

“Open Before Christmas”

Matthew 1:18-25

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Woodside Church

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2022

This the Big Night! There has been an insane amount of planning, preparing, purchasing and praying for this night. And now it is finally here: Eagles vs. Dallas!

Oh yeah – and it’s Jesus’ birthday too.

Speaking of the Birds, Fred and John bought season tickets to the Eagles at Lincoln Financial Field last year. They enjoyed the season but noticed the seat next to them was empty for every game. Then on the last Sunday in December they were amazed to see, for the first time, a guy sitting in the empty seat. John asked, “Where have you been all season? You missed six out of eight home games!” The man grimaced and said, “My wife bought the season ticket last summer and just gave it to me for Christmas.”

Some gifts are better if you open them *before* Christmas. But first the gift has to get to you. Just imagine how hard those people at the Post Office work to get all the cards and presents delivered in time. A couple weeks before Christmas, a postal worker named George spotted a letter addressed, “To God.” George opened the letter and read:

Dear God, I am a 93-year-old widow living on Social Security. Yesterday someone stole my purse. It had \$100 in it, which was all the money I had left from my last check and my next one will not come until the last week of December. Next week is Christmas and I invited two of my friends over for Christmas lunch. Without that money, I have nothing to buy food with. I have no family to turn to, and you are my only hope. God, can you please help me?

George was really touched. He had an idea. He put a copy of the letter up on the staff bulletin board. The letter touched the other postal workers and they all dug into their pockets and raised \$95. They immediately sent the cash to the lady in an official Post Office envelope so she could open it before Christmas. For the rest of the day, all the workers felt a warm glow thinking of the nice thing they had done.

A few days after Christmas another letter addressed to 'God' landed in the Post Office. All the workers gathered around while George read the letter.

Dear God. How can I thank you enough for what you did for me? Because of your generosity, I was able to provide a lovely lunch for my friends. I told my friends of your wonderful gift. Word spread to my church and even Pastor John is beside himself with joy. It’s truly a Christmas miracle! By the way, there was \$5 missing. I bet it was stolen by those thieves down at the Post Office.

She sure put those postal workers in a box.

Christmas is all about the boxes. We pull boxes of ornaments out of the attic. We open mailboxes for Christmas cards. We shop in Big Box stores and wait for boxes to arrive on our doorsteps. But what really counts are the boxes under the tree. Sometimes kids even love the box more than the present. As we grow, Christmas is less about presents and more about people, the time with loved ones, the memories we make.

There are a lot of things we open before Christmas...and not all of them are jolly and bright. Maybe you opened your mouth in the stress of the season and said something you regret. Maybe you opened the credit card bill, the past due notice or your final paycheck from the job that let you go. Maybe you find yourself opening too many bottles of alcohol, pills or weed to help you have your own 'Merry Little Christmas' but they are making it worse. Maybe this time of year opens the floodgate of tears. It reminds you there is an open space in your life - you're not married, you once were married, or you miss your grandparent, parent, spouse, sibling, son or daughter. Maybe all the problems in our world make it hard for you to be open to God. If He does exist, why doesn't He come down and fix the troubles in our little box?

Well tonight, friends, God has a gift for you – the greatest gift you will ever receive. And it is clearly marked: "Open Before Christmas." God invites you to enter a personal and loving relationship with Him. The Father sent us His only Son. God is with us. God came in person. My question for you on this Christmas Eve is: Will you open God's gift? Will you open your life to the 'Savior who is Christ the Lord'?

One way to do this is to **Open Your Mind to the God who Made You**. During the Christmas season, the American Atheist Society sometimes puts up a billboard of a Nativity scene with the words, "You Know It's a Myth. This Season, Celebrate Reason." The message is Atheists live by reason while people who believe in God are unreasonable, irrational and intolerant. But is it reasonable to say there is no God when you can't disprove Him? Isn't that closed-minded? Isn't that a statement of faith and intolerance? Why not celebrate faith and reason?

"If God exists," the atheist or agnostic asks, "why doesn't He show Himself?" The fact is He did. The Creator came down to be with you. The Gospel of John states,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him. The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. John 1:1-3, 10, 14

The Maker of the vast Cosmos, the Artist who paints the galaxies with His brush, visited His Creation in Jesus. He didn't want there to be any doubt. So He came in person.

My Great Aunt Elin, my Grandfather's sister, lived in Sweden. In 2010 she passed away at the age of 96. I just received an email that her son Gote passed away on

December 5th. Aunt Elin was an artist. Her paintings graced the walls of our home. As I grew up I was surrounded by the beauty that flowed from her brush. My taste in art was shaped by her work. Yet since she lived in Sweden I never met her. Then, in 1996, my family visited Aunt Elin in the little cottage that has been in our family for generations. All my life I have known her masterpieces. Now, finally, I met their maker in the land where my ancestors are buried. It was one of the very best days of my life. I couldn't help weeping. I felt I had come home.

For its whole life, the human race has grown up surrounded by the glorious work of our Creator. But on Christmas, we finally meet the Maker Himself and suddenly we have every reason in the world to believe there is a God and we have a home. In the New Year, I hope you will open your mind and join us on Sundays for a series called *Core Strengthening*. We'll dive deep into the Apostles' Creed which covers all our Core beliefs and deals with such questions as: What is God like? Who is Jesus? Why did He die? How do we live? Then in February we'll take the *Red Letter Challenge*. We'll discover ways to practice Jesus' teachings every day. Make worship a regular part of your week and you will meet your Maker. You don't have to wait until you die.

Second, to receive God's gift, **Open Your Heart to the God Who Is With You.** This month, Woodside is reaching out to refugees with our Hope for Ukraine offering. So far you've given almost \$19,000 for housing, medicines, food, education, counseling and Bibles. It will go through the Outreach Foundation to mission workers in Ukraine and the countries around it. My friend Tom Boone from Outreach sent me a report of his visit last month to the border between Poland and Ukraine. He met with Dr. Ivan Rusyn, President of the Ukrainian Evangelical Theological Seminary in the capital Kyiv. They provide 1500 hot meals a week at their campus and support villagers north of the city who live in sheds, basements and garages without power or food. Dr. Rusyn and his students also travel to the eastern Ukraine where villages are frequently bombed. In addition to humanitarian aid they bring encouragement, counseling and the Word of God.

People know that God is at work in Ukraine through the compassion of Ivan and so many other Christians. At the end of the day, we stood at the border and prayed for the people of Ukraine, for those crossing with supplies and especially for Ivan. We prayed for the war to end.

When Ivan and his students show up, bearing your gifts, the people weep and say, "*God is with us. We knew God would save us.*"

At Christmas we discover: God is always with us. Matthew says,

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). Matthew 1:22-23

God is with Mary and Joseph when they are forced to leave Nazareth, give birth in a barn and flee as refugees to Egypt. God is with the shepherds who live outdoors, in the cold,

on the margin of society. God is with the magi who are from another nation, race and religion. The greatest news in history came first to the poor and powerless, to refugees and those shunned by the rest of society.

Why? To show God wants to be with each one of us. The angel said it: “I bring you good news that will cause great joy for ***all the people***.” God wants to be with you. He does not look down on you, reject you or shun you. He is willing to enter into your darkness. Often I hear people say, “How can God love me? After what I’ve done? How can God forgive me? I can’t even forgive myself.” So many times we put God in a box. We think He is vengeful, cold and distant. Yet in Jesus, God breaks out of the box. In Jesus, God is with you. He gave up His home so you can have a home. He gave up His life so you can have life and life eternal.

That’s why tonight I invite you to **Open Your Soul to the God Who Can Save You**. Speaking of Lincoln Financial Field, Billy Joel is playing there this summer. On his daughter’s twelfth birthday she was in New York City but he was in Los Angeles. That morning he called to wish her a happy birthday, apologized for not being there, and told her to watch for a gift. That evening, his daughter answered the doorbell to find a huge, brightly wrapped box. She tore it open, and out stepped her father, fresh off the plane.¹

Just like God, Billy Joel knows presence is the best present. He also knows you can have it all and still be empty. Billy has won Male Artist of the Year, Record of the Year, Song of the Year, and Album of the Year. He’s written an astounding twenty top-40 hits, nine reached the top ten. He received numerous honorary doctorates and was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. Not bad for a high school dropout. But he’s had his struggles including alcoholism. Married four times, Billy says,

The happiest times in my life were when my relationships were going well. But I’m angry with myself. I have regrets. You don’t get hugged by the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. I want what everybody else wants: to love and to be loved.²

That’s why God came in person: to love us. God came to save us from all the destructive influences in our lives. He came to save us from all the false idols that rule our lives. God came to save us even from ourselves. On the Cross He took our place. He opened wide His arms and took upon Himself all the spiritual darkness, spiritual diseases, spiritual death that separate us from God. He did it to make your soul whole.

Do you have a lonely soul, a hungry soul, or a wounded soul? Open your mind, heart and soul and let God’s Son, the greatest Christmas gift of all, come in and save you. Tonight, don’t ignore God’s gift. Do something about it. Say, “Yes” to God: commit or recommit your life to Jesus, your Lord and Savior. Tonight take a step and join us for the Core Strengthening series, join a Growth Group in January. Tonight, hear Jesus say to you, “Fear not, for I am with you.”

¹ Max Lucado, *Next Door Savior* (W Publishing Group, 2003), p. 113.

² People in the News: “Look out, Manhattan, Joel’s on a Love Hunt” (9-27-02).

Eugene Rittman was twenty-one when the U.S. Army sent him to the frontline in the Korean War. He was assigned a position on the notorious Heartbreak Ridge near the 38th parallel. They told Gene he was taking the place of a soldier who was killed the night before. That day, November 7, 1952 they came under deadly attack. Artillery fire slammed into Gene. Shrapnel lodged in his lungs, back and close to his heart. Gene was strapped to the outside of a helicopter for the ride to the MASH unit. *The New York Times* reported that among those killed in action on Heartbreak Ridge was Pvt. Eugene Rittman. Neighbors who read the notice instantly called his parents to offer their sympathy.

Yet Gene was alive. After he was hit, as they strapped him onto the helicopter, Gene clearly heard a Voice say, “Don’t worry. You’re going to be alright. You will see your Mother.” The Voice told the truth. He survived. For the rest of his life Gene firmly believed he heard the Voice of the Holy Spirit. He deeply devoted his life to our Lord Jesus Christ – the Savior who took our place and died our death. The Lord who was pronounced dead and is alive forevermore. Eugene Rittman lived the rest of his life by one Bible verse: “Fear not for I am with you.”

He became a husband to his dear Eleanor, father, grandfather and great grandfather including his granddaughter Melissa McAnlis who is leading worship at Woodside tonight. Gene Rittman lived another 70 years. Three days ago we laid him to rest at the age of 91. Tonight, he is celebrating Jesus’ birthday with Him.

God is with you. He gave His life for you. He wants to give life to you.

Don’t wait ‘til Christmas. Open His gift tonight.