that sound about right? Mine, mine, mine, mine, mine... unless it's broken and then, it's yours! It's like my lousy ballerina ornament. Nobody wants broken things for Christmas... except for one person. Christmas is the moment in history when God looked down upon his world—the world he loved—and said, "It's broken and it's mine. So I am going to fix it." And he sent his one and only Son to earth to do just that. What did Jesus want for Christmas? He wanted his broken world back so that he could fix it. "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son..."

How many of you noticed the winner of the 2014 Time "Person of the Year" award? It went to the E bola fighters—the health care workers—who traveled to West Africa to fight one of the most frightening diseases in our lifetime.

We may celebrate them as heroes now, but do you remember the response when they first returned to the states? The doctor who had contracted E bola? The nurse who had been exposed but was allowed to fly on an airplane anyhow? I'll admit, my first thoughts were not very charitable. "How foolish can they be? Don't they know how dangerous it is? How can we just let them back and put our citizens at risk? They could bring the epidemic here... to our side of the ocean. How foolish can they be?"

Any of you have these thoughts? "Shut down the flights! Isolate the disease. E bola is their issue. Do what we can within reason, but don't put our nation at risk. If they are foolish enough to get themselves infected that's too bad, but they knew the risks."

But as I thought and prayed more about this, I grew ashamed of myself. I discovered that many of these doctors were Christians serving in obedience to Jesus. Of course they knew how dangerous it was. Of course they knew they were putting their lives on the line. But they looked across the ocean toward West Africa and said, "It is broken and it is mine. It is mine to do something about. These are my fellow human beings. I am called to love them. If no one steps up, their continent will be ravaged. So I will go, whatever the risk—even if it means death, I will go. It is broken, and it is mine."

Who does that sound like? Isn't that what God did that first Christmas? Every health care worker who took that risk was simply following in the footsteps of Jesus, who looked across the ocean of time and space upon a broken world and said, "That's mine. It is broken and it is mine, and I will save it even if it costs me my life."

Tell me, is our world today is any less broken than it was 2,000 years ago? When gunmen storm a school in Pakistan and open fire, leaving more than 130 dead, mostly children? When barbarians kidnap girls from a Christian school in Nigeria and sell them into slavery? Or in our own country where racial tensions lead to

violent protests? Every day we open the paper and read further evidence of the brokenness of our world.

And what about here... what about Gig Harbor? No gunmen or kidnapers or Ebola here. The rest of the world might be broken but not us, right? You know that's not true. What have you seen recently that reminded you of the brokenness in our safe little Harbor?

Last week, Cyndi and I joined 30 other Chapel Hill folks caroling at the women's prison. We sang 12 Christmas carols seven different times throughout that institution. My throat was shot but my heart was touched. I looked out and saw young women the age of my daughter—and other women the age of my mother—and I thought, "What is your story? What in the world happened in your life that put you here?"

As I watched them do hand motions to Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer and sing Silent Night, my heart ached for the brokenness in their lives that landed them in this place. At one point, we were escorted to Maximum Security and just as we arrived, the inmates were ordered into their cells for lockdown. So we stood there, singing to closed, locked cell doors. I wasn't sure they would even be able to hear us, but as we sang, we heard their voices coming through the slots in their cell doors like angels and we could see their faces as they peered eagerly through the windows. They were so grateful. And I was so moved.

Their brokenness was obvious to see; ours is not so obvious. But of the 4,000 folks here tonight, I wonder how many will return home to a family gathering that includes tension or bitterness or unforgiveness? We may light candles and sing carols together, but the truth is most of us struggle with broken relationships right in our own families. Perhaps even with the person who sleeps next to us every night. The truth is, there is plenty of brokenness to go around. And those who choose to live in denial—who pretend that everything is fine when they know perfectly well it is not—well it's kind of like a ballerina ornament with two snapped-off legs... everyone can see it is broken even as they keep passing it off from person to person.

The London Times once ran a headline in its paper that asked, "What's wrong with the world today?" An English writer named GK Chesterton sent this response to the editor: "Dear Sir, I am. Yours [truly], GK Chesterton." "I am what is wrong with the world." It takes humility to admit that each of us—myself included—is part of what is wrong with the world.

So what do we do? Tomorrow will be the opening of a movie based on one of the most compelling books I have read recently: *Unbroken!* It is the story of how Louis Zamperini survived 45 days on a life raft and then two years of torture in a Japanese POW camp in World War II. Unbroken... except the title isn't accurate.

Louis wasn't unbroken. He outlasted his torturers, but for years after the war, he suffered from trauma and bitterness resulting from that ordeal.

Unfortunately, the movie leaves out the best part of the book. Four years after his return home, Louis went to a Billy Graham crusade, gave his life to Christ and experienced a total transformation. Not only was he healed spiritually and emotionally, he was inspired in 1950 to travel to Japan. He found the prison where his abusive jailer was being held as a war criminal and he forgave him, face to face.

The best and real story behind this movie is that Jesus took a man who had been broken and put him back together. The best and real story behind Christmas is that God sees you in your brokenness—whatever it might be—and he still loves you. Tonight, Jesus looks upon you and says, "You are mine! I see the parts that are broken, but I love broken people. They are my specialty. And I would love to put you back together."

In a moment, you can light a candle and sing Silent Night as you do every year... or you could light a candle, sing Silent Night, and offer up this prayer to Jesus: "I admit that I am broken. I cannot fix these things in my life. Please, Jesus, will you? I offer myself to you broken parts and all. Please, will you take me?" And he will.