

Unexpected Gift

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2019
Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Matthew 1:18-25

If you are a procrastinator, you know what time it is: The last minute. The last-minute for buying Christmas presents. Fortunately, *Fast Company* magazine (February 2019) has a list of gifts for you to consider. All are unique, unforgettable and...frankly, quite weird. Put one of these under the Christmas tree, and your generosity will *never* be forgotten. Guaranteed.

First, a pair of air-conditioned shoes. Made by a Japanese company called Hydro-Tech, these \$78 shoes have filters and micro fans built right into them. Give them to a person who wants to be cool. Literally.

For an additional \$20, you can buy someone an OstrichPillow. This napping pillow wraps completely around a person's head and can help them get some sleep on a couch or even at a desk. The company's motto: "Dreams Happen Anywhere."

If your budget is a bit tighter, \$15 will get you a toilet nightlight, which will provide much-needed guidance in the dark of night. Or maybe there is a man in your life who would be interested in a clip-on man bun. Available for only \$10, this hair accessory enables a businessman to be conservative all day and then turn into a hipster at night!

And for a cat-loving friend or family member, \$25 will buy the weirdest gift of all: A cat brush shaped like a tongue. Yes, that's right: This brush is held in *your* mouth, and you use it to bond with your kitty by pretending to lick it like a mother cat. In this way, so the tag line goes, you are "communicating in their love language." Using the Licki Brush is said to be an "oddly meditative practice," soothing for both owner and cat. For most people, a Licki Brush would be a *truly* unexpected gift.

Odd, but expected, gifts. So, what were the people of Israel expecting during the rule of Emperor Augustus of Rome? They had no Christmas to celebrate, so they were not looking for anyone to surprise them with a Licki Brush or an Ostrich Pillow. But the people had hopes and dreams in their time of oppression, and some of these expectations were based on their Hebrew Scriptures. What they get is a girl who's pregnant. This is a really odd sign or gift.

The prophet Isaiah explained that "*the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel*" (Isaiah 7:14). Such a prophecy was thrilling, because the name Immanuel means "God is with us," and the people of Israel longed for God's presence and power. In the face of threats from foreign rulers, Isaiah predicted that God would free them from oppression and bring peace to their land. Perhaps the gift was a *girl with child*, who would bear the promised child – yet another gift – a child named Immanuel, a sign of God's presence and power.

The people also knew Psalm 80, a prayer for the restoration of Israel. "*Stir up your might, and come to save us!*" says this desperate appeal to God. "*Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!*" (vv. 2-3). The people of Israel heard their enemies laughing at them, and they sensed that their neighbors were looking down on them, so they cried to God, "*Let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself*" (v. 17). Perhaps the gift was a mighty messenger, God's right-hand man.

Both were expected gifts, desirable and deeply appreciated. Both Immanuel and the mighty messenger were part of the expectations of God's people. But the gospel of Matthew tells us that "the birth of Jesus the Messiah" took place in a way that no one saw coming (v. 18). Jesus, himself, was an unexpected gift and so were the circumstances surrounding his birth.

An unexpected gift. "*When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit*" (v. 18). Pregnant by the Holy Spirit — that's *unexpected!* In the original Hebrew of the Old Testament, Isaiah speaks of a "young woman," not necessarily a virgin, and there is no mention of the Holy Spirit.

"Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly" (v. 19). Joseph planned to separate from her discretely — that's *unexpected!* He could have shamed her in public and even had her stoned to death.

"But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins'" (vv. 20-21). An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream — that's *unexpected!* And the angel gave him the name Jesus, which means "Savior" — that's also *unexpected!* Jesus came to save us from our sins.

Of course, Matthew fulfills the expectations of Israel when he says, “*All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us’*” (vv. 22-23). Jesus may be an unexpected gift, but he is not weird at all. Instead, he shows that God is truly with us, and that his mission is to save us from our sins.

In the gospel of Luke, we hear some additional surprising news: When the shepherds of Bethlehem were watching their flock at night, “*an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them*” (2:9). The appearance of an angel to a bunch of laborers in a field — that’s *unexpected!* Then the angel said to them, “*To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord*” (v. 11). The child is not only a Savior, but the Messiah and the Lord — that’s *unexpected!*

And finally, said the angel, “*you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger*” (v. 12). The Savior, Messiah and Lord is born not in a luxurious palace, but in a rustic barn — that’s *unexpected!* Just about everything about Jesus is unexpected. He may be the most surprising gift of all time, but he is also the most transformative.

So how can we respond to such a gift? A short thank-you note may be appropriate for a pair of air-conditioned shoes or a clip-on man bun; but giving thanks for the gift of Jesus takes a bit more thought. This Christmas, our challenge is to accept Jesus into the deepest parts of ourselves as a surprising and transformative gift.

The gift of Jesus as *Immanuel* means that God is with us in every time and place and situation. Jesus comes to us as nothing less than the presence and power of God in human form. He is with us when our friends desert us. When our relationships fall apart. When our jobs are unsatisfying, unstable or unexpectedly taken from us. In these traumatic experiences, Jesus is Immanuel, present with us in surprising and life-giving ways.

The gift of Jesus as *Savior* means that God is with us to help us, save us and transform us. Jesus is not simply standing by our side, as a supportive friend would be. No, he comes in decisive action. The name Jesus literally means “God helps” or “God saves,” which tells us that he has a particular purpose in this world. When we are feeling overwhelmed, Jesus helps. When we are overcome by sin, Jesus forgives. When we feel lost or defeated or powerless, Jesus saves.

Together, these actions are transformative. We are new creations in Christ. The old has passed away. Everything is now new. A re-invention has taken place. All this is possible because Jesus is Lord.

The gift of Jesus as *Messiah and Lord* means that Jesus is leading you as your Lord and master. We are sometimes reluctant to accept this present, because we like to stand up on our own as independent people and say to the people around us, “You’re not the boss of me!” But the truth is that we all need guidance as we make our way in the world.

To accept Jesus as Messiah and Lord is to fall in line when Jesus says, “*Follow me*” (4:19). It is to make a serious effort to “*love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you*” (5:44). It is to accept the truth of Jesus’ words, “*You cannot serve God and wealth*” (6:24), and to structure our lives so that we are storing up treasures in heaven, instead of on earth.

By this point in the month of December, it may be too late to buy the perfect Christmas present for a friend or family member. But it is never too late to accept the unexpected gift that God is offering you: the gift of Jesus as Immanuel, Savior, Messiah and Lord. All you need to do is accept it and allow Jesus to go to work in your life, in surprising and transformative ways.

A Prayer by Kathleen Norris

O God, who spoke all creation into being: When you created human flesh, we betrayed you by our disobedience. When you led us out of slavery in Egypt, we doubted and defied you. Yet you chose to come among us through your Son, Jesus Christ, who suffered death on our behalf, putting an end to the power of sin and death. For this great gift of your steadfast hope, we give you thanks. Help us, O Lord, to keep vigil this night. Help us to watch for the signs of your coming into our midst, not in the splendid palaces of power, but in hearts humbled by need. Help us to believe that the darkness of cruelty and sin will never overcome the light, and the mercy, of Christ. Help us to endure, knowing that the evil and injustice of this world cannot prevail against your Word. We ask this in the name of your Word made flesh, our Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Source: Woodruff, Jay. “The Un-Recommendder.” *Fast Company*. February 2019, 96.