



## **What God Wants for Christmas**

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***Third Sunday in Advent  
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**Is. 40, 43, 55, 58, 61 & 63  
Mt. 1 & 2 & Lk. 1 & 2**

On the Second Sunday of Advent, I was standing in the breezeway waiting for a modicum of calm to pass over the congregation before nodding at Loris and launching our angelic acolytes down the center aisle. The small hand on my watch was on the 10 and the big hand was on the 12, but I wasn't sure that my envisioned calm would come.

Worshippers were streaming into the Sanctuary willy-nilly through the side and rear doors. Several people were standing in the center aisles chatting with friends. Children were collecting colored pencils and folios from the art cart by the ushers' closet. And the din of conversation was competing with the organ.

All that is to say it was a typical Sunday morning at Eden Church, except that we were in the middle of Advent so that the chat at the back of the house was about Christmas instead of play dates. Specifically, the topic was, "What's on your Christmas list?"

I admit. I was curious. "What exactly do sixth grade boys want for Christmas?"

Stephanie would say, "This is your big chance for 'cultural education,' Arlene. Listen up!" And listen up I did. I heard quite a lot about computer games, a baseball glove, and bicycles.

"Great," I thought, a baseball glove and a bicycles; "score one for healthy diet and exercise."

Periodically the boys turned to me and said, "Is it time yet?" Meaning is it time to go down the aisle to light the candles.

"Not quite," I said. "We're waiting at least for the people in front of us to find a seat, so that we don't light their hair on fire when we go down the aisle."

"Oh, OK," one of them said to me.

Then the other turned to me and asked very politely, “Hey, what do you want for Christmas?”

I was touched. It’s been a long time since anyone other than family members have asked me what I wanted for Christmas. And, honestly, I don’t think I have ever been asked this question quite so sincerely and tenderly.

“Hey, Arlene, what do you want for Christmas?”

The question and the tone gave me pause. I wanted my response to be as sincere and meaningful as the inquiry was.

Finally, I said, “For Christmas, I would like you boys to come to church, learn your Christmas music, and sing in worship.”

For something in the range of 5 seconds both boys focused their attention on me and what I was saying, and they said in unison, “Oh!” and nodded with earnest and sincere recognition.

In those moments, which I am sure parents and grandparents and school teachers live their whole lives to experience, I sensed a deep comprehension of one of the counter-culture lessons that we are trying to teach at Eden Church.

One of the boys said to me, “Oh, OK.”

Then the other boy said to his sidekick, “Yeah, my parents said something like that yesterday when I asked them what they wanted for Christmas. Grownups are like that.”

“Score another one for the home team!” I thought to myself. “The boys’ parents and their church family are on the same page. We just might win this one over Madison Avenue, this year.”

## II

This past week, my thoughts have turned repeatedly to this Advent sidebar with our angel acolytes, and, in particular, to the question, “What do you want for Christmas?”

It’s a question that we frequently ask children and members of our immediate family, because we know that Christmas lists are a topic that engages children who are easily distracted by the excitement of the season, and because we want to give gifts that are fitting, needed, and valued by our loved ones.

Parents and teachers also use this Christmas list inquiry as a means of generating attention to language arts and good behavior during the holidays. Letter writing campaigns at school or around the dinner table come to mind.

Letters like this are frequently written and mailed to the North Pole:

Dear Santa,

My name is Jane. I'm eight years old.

I have been very good this year, except for fighting with my little sister. My parents say that I need to learn to share, and to be more patient with my sister. I think I'm doing better. I hope you do, too.

For Christmas, I would like Pokémon cards, an X-box, and a pony.

On Christmas Eve, I will leave cookies and milk for you, and carrots for your reindeer.

Sincerely,  
Jane

### III

Given all the emphasis in our society on what children want for Christmas, and all the emphasis that advertising companies place on what adults should want for Christmas, I propose that we explore—as a spiritual practice—asking not only what others want for Christmas and stretching our imaginations beyond material gifts, but that we also ask what God wants for Christmas.

What does God want for Christmas?

On first blush the question may seem impossible to answer with certitude this side of heaven. Maybe it is. Maybe it isn't.

I submit to you that God gives us plenty of Christmas clues.

Many of God's clues are expressed in the poetry of Isaiah and the Christmas stories in Matthew's and Luke's gospels.

Isaiah tells us that what God wants for Christmas is forgiveness and grace to be given and received. God wants us lambs to be gathered in one fold. God wants the weak to renew their strength (Is. 40).

God wants water in the desert (Is. 43), food without a price (Is. 55), and light in the darkness (Is. 61).

According to Isaiah, what God wants for Christmas is exiles to be liberated, forgiveness to be granted, and grieving to be replaced with joy. God wants wars to cease, and ruined cities to be rebuilt (Is. 61).

For Christmas, God wants us everyone who has enough to share our food with those who are hungry, our clothes with those who are naked, and our homes with those who are homeless (Is. 58).

Isaiah says that God wants a new heaven and a new earth for Christmas. God wants infant mortality to end, and premature adult deaths to cease. God wants every human being to have a roof over head, enough food to eat, and fruitful and meaningful work. God wants wolves to lie down with lambs, lions to eat straw like oxen, and the prophet's peaceable kingdom to prevail (Is. 65).

Luke, the evangelist, echoes Isaiah's Christmas wish list in the words of Mary's Magnificat.

Luke says that what God wants for Christmas is the world turned right side up for those whose lives have been turned upside down by poverty, oppression, and war (Lk. 1:46-55).

Luke says that God wants lowly shepherds to know that God has come to lift them up and enfold them in divine grace. Luke says that God wants heavenly angels to touch the earth and doff their wings and proclaim good news to everyone. Luke says that God wants the Simeons and Annas of the world to see and hear that the promises proclaimed before they were born have been fulfilled in their lifetimes (Lk. 2:8-40).

Matthew says that what God wants for Christmas is for the people who come from the wrong side of town, who have the wrong pedigree, and who have no birthright to material inheritance, to know that they are part of the lineage of David and Jesus of Nazareth (Mt. 1:1-17).

Matthew says that what God wants for Christmas is for earthly kings to know that the King of Kings has come, that they are not in charge, and that the Prince of Peace will prevail (Mt. 2:1-12).

Matthew says that what God wants for Christmas is for strangers and aliens to know that God is on their side, and that God is the constant companion of those who are on the run from famine, war, and infanticide (2:13-23).

#### IV

Yes, God has given us plenty of clues about what God wants for Christmas. God's Christmas list is all over the pages of the prophets and the gospels, like post-it notes on a family's refrigerator.

And for those who aren't so familiar with the passages that I've referenced, and who don't have a Bible at home or who do but don't know where it is, I'll share the insight that what God wants for Christmas is a lot like what grandparents want for Christmas.

When I was a child, I asked my Grandma Thomsen every year what she wanted for Christmas. I asked her with the thought in mind that maybe, just maybe this year she'd say something different than last year and all of the preceding years when I had asked. But she never did. Grandma's wishes were always the same. They were never anything that I (or anyone else) could buy at the store.

Grandma wanted our family to be together. She wanted everyone to get along. She wanted there to be plenty of food on the table. She wanted good health for the whole family, so that we could enjoy our blessings and the holidays that we were celebrating. Oh, yes, and she also wanted her Jell-O salad to come out of the mold without a flaw.

My Christmas wishes for each of us this year are that we may hear what God wants for Christmas, and that our very lives may be an expression of the fulfillment of these wishes, in small yet marvelous ways—like the ways that sixth grade boys can ask with great sincerity, “What do you want for Christmas?” and listen with open hearts to our very peculiar responses.

Merry Christmas, and amen.