

Before and After¹
Hebrews 1:1-12
Gail Serratt, December 27, 2009

Let's rewind back a few days before Christmas, when unopened packages were still nestled underneath the Christmas tree. Go back a little further in your mind when those packages needed to be wrapped. Go back even further when these gifts had not yet been purchased or made or even conceived. Yes, I know for some of you, this entire envisioning exercise occurred in less than a 24 hour-period! Thank goodness for gift cards at 24 hour convenience stores and Slim Jim stocking stuffers...but that's not important right now.

For most of us, this 'before' Christmas time, the period the Church calls Advent, is filled with preparation and much to do. All the anticipation at the front end gains speed during Advent, drumming excitement right up to the climatic Christmas Day. Signs and wonders and stories are once again re-told, and carols sung as we got closer to Christmas. Celebrations and gatherings are held. We light candles in the darkness awaiting the arrival of the True Light and there's joy and laughter and warmth and togetherness. But that was all before Christmas and now's it after -- and there's nothing left to unwrap, to open.

Now I admit that I go through a mild depression on these days after Christmas. Perhaps it has to do with building up for the big day and then afterwards I'm depleted (physically, emotionally, and sometimes spiritually). Try as I might to not let it happen, I allow the cultural expectation of Christmas day with its gift giving and receiving to overwhelm the reason for the season. Fortunately the Church does not abandon the celebration of Christmas after only one day. Liturgically, the season of Christmas stretches for twelve days and culminates on the Feast of

¹ I am grateful to Reverend George Mason of Wilshire Baptist Church not only for borrowing his title and patterned before/after structure, but also for his message on the unchanging dependability and nature of God from his sermon delivered on this text on December 25, 2005. His wisdom is included here in both thoughtful influence and quotes.

Epiphany (January 6) which in the West is the celebration of the visitation from the wise men, and represents the manifestation of God in Jesus Christ to the Gentiles.

So on this third day of Christmas I would like to suggest that we use the remaining days of Christmas to reflect upon the ancient stories that we've been hearing throughout Advent – the gospel accounts of Christmas. We are in danger of leaving the stories behind for another year. Leaving them in the past where it's not intrusive, where it doesn't ask anything of us; where it makes no connections or no difference. It would be like singing Joy to the World, the Lord *has* come (check); but revisit the lyrics. It's not the Lord has come (past tense) but the Lord is come (present tense). So how does this affect us right now?

The real gift we celebrate at Christmas is the coming of the Christ child. So here's the question for our reflection: What's the before and after of Christmas in our lives? What changes occur and what doesn't change; what changes and what remains the same? What remains the same before and after the birth of Jesus is the love of God for the world. God loved the world from the beginning; God spoke the world into being and God has spoken to our ancestors and prophets in many and various ways (visions, dreams, angels, nature, objects). God has been trying to get our attention since we attempted to hide in the Garden. God has always loved us. Do not heed any teaching that claims that the God of the Old Testament is an angry judge devoid of compassion and grace / and it is not until God decides to send his son to save us that he loves the world. God has always loved the world. God so loved the world before Christmas and God so loved the world after.

“You are the same, your years will never end,” says the writer of Hebrews about God.
“Christmas does not change the nature and dependability of God. Rather Christmas makes God

known more clearly.”² Christmas is a time of revelation – the exact imprint of God’s very being is revealed. Through Jesus who has become flesh, we are able not only to know something about God but to enter into a deeper understanding of God through relationship with Christ. The change came when the Word became flesh - when God became man. And in doing so, something changed. Jesus intercedes for us with God; and God through Jesus encountered what it is like to become us -- to be flesh. What changed for the world because of Christmas? The encounter with God through Christ.

Last week in the Gospel of John we heard about the *Word*, another name for Jesus. The *Word*, who in the beginning was with God and is God, and through which all the world came into being; well the *Word* came into the world as tiny baby Jesus. In other words, Jesus has always existed, from eternity to eternity. He was there at the creation of the world and he’ll be there at the consummation of the world.

Now, the *Word* (Jesus) became flesh - God becomes human in the world and that is a new thing. Tiny baby Jesus grew up to become grown up teacher Jesus and became our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ, and therefore the third image we might add to our Christmas stories is exalted Jesus who sits at the right hand of God and reigns forever. “Your throne is forever and ever” and it is exalted Christ (having conquered sin and death) who intercedes for us.

What impact has the coming of Christ had on your life – the impact of Christmas this year? Can you articulate it? Maybe (like me) you need these remaining days of Christmas to let the inner light of Christ lead you. No matter where you are right now in joy, doubt or fear or none of the above; maybe just existing -- let the presence of Christ surround you. Make time for solitude, rest, for reading scripture, for prayer, for listening, stillness – you design.

² Quote from Rev. George Mason in *Before and After*, December 25, 2005, Wilshire Baptist Church, Dallas Texas.

There is a story I read several years ago that I have not been able to locate the source. So if it's embellished a bit in my memory, tell me afterwards and from where I may have heard it if you know. From what I remember, it begins in heaven, where a recent entrant strolls into a warehouse filled with beautifully decorated packages. Each package has a name tag on it bearing a person's name; and the names on the packages appear to be in alphabetical order. The now curious heavenly participant hurries to her area to see if there is package with her name on it and sure enough – there is and it's rather large. The angelic warehouse attendant cautions the soul about opening the box but it's too late. She has untied the ribbon and slipped the top off...and do you have any idea of what was inside?

The box was full of unspoken blessings, unlived blessings, unknown blessings...blessings that could have been shared had she only paid attention, had she only been attuned to God's encounters. You see, she often kept a tight schedule. She was very busy, so she didn't have time for prayer, for listening, for encounters with God, for change, for blessings.

Wonder what Jacob Marley's package would have looked like. Do you remember him in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*?³ Jacob Marley was Ebenezer Scrooge's business partner who had died but comes back as a ghost to warn him about how he is living. There is a scene near the end of the first chapter where Marley has been talking to Scrooge and he begins floating backward toward the window and when he reaches it, the window opens slowly and Marley floats out into the air.

Scrooge comes to the window to peer out and sees that the air is full of ghosts, many of whom he knew. All are weighed down with chains, but not just chains -- with safes, lockboxes, all the things we hold on to for protection, security. And Scrooge notices this one old ghost in particular with a huge safe attached to his ankle and the ghost is crying. Why is he weeping:

³ I am grateful to Dr. Roy Heller, SMU Perkins School of Theology for bringing this classic favorite to my attention.

because of the chains (no); because of the safe attached to his ankle (no). That's not why he's weeping...Scrooge notices that the ghost is looking down at the street where there is a woman sitting, shivering, holding an infant in the snow. And Scrooge realizes that the reason the man is weeping, is that finally the man wants to interfere for good, but he can't. He's weighed down and stuck. It's too late for him; he's lost all ability to encounter change.

But it's not too late for us.

How many blessings are yet to be unwrapped this season?