

Christmas Shopping for Jesus . . .

I hate crowds. Put me in the midst of folks on Black Friday and you'll see a frenzied me as a shopper who'd like to swat those in her way. Christmas shopping brings out a side of me that I don't like to recognize is there—such intensity of feelings and desire to make sure I get the latest "thing" and get it on sale. I know better, yet there's the temptation to fall into that trap. I also hate Christmas displays and music that start in many stores right after the back-to-school sales. They make me grumpy and turned off to the "Christmas" season.

Something is terribly wrong. If I want to keep my focus on the mind-blowing reality that God chose to take on human flesh, I'm getting too easily sidetracked.

At least as I remember them, things were different when my children were younger. We'd make "straw" for Jesus' manger by writing good deeds on slips of paper and putting them in a shoe box. We wanted to make sure the baby Jesus had a comfy place to rest. We lit our Advent Wreath and added items to the felt Advent banner we had made. On Christmas Day we set a place for Jesus at breakfast. We told our children that the reason we exchanged gifts at Christmas was because God gave us the gift of Jesus. Finances were tighter then and many things were out of our budget. We made do on a lot less and had to be more creative about celebrations. As I look back, I think that "lack" was a gift that allowed us to be more in touch with what was important.

Today I have fewer needs and can usually buy what I want for myself. Most of my family and friends have wish lists on Amazon. In many ways there are fewer surprises and less wonder.

But Christmas—God's coming to live among us in the form of a weak and helpless infant—can never fit into that category. John's gospel tells us that the "Word became flesh and pitched his tent" among us. God wants to be with us in the ordinariness and the messiness of our daily lives. God desires to be with those suffering

from war and famine, those fighting cancer and sick from chemotherapy, those whose homes have been lost in fires, hurricanes, and floods. God holds the ones grieving, gives calm to immigrants fearing deportation and refugees waiting to emigrate to safety. God works for justice for the ones facing prejudice, discrimination, and violence. God aches with those whose bellies are growling with hunger and have no way to get food. God sings lullabies to mothers rocking crying children and whispers words of comfort to those struggling with depression, addiction, or imprisonment. God wants to be with us in everything.

Wherever there is a need, God is there—not looking from a distance from a far-off heaven, but right there with us, in us, next to us. God's there because God loves us—passionately, completely, and beyond all human understanding. There is nothing—absolutely nothing that we can do to earn God's love. It is all pure gift.

How can we respond to such a wondrous gift? How can we give God anything in return?

I think of the Christmas story of the poor child looking for something to give to the baby Jesus. He searched and searched but none of his meager possession seemed appropriate. Realizing that he had nothing material to give, he tip-toed up to Mary and whispered to the sleeping infant "I don't have anything to give you, but I'm here." And God smiled broadly, lifted him to himself, kissed his cheek, and danced. That's exactly what God wanted.

We won't lose sleep Christmas shopping for Jesus. We won't have to rise early to beat the crowds to make sure we get the coveted door buster item at a greatly reduced price. We won't have to pore over the millions of items on Amazon. Jesus has no wish list there. The perfect gift for the God of the universe, who fashioned us and loved us into existence, and loves us beyond imaginings is ourselves—no gift bags, tags, or ribbons needed.



"On this night, let us share the joy of the Gospel. God loves us. He so loves us that he gave us his son to be our brother, to be light in our darkness. To us the Lord repeats, 'Do not be afraid,' ... And I, too, repeat, do not be afraid,"
—Pope Francis