



WONDER

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Would you believe it if I told you that wrapping paper was invented by mistake? Some of you have suspected that for a long time...The idea of wrapping up gifts has been around since the Chinese first invented paper in about 100 A.D. But wrapping paper as we know it today came into use in 1917 here in America.

At the time, the Hall Brothers, Joyce and Rollie, had a little business we now know as Hallmark, and they were selling tissue paper for wrapping Christmas gifts. That was the American gift wrap of choice in the early part of the 20th century. But in the holiday season of 1917, the Hall Brothers ran out of tissue paper. It was a moment of crisis. So they looked around their shop and saw a pile of thin, decorative paper they had ordered from a factory in France to make into envelope liners. They thought, "Hey – this would work," so they slapped some prices on it, made it look like the latest trend in gift wrapping, and it caught on. People bought it. So the next year, they made their own paper, and an industry was born. Today, people spend \$265 billion a year on gift wrap.

I've never quite understood wrapping paper. I'm not very good at working with it. I always end up with wrinkled paper and bulky corners. I run out of tape or cut the paper the wrong size or tie the ribbon wrong. You know what it's like. Then when you finally finish it, your masterpiece is torn to shreds in about two seconds by whoever opens it. My practical side says, "Wouldn't it be a whole lot easier to just hand somebody a gift and not fuss with all the wrapping business?"

Possibly. But even my pragmatic personality can't deny that wrapping paper does something. It's not worthless. And it's not just making a pretty presentation. In a word, I think wrapping paper boosts the "wonder" factor. When a gift is wrapped and under the tree, it is on display for you to see -- but hidden at the same time. The wrapping creates anticipation. It makes you wonder, "What is in there?" Addison turned 12 this week, and the morning of his birthday, we gave him a choice of a few of his presents to open. So what did he do? He picked each one up, felt the weight, gave it a little shake. We've all done that. What is that? It's a form of wonder. You wouldn't do that without wrapping paper.

The wrapping paper tells you somebody thought you were important enough to be celebrated. Somebody took the time to not only give you a gift, but also to make receiving it an experience you would remember.

God is great at wrapping his presents for us. When he sent us salvation through Jesus, he took great care in how he packaged it. A few weeks ago the Junior High class learned about all the prophecies that were fulfilled in Jesus – over 300 predictions that came true in him. That shows an incredible amount of pre-planning and attention to every detail. God didn't just plunk down salvation and say, "Here you go," he spent the time to present it in a certain way.

Our practical, pragmatic side doesn't quite get it sometimes. There are so many things about Christmas that seem inefficient and curious to us. Why did God choose to do things the way he did? If his gift was for the whole world, why did he deliver it to a no name village? Why did God allow Jesus' life to start with a scandal in a time of chaos? Why did he tell shepherds about the birth instead of somebody more influential? Why did he use a star to communicate to wise men instead of words? Why would he take those wise men to Herod who would immediately try to kill Jesus?

It all seems so NOT the way we would do things. And yet in light of all those 300 prophecies, we know God chose what he did intentionally. You couldn't have all those details line up and still have a bunch of random events happening. God obviously allowed these strange things on purpose.

What was his purpose? I think at least part of it is the same reason we use wrapping paper: To boost the wonder factor. God is giving us this incredibly precious gift, and it's on display right in front of us, but it's wrapped up in such a way that it is hidden at the same time. And as we explore the meaning of all these pieces we "wonder" about, it draws us into a greater kind of wonder about all that God has done for us.

So over the next few weeks, we're going to look at some of these pieces of the wrapping around the Christmas story, the pieces that make us wonder, "What was God thinking?" We know the story, and we like to get straight to it, but I'm hoping we can slow down a little bit and appreciate the packaging this gift came in.

I'd like to start by going back to one of those prophecies I mentioned, this one in the book of Isaiah. Isaiah was a prophet who lived about 700 years before Christ was born. His writings are filled with God's heartache over the conditions his people are living in and his plan to change the situation. In Isaiah's day, Israel's king had died, his son was assassinated and a whole string of kings followed. Imagine the uncertainty that would throw over your life. Isaiah writes about the fear and the hunger and the stress and the rage at God. Isaiah describes a dark and dangerous time. Then he gets to chapter nine and says this:

Isaiah 9:1-7

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress.

Stop right there. Read that line with me:

Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress.

Does that sound good or what? That's a welcome ray of hope, because people are full of distress. The economy is in the tank. People's jobs are on the line. Families and marriages are struggling. Lives are incredibly full and busy. There was just a new report out this week on weapons of mass destruction and threats around the world, and it was not a very cheery outlook. On all kinds of fronts, distress is rearing its ugly head.

Nevertheless, Isaiah says, nevertheless. The gloom is going to disappear. If I were an Israelite back then, that would have caught my attention. As people in distress today, God invites us to latch on to that same promise and make it our own. God is lifting the gloom.

Isaiah continues:

In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honor Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan —

Zebulun and Naphtali were kind of like King and Pierce counties. They were two territories in Israel that were side by side. It was a region of the country that had suffered in the past, and now God is saying he's going to honor that area in a special way. And guess what? That's the very place where Jesus would have his ministry 700 years later — the region of Galilee, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan.

Now that the stage is set, Isaiah begins to build some expectation in the hearts of his listeners:

*The people walking in darkness have seen a great light;
on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned.
You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy;
they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest,
as men rejoice when dividing the plunder.*

*For as in the day of Midian's defeat,
you have shattered the yoke that burdens them,
the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor.*

Isaiah is referring to the battle where Gideon and just 300 men defeated the entire Midian army. God threw the army into a panic so they fought themselves and fled when they heard Gideon's men. Nobody would have guessed how that battle was won. Not only was it an awesome victory, it was a dramatic demonstration that God can work through the most unexpected and impossible ways to accomplish his purposes.

So Isaiah's listeners have that miraculous win in mind as he keeps going.

Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood

will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.

This is going to be good. It's going to be amazing – war is going to be nothing but a memory. Enemies will be gone. The country is going to prosper. Night is going to turn to day. Everybody will be happy again. So what is it Isaiah? What could possibly be huge enough to make that kind of difference? What's the big surprise God has planned? Is he going to bring a big earthquake in Assyria? Is he going to rain down gold from heaven? What sort of spectacular display of his power are we talking about?

Then Isaiah says it:

*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given.*

What – really? You've gotta be kidding me. A baby? We've got all these problems and a little baby is going to fix them? How is that supposed to work?

I can think of all kinds of problems with this solution. For one, it's a baby. That means he's going to have to grow up first. That's a long process where anything could happen. It takes years. If I'm dealing with a crisis now, I don't want to hear about how much better I'll feel in 20 or 30 years. Babies can't do much of anything in the short term.

Second of all, a baby is not going to intimidate anybody. We went and saw the new Disney movie Bolt last weekend. My favorite character in the movie was this little hamster named Rhino. He was hilarious. He was always talking tough, saying things like, "I eat danger for breakfast" and cracking his neck like he's getting ready for a fight. But you couldn't quite take him seriously because he's this tiny creature inside a plastic ball. He couldn't really hurt anybody.

You've got the same thing going on with this baby idea. Bully neighbors who are threatening war aren't going to be scared off by a kid in a diaper. It's laughable.

Why would God choose a very small, weak and helpless and vulnerable child as his way of dealing with a big and powerful and dark and overwhelming situation? This is the wonder of the way God wrapped Christmas. It's great he has a plan – but why a plan that looks so different from what we would expect? Why a baby?

The longer we stop to think about that question, the more we begin to see that a baby was the perfect means for God to choose to put his rescue plan in motion. Because a baby represents some things in a way nothing else does. For one thing,

A baby is a delight.

Lots of things in the world make us happy. Money. Toys. Friends. But I can't think of anything that has quite the universal effect on people that babies do. I know not everybody's a "baby person". But you don't have to have kids or want kids to know

what I'm talking about. We've all seen this scenario: A new mom is standing in line with a stroller. A complete stranger walks over, bends down and starts talking to the baby. They make strange sounds and even stranger faces. They completely lose their inhibitions and self-consciousness, which I think is a sign of how instinctive "baby joy" is. We'd never do those things in front of people normally, but we get so caught up and mesmerized by a brand new little person that we can't help ourselves.

Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "We find delight in the beauty and happiness of children that makes the heart too big for the body." Without even trying, babies make us well up with a kind of joy that doesn't come from anything else.

God knows that about babies, and he linked his best gift to us with that source of deep, human bliss. There is no better symbol for the joy of God's salvation than a baby. If he's going to create an image in our mind of how wonderful his rescue is, isn't it beautiful that he chose a baby? It instantly makes a positive association for us.

I don't think that's an accident.

Zephaniah 3:17

*The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save.
He will take great delight in you.*

We delight God. It brings him joy to save us and he wants us to share in that joy. He could have seen it as drudgery, sighing and groaning over having to step in and save us from ourselves. What a pain. But he delights in us. And he chose to deliver his best gift to us wrapped in a baby so we could see it through eyes of delight as well.

What's more, God delights in Jesus. He's his son. God sending him in the form of a baby helps us connect with that dynamic of their relationship. And when we think of Jesus as a baby and begin to grasp the delight God takes in him as a parent, we better understand the loss and cost involved for God the Father to be separated from God the Son.

So I see delight as a piece of the reason God would make the unthinkable choice of delivering salvation in the form of a baby. A second reason is because

A baby is a person.

If you are looking for the right solution to a problem, you have to know what the problem really is. Let's say my car is making a funny clicking noise. Every time I drive it, I can hear this "ting ting ting ting ting". What will I do about it? Well, if I think it's fuel related, I might try to knock out the knocks by changing the grade of gas I'm putting in it. If that doesn't work, maybe I'll take it to a mechanic to check the engine. But if I really know what's going on, I'll grab a pair of pliers and go pull the rock out of the tire tread that's been making all the noise. You can come up with all kinds of solutions, but the one that works will be the one that fits the problem.

The Israelites probably thought their main problems were idolatry and foreign enemies. In that case, God could have smashed all the golden statues and fought off all the armies and been done with it. Look at all the plagues of Egypt – locusts, frogs, darkness. God could flex his muscles any way he wanted to make his point.

But God knew that the real problem wasn't global or national or social. It was a personal problem – a problem that affected everybody as a whole, but also each of us as individuals. And if the problem was personal, then the solution needed to be personal, too.

God as a baby made God understandable for us. It brought him into the personal realm. It put a face on him. It's the whole concept behind the name Immanuel – God with us. Now we could get it, because we could relate to him. Not only that – because he came as a baby, that means he went through all the same stages of growing up that every human does. He knew what it was like to be tired. He knew what it was like to work hard. He knew what it was like to watch someone he loved die. He knew what it was like to be under pressure and stress. He knew what it was like to have friends abandon him. He understood tense family situations. So he can speak to us with the sympathy and compassion of somebody who has experienced the human condition from the inside out.

If God feels distant and vague to you, think of the baby. If you don't believe God understands what you're going through, remember his choice to live on earth and walk in our shoes. As Psalm 147 says, "His understanding has no limit." He knows your pain intimately.

If you were babysitting an infant, and you picked it up, the one thing you can't do is hold the baby at arm's length for very long. Your arms will get tired and the baby will get anxious. You really only have two choices: Pull the baby close, or set it down.

God getting personal as a baby means he can no longer be held at arm's length. You can't be keeping him at a distance. You either draw close to him or you walk away from him. He doesn't leave the option open of an impersonal relationship. A baby is personal.

I think another reason God chose a baby to bring his grace is because

A baby is an heir.

This piece would have made at least some sense to the Israelites, because with all the upheaval in the royal family, they were looking forward to a rightful heir taking the throne. They would have understood the son given not just as being an ordinary baby, but as a son who would one day be king. Isaiah described that for them.

*For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.*

*And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
Of the increase of his government and peace
there will be no end.*

*He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom,
establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness
from that time on and forever.*

Whatever else you want to say about this baby, you can't get around the fact that Isaiah is saying he was born to rule. He will bear the weight of governing on his shoulders.

Two possibilities were very real for the Israelites of Isaiah's time: Being out of control, or being controlled. The first was total anarchy. Nobody seemed able to stay on the throne very long. When nobody's running the show, society breaks down and life turns to chaos. Given the turnover in the monarchy, the nation was on the brink of an internal meltdown.

The other danger was that they would become totally controlled – either by a foreign power like Assyria or some Israelite dictator who stepped into the power vacuum and ruled with an iron fist to re-establish order. They would eventually lose their freedom and become slaves in Babylon.

Two distinct possibilities: Chaos or Control. Isaiah presents a third option. The Prince of Peace. Or, as the Message version translates it, the Prince of Wholeness. I like that. That's a better rendering of the Hebrew word shalom. Wholeness. And Isaiah says of the increase of his government and wholeness there will be no end. No more upheaval. No more chaos. But a King who is also an Everlasting Father, who does what is right and just every time, a King who binds up the broken and restores wholeness.

New baby. New heir. New kingdom. That means a new possibility for us as well. Some of you are here today and you know what it's like to be out of control. Your life feels like it's running away from you and you don't know where you're going. All your choices feel random and shaky.

Others of you feel like you're suffocating because you are being controlled. Maybe you've got sins you can't shake. Addictions that won't let go. Maybe you're driven by work or an obsession with achieving. Or maybe you feel like other people, past or present are dominating your thinking and pressuring your decisions.

Isaiah says, "Don't you want the Prince of Wholeness instead?" We don't have to be out of control any longer or controlled by things and people that don't have our best interest in mind. We can choose to live under the rule of a loving Father who wants us to be whole and who has the power to get us there.

The baby in the manger is the rightful one to be on the throne of our lives, the only one we can trust to be in control, because he always does what is right and good and just. If we're going to know why God sent a baby, we have to see that the baby is an heir. He's the real King. God is setting up a new regime.

One final thought about why God chose a baby to bring his salvation is because

A baby is a new start

One simple reason God chose to send salvation in a baby is because that's what we need to become to accept salvation. The way God entered our world is the same way we enter his. It's all about starting over again.

Mark 10:15

I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.

Jesus got even more specific in his conversation with Nicodemus.

John 3:1-4

Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council. He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the miraculous signs you are doing if God were not with him."

In reply Jesus declared, "I tell you the truth, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again."

"How can a man be born when he is old?" Nicodemus asked.

Here is one of the enlightened religious leaders, somebody who was as close as anybody to understanding what Jesus was about, and yet Jesus essentially says, "You're going to have to start over to enter the kingdom of God."

Oswald Chambers said, "Beware of posing as a profound person. God became a baby." The key to getting into heaven is not found in doing more good things or conquering our failings or avoiding evil. The key is in dialing clear back to the beginning, scrapping what we think we know and accepting our own helplessness. We need God to pick us up and carry us. That's what becoming a baby means – getting a fresh start from God and counting on him instead of ourselves.

We've been talking all morning about the mystery of why God would send a baby. But we don't need to be smarter or wiser to understand it. We need to be more like a baby ourselves. Trusting. Vulnerable. Dependent. That's when the wonder starts to sink in.

It's the opposite of all our instincts. And it would be impossible to make it happen if it weren't for Isaiah's last line in this section:

The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.

God is zealous – he's fired up – about this plan. That's why his sending a baby worked in the face of such incredible odds. That's how we too can become his children, with innocence restored and a wide future ahead of us. God wants it to happen, so he can make it happen.

Corrie Ten Boom tells a story about visiting a missionary family in Africa. They had this tiny little shack and six kids. The youngest was just a few months old. The missionary wife picked up the baby in her arms and said to Corrie, "Come with me. I want to tell you a story."

They went outside and sat on a little bench. She said, "To have many little children can be a burden for a missionary. When I learned I was going to have another baby, I rebelled against God. We already had five small children and it did not seem fair that we should have to bear another. My health was not good and I looked upon having another child with great sorrow and unhappiness. Was it not enough to have five children? Oh how my heart cried out at God and there were times when I wished He would take the baby from me."

"The time for the birth was here. I was very weak and there were no doctors nearby. We had no one to leave the other children with, so my husband put us all in the car and drove us into a town where there was a good mission hospital. There we stayed until the baby was born."

Then her voice got soft and she said, "When we returned to our house with the new baby, we learned that in the short days we had been gone the dreaded Mau Mau had come. They had murdered every white person in the entire area. Had we been home we would have all been killed."

She hugged her little baby, tears streaming down her face. "This little darling was sent by God to save all our lives. Never again shall I rebel against His ways for our lives."

When God's salvation comes, it often looks like the last thing we need. And everything in us wants to rebel against it. We don't want the burden of starting over. We don't want to give up control. But what a gift we find when we're ready to receive it.

In a couple moments, we're going to celebrate the Lord's Supper together again. And I realize that the core of our faith is found on the cross and not in the manger. But God chose to send his son first as a baby. And as we think about what the grown-up Jesus did for us, I'd like us to also remember why it's important that unto us a child was given.

Maybe you feel you've lost a sense of delight. Like David, your prayer is that God would restore the joy of his salvation. For David, that meant confessing sin that stood in the way of that delight. Communion is the perfect time to lay your sins before God and ask his forgiveness.

Maybe you're feeling out of control or that you've given control to the wrong things and now you're trapped. As you dip the bread in the cup today, you can make it your cry to the prince of wholeness to put you back together.

Maybe your need this morning is to become God's child or to get back to being vulnerable and helpless before him. It's the opposite of all our instincts, but the only way to life and peace.

Winnie the Pooh once said, "Sometimes the smallest things take up the most room in your heart."

That's really what God wants – to take something as small as a baby to grab more room in your heart. No matter what you've been through, whatever darkness and gloom you're struggling with, God says "Nevertheless. Nevertheless, I can shine a light. Nevertheless, I can bring you joy. Nevertheless, I am in control. Nevertheless, I love you and will bring you safely through. Nevertheless the gloom and the darkness will end."

The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.