**3rd Sunday of Advent – Theme: Joy  
Unwanted Gift** Luke 1:26-56

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| **Slides** | **Sermon** |
| 1 | Unwanted Gift  How many of you participate in a “White Elephant” gift exchange? We have done this several Christmases at the Donahues’ Christmas get-togethers on Dec 26th. We always gathered on this day because it was also my father’s birthday. So we could celebrate both at the same time. Having a White Elephant exchange is fun and you always get something you don’t really want. But if you get lucky and handle it right you can usually get rid of that unwanted gift! But fair warning: If you play it as a family like the Donahues do with everyone, including the children, you have got to be sensitive to the child that gets a present they like and want. Therefore, it is best not to “steal” that present or you’ll upset the child and the whole experience! The key to success is to be sure the child gets something even better than the one they had before.  The White Elephant game highlights: what do we do when we open a gift we don’t like nor want? |
| 2 | Let’s stop here and I want you to think of a gift you got that you didn’t want. Now, on 3 everyone shout out loud what that gift was. Ok. Think of it. Now 1, 2, 3 – shout it out! What experiences have you had or seen others have when they get a gift they didn’t want? Just show 4 to 29 of this video:  https://youtu.be/G9PyW259YWY |
| 3 | We realize that this is not just a kid thing. We as adults get presents we don’t want. For example, once for Christmas Dad and kids gave the mom a new set of cookware! It was better than what she had, but that wasn’t what she wanted! Akin to husband getting his wife a dishwasher or washer & dryer for Christmas. Most of the time that doesn’t communicate the love and care the wife wants to experience. Getting an unwanted gift is something that we as adults have had to deal with for years. And for the most part we have learned to be polite, express gratitude for the thought or otherwise deferred attention to the gift and change the subject by suggesting someone else open their gift. |
| 4 | This idea of receiving an unwanted or at least a wildly unexpected gift is experienced by Mary – Mary at first wasn’t sure what to do about the angel Gabriel’s message.  She heard these words –  “Greetings favored one, the Lord is with you.”  Mary knew this already because she was righteous and of course God was with her. She trusted God’s presence and the leading of God’s spirit – like any righteous person.  So, it is no wonder she was perplexed by Gabriel’s words. Why would an angel be sent to tell her she was favored – but surely not any more than any other righteous woman? So, she wondered, “What was God up to?”  Then Mary heard from Gabriel, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” I think she had no reason to fear until now. What was she to be afraid of – any righteous person would delight God, so what’s to fear?  But now Gabriel tells her what “being favored” means in Mary’s case, “You will conceive in your womb and bear a son and you will name him Jesus.”  Mary thinking, “Well, that’s not unheard of. It wouldn’t be very long until Joseph and I would be married. And everyone would expect me to be pregnant soon thereafter. How delightful that Gabriel gave me a glimpse into how my Son would grow up to lead Israel. He would be Great, he would become king like his great ancestor, David, and he would reign over the house of Jacob.”  But Mary probably caught the odd descriptions of her son being called “Son of God” and “reigning forever.” But those are terms that could be explained. After all, any Hebrew son is technically a child of God. And the term “forever” is often used to mean a long, long time.  Then Mary began to wonder if maybe Gabriel is speaking of now and not when she and Joseph are married. So she asked a question just to be sure of what was going on.  “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”  And surprise of surprises Gabriel replies, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you, therefore the child to be born will be holy and he will be called the Son of God.” |
| 5 | And as reassurance to Mary, Gabriel tells Mary about Elizabeth conceiving at an old age when she was said to be barren! Then Gabriel says: “For nothing will be impossible with God!”  I wonder how long the silence was as Mary put all this together in her mind. What emotions did she feel – Fear? Confusion? How can she accept this? Who would believe her? And how would Joseph handle it? I think Mary felt that she would perhaps become a single parent, if she was even allowed to live! How would she explain this to her parents? to her friends? She probably wondered how it would change her life as a carpenter’s wife!  But with all these and hundreds of more questions, she leaned onto and into her righteous faith and made a gigantic leap of faith and accepted this unwanted gift from God.  “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”  Wow! I am so impressed with Mary. Some will say she was just a child being 12-14 years old and didn’t realize what she was signing up for!  But I don’t believe that. Yes, she was young, but she was a committed believer, a righteous woman, and she knew full well some of the complications this special pregnancy would bring. But what is astounding to me is that she was God’s servant and that meant doing whatever God asked or required!  What can we say about our faith? We are righteous by God’s forgiving grace in Jesus’ death and resurrection. So, how do we respond to the gifts God seeks to give us?  Are we like the bratty kids that scream and shout when God gives a gift that we don’t like – such as   * a special needs child born into our home * a failing parent that we have to care for just as we are retiring, and those retirement plans have to be put on hold * an unexpected illness that God gives to help us turn our life fully to Jesus   What kind of unwelcome gifts do you have that you’ve always seen as burdens you have to bear and therefore miss the joys that the gifts could bring to you? |
| 6 | Mary immediately left Nazareth and went to be with Elizabeth who was in seclusion. They would support each other, and Elizabeth’s gift of presence was one of the ways God confirmed God’s gift to Mary.  As we approach Christmas, I am sure we will receive gifts that we don’t want. How will we respond? Will we politely accept them and then later get rid of them? |
| 7 | Or will look to see what God is trying to teach us about the gift and/or the person who gives it. Maybe the gift reflects the brokenness in your relationship with that person. Maybe it reflects how you haven’t spent enough time with that loved one to know what is a better gift. Maybe the unwanted gift has some surprises for you that you will miss if you too quickly toss it aside.  And maybe, just perhaps, that unwanted gift is the very gift you are meant to have, and it will open the door to your relationship with others and to God. |
| 8 | Mary’s gift of Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit, was certainly a surprise and I think at first it was one she didn’t want. But because of her righteousness and firm commitment to God, she received it! And God used it not only to bless her, but God used it to bless the entire world! What joy she had being the mother of God! What joy we will have if we receive these unwanted gifts that God sends, and we let God use them to draw us closer to Him and to each other.  Prayer: O God, we thank you that Mary believed in your unusual ways and became a part of your plan to bring salvation to us and the world. May we not be too hasty to label a gift as unwanted. May we pause long enough to consider how God might be giving us a special gift like he did Mary!  Amen |