

Santa and Jesus
The present: A Box, Paper, and Ribbon
Gifts Unwrapped

INSIDE: AGIFT

Nestles between tissue paper ... protected ... safe
Surrounded – Cornered by 4 sides, A top
A bottom ... *Necessary*

SANTA COMES

A beautiful Gift Arrives – “Packaged”
It waits for Christmas Day
The Time is Not Yet

Inside ... “It” waits
Wrapped between Tissue, Paper and Ribbon
Restricted in Shades of Darkness: Secure
The Time is “Not Yet”

INSIDE: A GIFT

God comes – Emmanuel – Jesus
Protected ... Safe ... Surrounded
Cornered by 4 sides; A top – A bottom ... *Necessary*
Shakinna Glory – Arrived “Packaged”
Wrapped in “Rough Burlap Cloth” unnoticed and Disguised
He Wiggled and Itched ... Divine Urges Restricted
The Time is Not Yet
Frustrated Power, Alone, Ignored ... and Shamed
He tested the lid and Out of Darkness came light

INSIDE: A GIFT

We are wrapped

Protected ... Safe ... Surrounded
Cornered by 4 sides; A top, A Bottom ... *Necessary*
Perfectly Formed Beauty
Slowly Becoming “Packaged”
Tissue paper, Burlap, even much worse
Cold Hard Slivers of Stainless Steel Magnetically Attached
Piece by piece ... we resist and accommodate

Boxed, Papered, Ribboned we wait ...
With Fear as our Scrooge

“Packaging” becoming like a concrete vault.
Encased by discarded ancient timber and nial.
We squirm and coil ... Longing ... Longing to be released.

Twisting, Turning ... The Darkness becomes lonely ... and ... Familiar
Resisting urges to “Punch” the lid ...
“Please Open” are the words through
fainted cry and Wetted tear

You Adjust

Silent ... Unnoticed
You “test” the lid _ Secure, Tight
Designed for Security, That Lid becomes and Obstacle
Trapped in *confined loneliness*
You recognize something different
Is It Time, Yet?

***The Life of God, in YOUR LIFE “Packaged”
But The Time is Here***

Being Unwrapped ... Always
No Matter How Remote ... How Sealed and Encased
The Time is NOW! It's Christmas

Test the Lid, Move it! I will help you.
You Push ... Ribbon, Paper and lid Falling
Light appears!
I see you ... You are not alone.
Wrappings loosen, ribbon untied
The **Experience of Relationship** removing darkness

***Santa .. Jesus and You – But “Look Around”
Gifts Unwrapped***

By Curtis Miller

***Come , thou long expected Jesus
Born to set the cornered free
From our fears and sins release us
Let us find ourselves in thee
You're my strength and consolation
Hope of all the earth you are
Dear desire of every nation
Joy of every longing heart.***

***Born you people to deliver
Born a child and yet God's gift***

*Born to live in us forever
Now your gracious love does sing
By your own eternal spirit
Live in all our heart alone
By your all sufficient love
Raise us to your glorious light.*

The Light of Love

Mother Teresa once said that there is a great hunger
for food in Calcutta where she worked among the poorest of the poor.
She from her travels realized first hand that there is a great grey plague of poverty
hovering over the world. And for many people this makes life a very dark place.
But, Mother Teresa said, in America there is even a greater poverty,
a deeper hunger and that is the hunger for love.
In North America we are so rich, we eat so much, we do so much,
we own so much, we spend so much; yet we starve for love.
How great is that darkness when even the light within us is dark, Jesus said in Mt 6:24.
What a loneliness, what an emptiness, what a grief and unhappiness
to be unloved or little loved or unlovable.

Jesus said: The greatest commandment, the commandment that sums up all others is this:
Love God above all and love your neighbor as yourself.
That sums up the whole purpose of life – to love.
That sums up the way we find fulfillment and meaning in life – to love.
That is how we find the gift of ourselves and have the courage to unwrap it – love.

Today is the fourth Sunday of advent. Christmas, the feast of love, is so close.
And so on this Sunday we light the pink candle of love.
The prayer candle for love.
O how we wish love would wash over us, over our spouse, our children,
our grand children, our church.
O how we wish WE could love with a perfect love.
O how we wish the children in the streets, the youth in their gangs,
the seniors in their convalescent homes, the couples in divorce court, and
the teens in our abortion clinics,
O how we wish they would find love, would experience love.
O how we wish the fighters in Iraq and the suicide bombers in Palestine, and
dealers in sex in Asia and drugs in S America could find love.

O God, O Holy Spirit help us we pray.

Today I was going to tell you about the love in the life of
Abraham and Sarah our faith parents.

These old folks who inspired us during these advent weeks.
They lived by faith alone, they were hoppers – people of hope.
Bible scholars tell us that where ever faith meets hope, love is born.

Where faith meets hope, love is born.

And so I eagerly searched for a love we could see and imitate and
be inspired by in the life of Abraham and Sarah.

And there are flickers of love in their story.

There is the love for a beautiful young woman in the heart of young Abraham.

There is the love of jealousy when other men looked at Sarah.

There is the love for family cousins, a son, and even strangers. And

there was that amazing story of love for God, when Abraham and Sarah were
even willing to sacrifice their loved son Isaac to prove their love for God.

Remember how Abraham tied up his son on the altar, and
raised the knife ready to slay him.

Right at the top of Abraham's reach God came down and stopped Abraham.

Stop. Stop Abraham. Now I know that you love me.

But you know the word God used to define this love Abraham showed. Gen 22:12

It was the word fear. Now I know that you fear me, God said.

This was not the love I was looking for.

This was not the love I was hungering for.

This was not the love young women who've had abortions are longing for.

Actions done out of fear.

And so today I need to tell you about a more perfect love and more
sacred love than Abraham and Sarah knew.

A love born not out of fear but out of love itself.

A love born deep in heart of God.

In April 1984, Anne Lamott who was living in San Francisco at the time,
took her fourth urine sample to the lab. It came back positive.

Anne writes in her book *Traveling Mercies*,

"I did not have the money or the wherewithal to have a baby.

The father was someone I had just met, who was married, and
no one I wanted a real life or baby with.

So one evening my friend took me in for an abortion, and

I was sadder than I'd been since my father died.

When I got home I went upstairs to my loft with a pint of Bushmills (Cheap whisky),
and some of the codeine a nurse gave me for pain. I drank until nearly dawn.

The next night I did it again, and the next night, although the pills by then were gone.

I didn't go out the whole week.

I stayed home, and smoked dope and got drunk, and tried to write a little, and
went for slow walks along the march.

On the seventh night; though very drunk and just about to take a sleeping pill,

I discovered that I was bleeding heavily. It did not stop over the next hour.
I was going through a pad every 15 minutes, and I thought I should call the doctor,
but I was so disgusted [with myself] that I had gotten drunk
that I just couldn't wake someone up and ask for help.
I kept on changing Kotex, and got very sober very quickly.
Several hours later, the blood stopped flowing, and I got into bed,
shaky and sad and too wild to have another drink or take a sleeping pill.
I had a cigarette and turned off the light.

After a while, as I lay there in the dark,
I became aware of someone with me, someone hunkering down in the corner, and
I just assumed it was my father, whose presence I had felt over the years when
I was frightened and alone.

The feeling of someone with me was so strong that I actually turned on the
light for a moment to make sure no one was there – of course, there wasn't.
But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus.
I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

I was appalled.

I thought about my life and my brilliant hilarious progressive friends.
I thought about what everyone would think of me if I became a Christian, and
it seemed an utterly impossible thing that simply could not be allowed to happen.
I turned to the wall and said out loud, "I would rather die."
[I would rather die than become a Christian]

I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my sleeping loft,
Just sitting there watching me with patience and love.
I squinted my eyes shut, but that didn't help because that's
not what I was seeing him with.

Finally I fell asleep, and in the morning, he was gone.

This experience spooked me badly, but
I thought it was just an apparition, born out of fear and self loathing and
booze and loss of blood.
But from that moment on everywhere I went,
I had the feeling that a little cat was following me,
wanting me to reach down and pick it up,
wanting me to open the door and let it in.
But I knew what would happen: you let a cat in one time,
give it a little milk, and then it stays forever.
So I tried to keep one step ahead of it,
slamming my houseboat door when I entered or left.

One week later, I went to church.
I was so hungover that I couldn't stand for the songs, and

this time I stayed for the sermon, which I just thought was so ridiculous, like someone trying to convince me of the existence of extraterrestrials, but the last song [of the service] was so deep and raw and pure that I could not escape.

It was as if the people were singing in between the notes, weeping and joyful at the same time, and I felt like their voices or something was rocking me in its bosom, holding me like a scared kid, and I opened up to that feeling – and it washed over me.

I began to cry [I couldn't stop] and had to leave before the benediction. I raced home and felt the little cat running along at my heels, and I walked down a dock past dozens of potted flowers, under a sky as blue as one of God's own dreams, and I opened the door to my houseboat, and I stood there a minute, and then I hung my head and said, "I quit. I give up" I took a long deep breath and said out loud, "All right. You can come in."

You can come in

So this was my beautiful moment of conversion. Anne wrote. The moment that that perfect sacred love was born in the heart a sad, lonely, hungry, love starved woman living in deep darkness. And suddenly a light shone in her darkness, the light of love. God's love. God's unconditional searching love. She experienced God's embrace.

For God so loved the world, people like Anne, people like you and me, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him whoever opens the door to him shall not die in their darkness but live in eternal glorious light.

But you know that is not the end of the story. That is only the half of it. That is only the half of love's power and grace. Anne Lamott continues "if I were to give a slide show of the next ten years of my life, it would begin on the day I was baptized one year after I got sober. The next slide would be of me two years later pregnant by a man I was dating and couldn't marry. In the next slide my son, Sam, is born. The next is of me nursing Sam and my best friend dying of cancer. Then Anne describes a few other meaningful slides.

But, and this is the punch line there would be thousands of slides of Sam and me at St Andrews, where I first experienced God's love. I think we have missed church ten times in twelve years. Hundreds of early slides would be of Sam would be snuggled in people's arms.

In latter ones you'd see Sam trying to wiggle free of hugs.
There would be different pastors along the way, none exactly right for us until
Veronica an African America woman would lead us.
She has huge arms to embrace us.
Sometimes she would sing to us from the pulpit and tell us stories.
She told us this story the other Sunday about her best friend.

One day when her friend was about seven years old, she got lost.
The little girl ran up and down the streets of the big town where they lived, but
she couldn't find a single land mark. She was very frightened.
Finally a policeman stopped to help.
He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around
until she finally saw her church.
She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly,
"You can let me out now. This is my church, and
I can always find my way home from here."

And that is why, says Anne Lamot, I have stayed so close to mine –
because no matter how bad I feel, how lost or lonely or frightened, when
I experience the love for the people at my church,
Their actions of love and their embrace,
I can always find my way home to arms of love.

Jesus said:

Love God above all and love your neighbor as yourself.
That's when the light of love, the light of Christmas may be born in us.

For God so loved the unloved and the little love and the unlovable that
he gave his one and only Son, that whoever opens the door for him
shall not die in darkness but live in the eternal glorious light of love itself.

Please, please open the door of your house, your heart and
let him in this Christmas and love each other with a perfect love,
A Christ Like love.

Let us leave this place by saying 1 Corinthians 13 in unison

May the searching, catlike, pursuing love of God,
And the sacrificial, waiting patient love of Jesus
And the inspiring embracing love of the Holy Spirit and the church
Wash-sh over you and set you free. AMEN?

