



GIFTS FROM GOD:
The Baptism of the Lord 2015:
The Gift of God's Presence

Today is the eighteenth or last day of Christmas. Probably the only thing of Christmas that remains for most people at this point is the credit card bills. Commercially speaking, Christmas ends on Christmas day. Have you noticed that businesses already have Valentines stuff out in the seasonal aisle? For others Christmas ends after twelve days, like the song, 'The Twelve Days of Christmas.' Here's an interesting fact. The song, the *Twelve Days of Christmas* is an English carol. From 1558 to 1829 Catholics were not permitted to practice their faith openly so they created a Christmas carol where each number in the song was a code for a religious reality. It sounds like something out of the Da Vinci code except this isn't fictional. For example, two turtledoves, the Old and New Testaments, three French hens, the gifts of faith, hope and love. Ten lord's a leaping, the Ten Commandments. Anybody want to guess who the partridge in a pear tree represents? Of course that's Jesus. The Church, however, officially recognizes that there are eighteen days to Christmas. This has been the longstanding tradition of the Church because it has to do with the new beginnings of Jesus, first his birth and today his baptism and start of public ministry.

In the spirit of giving through the Christmas season I have been presenting you with some amazing gifts from God. These gifts are designed especially with you in mind and are capable of affecting tremendous positive change in your life. I know this to be true because several of you over the past few weeks have shared what a positive impact this series of messages have made in your life. On the first day of Christmas we opened the gift of God's care. God chooses to identify with you particularly in the poverty stricken areas of your life so that you can prosper. On the fourth day of Christmas we opened the gift that God can be totally trusted. Simply trusting God is simply wonderful and will prevent you from coming up with all kinds of outrageous conclusions about God which will lead you to no telling where. Last Sunday we opened the gift of God's surprises. Someone said, "Surprises are one of the best parts of being a Christian." As the book of Chronicles affirms; "The eyes of the Lord look back and forth over all the earth for people that he can surprise with his blessings!"

Truth be known, I'd be willing to exchange the weed eater Christmas gift that I bought for myself for any one of these precious gifts but that's not necessary because God's only desire is that you have a joyful and purpose filled life. So what is the fourth and final gift? That gift is the **gift of God's presence**. Receiving this incredible gift into your life is essential if you want to live a life of joy and meaning. I like how Matthew put

it: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.” The first part of Matthew 1:28 is a direct quote from the prophet Isaiah but the second part is Matthew’s own personal commentary for contemporaries like us which says, Immanuel—means that God is with us.

What a great affirmation! God is present in your life all the time. He’s for you, with you and certainly not against you. If you would like to receive the gift of God’s presence more fully into your life there are two extremely important things that you must remember.

First, God is constantly engaged in your life and the lives of others. Things happen to us and others which seem unfair. You may conclude that at best God doesn’t care or at worse that God doesn’t exist. While these feelings are normal, extreme caution must be exercised. The reality is that there are many reasons as to why things happen and none of them require throwing into question the nature and reality of God. Let me give you some examples of why things happen from the Bible: freedom of choice, universal laws of nature, divine intervention, growing in character, getting you to where you need to be and the consequences of your actions. Once again the nature and reality of God is never questioned so why should we? Here are a couple of wonderful scripture passages to always remind you about God’s constant engagement in your life. Revelation 1:8. “I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty.” Psalm 139 “If I go up to the heavens, you are there; if I make my bed in the depths, you are there. If I rise on the wings of the dawn, if I settle on the far side of the sea, even there your hand will guide me, your right hand will hold me fast.”

Second, God is dynamically active in your life even when you’re not aware of it. I like how one person put it. “God is always doing 10,000 things in your life and you may be aware of three of them.” In other words, he’s constantly working behind the scenes on your behalf. For example, what has not happened to you today because God is watching over you? Think about that. Here’s another good example. Why in the world would you ever think that God has forgotten about you? Often when it seems that nothing is happening, that’s when God is making all kinds of things happen for you behind the scenes. A great example of this is found in Habakkuk 1:5, “Look at the nations and watch---and be utterly amazed. For I am going to do something in your days that you would not believe, even if you were told.”

I would like to leave you with two thoughts for reflection:

1. Consider saying to yourself before another minute passes that God is always present with you and others.
2. Affirm in your heart and mind the truth that God is dynamically active and engaged in your life and the lives of others.