

THE GIFTS
A Choir Christmas Program
by Bonnie Heidenreich

NARRATOR: The gifts of Christmas weave themselves like a tapestry into the celebration of the Savior's birth. In and out they weave, amid the glittering frenzy which sometimes surrounds the season. Gift-giving. Is this tradition the scourge of materialism, or is there something of the divine wrapped within? The answer, like the gift, is sometimes hidden, but very real and precious.

For on a starlit night many years ago, came the first gift of Christmas, a priceless gift from God, a gift to the world of His Only Begotten Son in the flesh, Jesus Christ.

SCRIPTURE: "For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder; and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The Mighty God, The Everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6)

SONG: "Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming" (male quartet)

NARRATOR: The miracle of the Christmas birth began many months before that holy night when an angel came to a fair maiden in Nazareth. God was to give to Mary a baby; and to that baby would He give His kingdom and the throne of David.

SCRIPTURE: "And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary; for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name, Jesus. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord god shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end." (Luke 1:30-33)

"And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.

"And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem to be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

"And so it was that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn." (Luke 2:1-7)

SONG: "Cradle Him With Love" Polish tune, words by Douglas E. Wagner (choir)

SCRIPTURE: "And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them; and they were sore afraid.

"And the angel said unto them, Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David, A Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

"And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying. 'Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.'": (Luke 2:8-14)

HYMN: "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing" (congregation)

NARRATOR: The angels sang of another gift which the world was to receive...the gift of peace; a gift which nestles like a tiny seed within each of us. Through His son Jesus Christ, God was to unveil the plan which would bring that peace to those who seek it.

SCRIPTURE: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." (John 14:27)

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STORY: The Christmas which is etched into my memory happened years ago when I was the mother of a small family. I will always remember that Christmas because of the gifts...but not the gifts which I expected to remember.

My husband and I didn't have a lot, but we had sufficient to make a nice Christmas for our little family. I spent many hours sewing dresses and making stuffed animals for the girls. My husband's workshop was kept busy with projects and toys of his own making, and the children carefully picked out just the right gifts for each other. All were wrapped and placed carefully under the tree.

Two days before Christmas, while we were at a school function, they disappeared, all of them. We came home to a house which had been ransacked and cleared of every single gift, including a few surprises we thought we had hidden. Even some of our precious ornaments were gone from off the tree.

I tried to remain calm for the children's sake. After the initial shock, we met in family council, and decided not to replace anything. We would spend a quiet evening at home, reading the Christmas story from the Bible and trying to focus on the spirit of the season.

But despite all my good intentions, a pallor of gloom began to settle over our home, and I could not feel peace in my heart. While I tried to find forgiveness for those who had done this horrible thing, my faith in humanity was shattered. 'Peace on earth, good will toward men' our borrowed radio sang out, but where was it? In a world of crime and chaos, how could there be any hope for peace?

A tiny miracle began about noon the next day with a call from a neighbor. She was so sorry about our tragedy. She had purchased an extra turkey and wondered if she could bring it over for us to cook. When we gratefully answered what we thought was her knock at the door, it was instead a box of presents, festively wrapped and left without a note on the porch.

As we stood looking at the gifts in wonder, two carloads of friends drove up, arms laden with firewood, gingerbread cookies, and 'just a few presents to make your barren tree look better'. So went the rest of the day. Between the telephone, the doorbell and the sweet voices of friends and neighbors, there was not time to catch a breath. An envelope of money was left anonymously in the mailbox, and our little living room began to fill with new gifts...of food, clothing, and toys, yes...but more importantly, with the love and laughter of those who cared about us.

As Christmas Eve settled around us, we found that it had lost its darkness and instead seemed filled with light. Even the eyes of my tiny 2-year-old were wide with wonder. The real spirit of Christmas which was sought so diligently the night before, descended now in richness and peace. And then as icing on that precious moment came the soft sound of carolers in the yard. (choir begins singing a cappella, "**It Came Upon a Midnight Clear**, that glorious song of old" then hums as the story continues.) How could I ever again doubt the goodness of mankind? There is peace on earth, and it is spread through the love of God wherever there are people who seek to love one another. (Choir continues singing words from "peace on the earth...")

NARRATOR: Peace is indeed a heavenly gift, one of many which God has given to His children to bless lives and bring happiness. Another priceless treasure which came as a result of the Savior's life on earth was the Comforter, the gift of the Holy Ghost.

SCRIPTURE: "And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever. (John 14:16)

"I, Nephi, was desirous also that I might see, and hear, and know of these things, by the power of the Holy Ghost, which is the gift of God unto all those who diligently seek him..." (1 Nephi 10:17)

NARRATOR: "The Comforter brings as his own gift, hope. Hope is the anchor which holds life steady during the storms of time. Hope is the light which shines through the darkness. "The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight." Jesus Christ, the babe of Bethlehem, is our hope for eternal life.

SCRIPTURE: "For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

"Wherefore, ye may also have hope, and be partakers of the gift, if ye will but have faith." (Ether 12:9)

STORY: The most meaningful gift I ever gave was given by accident to my Grandpa Joe. Actually, I had planned on it being a gift. It was meant to be a present for my entire family that Christmas. But I think that Grandpa Joe's getting it was a heaven-sent gift in itself. It was my first year at college, and I had taken a calligraphy class in relief society. I randomly picked one of the listed scriptures to practice penning, but it turned out so well, that I decided to frame it and give it to my family. It said:

"And if you keep my commandments and endure to the end, you shall have eternal life, which gift is the greatest of all the gifts of God."

My little brother was handing out the Christmas gifts that morning and he passed this one back to Mom and Dad. But before it reached them, Grandpa Joe got a hold of it and thought it was his. I was going to tell him, but he seemed so

pleased to get a present, I just couldn't do it. As he opened the gift and his eyes fell upon the words, a softness spread across his face. It made me think of Granny Em. Granny had been gone for three years now and I was used to seeing Grandpa Joe alone, but I guess three years isn't a very long time when you've been married for over 60.

Grandpa Joe gave me a gentle hug and a thank you with his twinkling eyes, but his thoughts must have been where mine were because as I turned around, I heard him say to himself, "Eternal life. That is the gift I hope for, too, Emma.... with you."

I knew he liked my plaque, because it was hung on the wall of his little home, right next to the last picture taken of Granny Em standing beside him.

That summer when I came home from college, Grandpa Joe had moved into the extra bedroom at our home. His health was failing, and Momma wanted him close. He wasn't able to bring very many things with him because our room was small, but the first thing I noticed was my plaque on the wall by his bed along with his favorite picture. Every time I entered his room, which was often that summer my eyes fell on the words of that scripture. "If ye keep my commandments and endure to the end..." Yes, Grandpa Joe was certainly enduring to the end. Even as he struggled with feebleness and pain, he always had a smile for me and a word of encouragement. He loved having me read the scriptures to him, and I spent hours reading at his bedside, feeling the strength of his spirit...a spirit that had lived through many hard years, never wavering in the testimony of Jesus.

That last Christmas when I came home, I found Grandpa Joe very, very weak. Speaking was hard for him, so I would sit next to him and just hold his hand. One day as I rose to leave, he seemed to hold onto me ever so gently as if he wanted something.

"What is it, Grandpa?" I asked him. "What do you want?"

His eyes turned slowly from mine until they rested next to his picture and my plaque on the wall.

"Do you want the picture or the plaque?" I asked. He made no motion, so I carefully took them both down and placed one in each arm.

There was a hint of smile in that wonderful old face and he closed his eyes peacefully.

"Goodnight, Grandpa," I said. "Sweet dreams. I love you."

It was the last time I saw my Grandpa alive. Sometime that night he slipped quietly from this life with his picture and my plaque safely tucked under each arm. And I knew that his hopes and dreams of that night would bring him to the feet of the Savior with Granny Em.

I asked Momma if I could keep the plaque which I had given him a year ago. I want it to always hang on my own wall as a daily reminder of what this life is all about.

SCRIPTURE: "And if you keep my commandments and endure to the end you shall have eternal life, which gift is the greatest of all the gifts of god." (D&C 14:7)

SONG: "Candlelight Carol" by John Rutter

NARRATOR: God has given other bounteous gifts to His children whom He loves. "All scripture is given by inspiration" and translated by "the gift and power of god." forgiveness is a merciful gift from the Father. Through the Priesthood, He gives us power "to heal all manner of disease." The earth is full of all varieties of meat and herb given unto the children of man. The list could go on; for ALL good things are indeed gifts from God.

SCRIPTURE: "And again, I exhort you, my brethren, that ye deny not the gifts of God, for they are many...and they are given by the...Spirit of God unto men, to profit them...And I would exhort you, my beloved brethren, that ye remember that every good gift cometh of Christ." (Moroni 10:8,9)

SONG: "The Gift" (Words by Jane Foster Knox, Music by Mark Wilson, SSA)

SCRIPTURE: "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem....And lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy. And when they were come into the house, they saw the young child with Mary his mother, and fell down, and worshipped him: and when they had opened their treasures, they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh." (Matthew 2:1-2, 9-11)

NARRATOR: Just as the wise men laid their precious gifts at the feet of the Savior, so we, too, come to His throne and kneel at His feet to honor Him. But what gift can we bring? What would He want of us, His children?

SCRIPTURE: "And ye shall offer a sacrifice unto me of a broken heart and a contrite spirit. And whoso cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost." (3 Nephi 9:20)

NARRATOR: A broken heart and a contrite spirit are what He wants us to lay upon the altar...a sacrifice of our will to His. He asks us to give our heart and soul in dedication to His service. And when we give this gift to Him, the only gift that He truly wants; He then gives back to us all that He possesses.

SCRIPTURE: “And he that receiveth my Father, receiveth my Father’s kingdom; therefore all that my Father hath shall be given unto him.” (D&C 84:38)

“Come unto me...and it shall be made manifest unto you how great things the Father hath laid up for you...” (Ether 4:14)

“For since the beginning of the world have not men heard nor perceived by the ear, neither hath any eye seen...how great things thou has prepared for him that waiteth for thee.” (D&C 133:45)

SONG: “Gifts That Are Mine to Give” by David Len Allen

NARRATOR: There are indeed magnificent gifts associated with Christmas; the gifts of hope, of peace, of eternal life, of power and of love. These gifts are far more precious than the tinselly trappings paraded in store fronts. And when we give the gifts that come from God to those we love, that love returns to fill our own hearts with exceeding great joy. Then, just as the herald angels sang out... “Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy...,” we can find a final gift, one of joy, growing and swelling within us. Joy which is full; joy which is exquisitely sweet, joy to the world.

SCRIPTURE: “What do we hear in the gospel which we have received? A voice of gladness!...glad tidings of great joy...

“Let your hearts rejoice, and be exceedingly glad. Let the earth break forth into singing. Let the dead speak forth anthems of eternal praise to the King Immanuel...

“Let the mountains shout for joy, and all ye valleys cry aloud; and all ye seas and dry lands tell the wonders of your Eternal King! And ye rivers, and brooks, and rills, flow down with gladness. Let the woods and all the trees of the field praise the Lord!....

“...Let the sun, moon and the morning stars sing together, and let all the sons of God shout for joy!” (D&C 128:19, 22, 23)

HYMN: “Joy to the World” (congregation)