

Parishioners often ask me, “What are you doing on Christmas?” Well, I’ll be at Mom’s and all my siblings and their families will come over for dinner and presents – like every year! It helps that my family are all still in the area, but I’m fifty-six years old, and I’ve celebrated every one of those fifty-six Christmases with my parents and all my siblings – except for one year. In 1988 I was living in London doing research for my doctoral thesis. There were four of us American graduate students living in a large flat in central London. One went home for Christmas. The other two were brothers – Eliga and Warren Gould. Their parents were coming to London to spend Christmas with them. Me? I couldn’t afford to go home. I was going to be alone at Christmas for the first time.

My Mom and Dad, sensing the strangeness of the situation sent me a box of presents to open on Christmas. But the problem was that they mistakenly sent the box by slow boat. Checking up on it a few days before Christmas they found out that the box wouldn’t get to me in

time. Bummer. Christmas in London was nice – roasted chestnuts sold on the streets – there was a good Christmas-y vibe. But it was going to be strange without my family or even any presents to open. But I was a more or less well-adjusted 27 year-old and I wasn't crying in my pillow over having no presents. Instead, I thought I would be a mature adult and watch as Eliga and Warren opened their gifts and celebrated with their parents in our flat Christmas morning. I would be happy for them. It would be OK.

Mr. and Mrs. Gould spent Christmas day with us and it was very nice. When it came time to open gifts the Goulds laid out all the presents they had brought under our rather pathetic Christmas tree. But as they started to hand them out to be opened they began giving some of them to me. What's this, I thought? Mrs. Gould, smiling, said that my Mom had contacted them about my box not showing up, and had asked if the Goulds would take some presents for me with them on the plane. Mom had sent money and told them what to get, and the

Goulds had graciously shopped for me and then had used their luggage space to carry the presents to me. I was touched by the whole event – more than that 27 year-old mature adult cared to admit. I had been taken care of on Christmas, after all.

That is what I would like to preach about this Christmas – that God takes care of us, even when it seems like He won't, or hasn't. And the most basic evidence for this is the first Christmas itself. For centuries God's People had been waiting the Messiah. Their lives had become a mess, partially through their own fault and sins, partially through what seemed like the randomness of historical events. They were oppressed, poor, and powerless. It didn't seem that God looked after them at all.

I think that is how many of us feel. Our own lives might also be a shambles – partially through our own fault, but partially through the events of history and events we have no control over. Where is God then? In our dark times we doubt God. At our best moments we might

decide to face the unwelcome facts of our lives stoically, like an adult – the way I was determined to look at my not very Christmas-y Christmas that year in London.

But God hasn't forgotten us, even though it may seem that we're alone or forgotten. He always sends His personal gift, His Son, into our need. Jesus was born in Bethlehem at the appointed time to save all of humanity from sin and death – all the darkness we had gotten ourselves into. And so at Bethlehem the angels sang, the shepherds and Magi knelt and worshiped, and Mary and Joseph pondered the beauty of it all. He came in a surprising way, when it didn't seem possible He would arrive. Nobody was looking for the Messiah to be born at midnight in a manger – of poor parents. He came, not as a King, but as an infant. Surprise!

That is just how I looked at my distant family's presents arriving in London from an unexpected source – who would have thought it? I was surprised – wonderfully surprised. Although God sent His Son to free all

His children from our bondage to sin, He didn't just come once – long time ago and far away. Jesus will also come to any of us who call on Him from our own messy lives. We will be taken care of in a way, even if at an appointed time, that He knows best. Jesus may not come in expected ways or forms, but in a surprising package via unlooked-for bearers of gifts. But He will come if we are faithful and watch and wait for Him. That is the joyful message of Christmas we celebrate today.

We're never alone on Christmas no matter how far as we may seem to be from love or our loved ones, because Jesus Himself always shows up on this day, and, indeed, on all days, if we'll only kneel before the manger and look for Him.