

The First Gift of Christmas Christmas Eve

Sometimes we receive the greatest and most meaningful gifts when we least expect them. Most of us have gotten in the habit of giving gifts at birthdays, at anniversaries and at Christmas. For many this is a time of meaningful gift-giving. For others it is a time to pick up the first thing they see on the shelf in CVS. I have found that many times my most meaningful gifts are given when the receiver least expects them.

That's what happened to the shepherds on the hillside outside of Bethlehem. It wasn't Christmas. There was no Christmas. It was just another workday with the sheep. It definitely wasn't a day for receiving presents. But the God of surprises had been planning something since before time began. It was unexpected and it was huge!

On that night so long ago, the hillside became what I like to call a thin place. A thin place refers to a place and time where the veil between heaven and earth become so thin so as to make it seem as if the two places are one holy space. The story proclaims that the glory of the Lord shone round about them. The veil was so thin that the shepherds could perceive the very presence of God emanating from heaven.

It was at that moment that an announcement was made by heaven's messengers – the First Christmas had come! The Lord of all Creation was proclaiming that He was going to be in relationship with human beings in a brand new way. That new way was to be found wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

The shepherds responded to this proclamation by going in search of this child. As we are told, they found Mary, Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger, just as it had been told to them. As they peered into the face of that little baby, these men who were just like you and me, unexpectedly received the first gift of Christmas.

One of my favorite Christmas stories is Richard Evans', The Christmas Box. At the end of the story, Rick finally understands the first gift of Christmas. Listen:

“It came to my heart. The first gift of Christmas was ... love. A parent's pure love ..., manifested by a Father's love for all His children, as he sacrificed that which He loved most and sent His Son to earth.”

For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

Tonight we join those shepherds of 2000 years ago, we join paupers, bishops and everyone in between, as we receive once again The First Gift of Christmas. You will undoubtedly receive

many wonderful gifts this Christmas. But tonight, receive anew the first gift of Christmas – the gift of your heavenly Father’s love as found in the babe named Jesus.