

Title: THE Story of a Father and a Son
Date: December 16, 2018
Subject: The person who has Jesus has it all
Scripture: John 1:1, 12, 14

Opening lines of stories are critical in setting the mood and establishing the scene. Here are some classics. Once upon a time. It was the best of times; it was the worst of times. It was a dark and stormy night.

But then the rest of the story needs to come together. Charlie Brown's sister Sally found out it can be difficult. She volunteered to write the class play for Christmas. She tells her brother, "In the opening scene Geronimo talks to Mary." Charlie Brown interrupts, "It wasn't Geronimo. It was Gabriel..." Sally reacts, "The kid who plays Geronimo is going to be very disappointed." She breaks the news to the kid who has a hard time as he's already made his costume. It gets to the point where Sally threatens that if he doesn't stop bothering her she will change his part to a sheep. Apparently the kid is practicing his new line as Sally says, "Well, BAA to you too!" The school cancels the Christmas play. Sally sulks in a bean bag and tells her brother, "I thought I wrote a good play, too. My best scene was where Joseph drives his family to Egypt in a '56 Thunderbird."

Sally isn't the only one who doesn't get things right. Lots of people are fooled by the sham and glam of contemporary Christmas celebrations. Some change the name to take out the word "Christmas." It becomes simply the holiday season or "Sparkle Season." Many people don't regard Christmas as a religious holiday. It's just one more fairy tale. People are having a more difficult time differentiating between reality and fantasy. You may have seen the commercial where a woman is riding a horse and throwing presents to people and then leaps onto a train boxcar. It has a disclaimer in little print: "Fictionalization. Do not attempt." Some of it's fueled by virtual reality games and movies. People are upset with Elon Musk about his planned trip to Mars. He has to explain that people would die on the way and survivors would have to work extremely hard once they get there. They thought it would be like the world of Marvel superheroes.

The focus can be on presents. Shoppers in the US plan to spend anywhere from \$794 to \$992 on presents this year (Statista, American Research Group). We're slouches compared to Canadians who will spend on everything related to Christmas – presents, food, travel, and entertainment – an average of \$1500.

Others make it about home and family, treasured moments and memories, love. I like, even cherish, all those things but it's not really about those things. A person can have the perfect family, a prize winning decorated house, elegant meals and personalized gifts for everyone -- all the trimmings of Christmas -- but they're wading in the shallow end of the kiddie pool. It can happen to we who have a personal relationship with Christ as our Savior. We need to dive head first into what God reveals in the Christmas story to get the meaning.

I mentioned some great opening lines for stories. Two of my favorites are "And it came to pass in those days..." (Luke 2:1) and "In the beginning" (Genesis 1:1; John 1:1). The first comes from the Christmas

narrative in Luke 2. The other is in Genesis 1:1 where it starts the grand story of Creation and indeed the entire Bible. It's repeated in the Gospel of John where the Christmas story is portrayed on an equally grand scale.

READ John 1:1, 14.

God communicated. He'd previously spoken to people using angels to convey short messages of hope or judgment. He spoke directly to people like Moses, but these conversations were brief. Now the Almighty God of the universe speaks fully, using his entire vocabulary. "The Word became flesh."

The word "word" is defined as a "unit of language, consisting of one or more spoken sounds or their written representations that functions as a principal carrier of meaning" (dictionary.com). Words - oral, written, and signed -- represent objects, ideas, actions or thoughts.

The word "word" had a greater meaning to people who lived during the time of Jesus. "Word" represented to the Greeks the principle of reason which they sometimes associated with the divine reason which governed the universe. Jews used the term to express the means for God's creative activity.

People now sometimes say "word" when another says something they accept as true. For instance, "the Packers have a very slim chance of making the playoffs." "Word." Or "most of us couldn't care less about what the Packers do." "Word."

John soars beyond these elements by adding the unique feature of the "Word" being a Person who is God. He pre-existed before time and entered into the human experience to convey all that humans can grasp without blowing out the circuits of their brains. There's more to come in the future in the presence of God.

"The Word became flesh." At Christmas we focus on the little baby in the manger. We need to not get stuck on the cuteness of the picture. Other places in the Bible add to the enormity of what transpires. The baby in the manger is "the Son of God who is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being" (Hebrews 1:3). "The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:15-17).

The manger contained someone who was completely other than any person or supposed god. Jesus Christ is not one of many gods. He is God, fully God and fully human. The amazing thing is what he did with his Godness. He did not cling to all the benefits and perks of his position. He entered humanity. He did this to communicate the truth about God and the facts about us.

He is "Full of grace and truth." We can say "word" again. The amazing thing is that he chooses to share his grace and truth with people. He wants to bestow on humans his riches. It begins with establishing a relationship.

READ 1:12. God allows people, you and me, us to become his children if we believe and receive. Earlier I said Christmas really isn't about family. Let me retract that statement. Christmas is about family. Being in God's family. That's first and foremost. All the other stuff is possible because we're in God's family.

There's more to what God wants to give. "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all -- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:32). These words are usually connected to the sacrificial death of Christ for our sins. I think the giving also pictures the Father in heaven allowing the whole undertaking to unfold. He allowed/sent Christ from heaven.

What a transition! From the star-studded glories and wonders of heaven to the dirt and smells of a stable. From possessing the untold riches of the universe to being an infant with nothing. From being robed in splendor and majesty to being wrapped in burial clothes. From being adored by angels to an audience of grungy, outcast shepherds.

Jesus is the indescribable gift (2 Corinthians 9:15). He's the gift that keeps on giving. "Jesus declared, "I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty" (John 6:35). "In his great mercy God the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you" (1 Peter 1:3, 4).

There are various versions of the following story. A very wealthy widower had an only child, a son born late in life. The father had a passion for collecting art and imparted it to his son. The son quickly developed into a connoisseur, an expert in judging the quality of paintings and skilled in the art of making a deal. Together they travelled the world in search of rare paintings by Van Gogh, Monet, Picasso Rembrandt and others. The treasured pieces became part of their massive collection that adorned the family home.

As winter approached, war blew into their country. The son answered the call to defend his homeland. Only a few short weeks later, the father received the horrible news his son was missing in action. He anxiously waited, fearing he'd never see his son again. His fears were confirmed days later when he received official word his son died while risking his life to rescue a fellow soldier.

About a month later, just before Christmas, there was a knock at the door. He tried to ignore it but the person was persistent. He called out, "I'm coming. I'm coming." As he slowly made his way to the door, the father passed the paintings he and his son had collected. Now they only reminded him that his son was not there and would never be there. Sorrow and anguish cascaded over the man in deep waves.

A young man stood at the door with a large package in his hands. He said, "Sir, you don't know me, but I was a friend of your son. I'm the soldier for whom your son gave his life. He was carrying me to safety when he was killed. May I come in for a few moments? I have something to show you."

The soldier recalled how the son talked to anyone and everyone about his father and their mutual love for art. The soldier shared how he was himself an artist, but not a very good one. The young man held out the package. "I know this isn't much, but I want to give this to you."

The old man warily but graciously accepted the package. He slowly and methodically unwrapped the package to find a portrait of his son, painted by the young man. He stared in awe at the way the soldier had captured the personality of his son in the painting, the details of his son's face. The father was overcome with

emotion. He promised the soldier it'd be hung in the place of honor above the fireplace mantle. It would not be regarded by critics as a masterpiece of great value but it meant the world to the dad.

The two men talked for hours. Finally the soldier had to leave. The old man profusely thanked him and offered to pay him for the picture. "Oh, no sir. I could never repay what your son did for me. It's a gift."

The father hung the portrait over his mantle, pushing aside works of art by famous painters. He'd often spend hours gazing at it. The portrait grew in importance as the man heard more stories of how his son had bravely rescued dozens of wounded soldiers. The stories made him proud and helped ease the grief. He realized, even though his son was no longer with him, he would live on through the lives of the people he'd touched.

Every time visitors came to his home he took them to see the portrait of his son before he showed them any of the other great works he'd collected. It was worth more to him than his entire collection. He told friends and neighbors it was the best gift he'd ever received or would receive.

That spring, a few months later, the old man died. Since he had no heir, his impressive art collection would be sold at auction. The art world eagerly anticipated the opportunity to see the collection and purchase pieces from it to be the centerpieces for their collections or to increase the size of them. They had to wait until Christmas as the man's will stipulated the auction take place on the day he'd received the greatest of all gifts.

When the day arrived, influential people, art collectors and museum representatives gathered to bid on the paintings. On the platform sat the painting of the son. It wasn't on anyone's list of potential purchases. The auctioneer pounded his gavel. "Who will bid for this picture? Who'll start the bidding at \$100?"

The room went silent except for the shuffling of feet and the shifting of weight in chairs. He asked again. No bids. After agonizing moments that seemed to drag on for hours to the anxious crowd, a voice from the back of the room shouted, "Who cares about that painting? It's just a picture of his son. Let's get to the real art." A chorus of voices echoed the sentiment.

But the auctioneer persisted. "No. We have to sell this one first. Who will take the son? Will someone bid for this painting? Who will start the bidding? \$200? \$100?"

The crowd was quickly going from disinterested to hostile.

Finally, another voice came from the back of the room. It was the longtime gardener of the man and his son. "I'll give \$10 for the painting. I knew the boy so I'd like to have it."

"\$10. I have \$10. Who will bid \$20? Will anyone go higher? How about \$15?"

"Give it to him for \$10! Let's see the masters!" The crowd was becoming even more unruly. They didn't want the picture of the son. They wanted the more worthy investments for their collections.

"\$10 is the bid. Won't someone bid \$20?" The auctioneer paused. "Going once, twice, SOLD for \$10!"

An audible sigh of relief swept through the crowd. Now they could get on with the sale.

The auctioneer pounded his gavel. "The auction is over. Thank you for coming." The crowd was stunned and shook their heads in disbelief. One man spoke for them all. "What do you mean it's over? What

about all the paintings? There are millions and millions of dollars' worth of art here. I demand you explain what's going on."

"When I was called to conduct this auction, I was told of a secret stipulation in the will. I was not allowed to reveal it until this time. It's very simple. Only the painting of the son would be auctioned. Whoever bought that painting would inherit the entire estate, including the paintings. According to the will of the father, the person who takes the son gets it all!"

According to the will of the Father in heaven, the person who takes the Son gets it all. The person who takes the Son, who believes in and receives Jesus as Savior, gets it all. They gain entrance into the kingdom of heaven and everything associated with it.

People seek treasures of purpose, meaning, fulfillment, peace, joy, hope, love, wholeness, freedom from pain. These treasures aren't found by seeking those things. They are found by coming to Christ who graciously gives us all things, all the things we truly need for this life and the next. He can do so as he is full of grace and truth.

A person can have all the stuff of Christmas and have nothing since they don't have Christ in their lives. On the other hand, the person who has Jesus and doesn't have anything else has everything.

The Festival of the Trees was a contest in which business and organizations competed by decorating trees. The magnificent display attracted a large crowd. Among them were a man and woman with their grandchildren. They went from tree to tree, excitedly pointing out the unique decorations. Melissa, one of the grandkids, soon lost interest until they came to a manger scene. She stopped in her tracks and stood mesmerized by the baby. Grandma and grandpa tried to get her to move along so they could see the rest of the trees, but all she wanted to do was get closer to the baby, maybe wiggle past the ribbon stretched around the cradle that was intend to keep people away. Finally, reluctantly, she agreed to leave, but kept looking back over her shoulder at the baby in the manger. The family was about to leave when Melissa asked if she could "see the baby" again. They returned to the manger where she lovingly gazed at the baby Jesus. The grandpa recalls, "Melissa adored the infant. I marveled at her simplicity. Unlike her, I often fail to see Christ for the trees."

May we not fail to see Christ because of the trees. May we marvel at the manger, at the baby in the manger, at the Son of God in the manger who has come to give us life, forgives of sins and all things for this life and beyond. May we not be content with wading in the shallow end of the kiddie pool with the trimmings of Christmas. May we not settle for anything less than Christ himself.