

It wasn't much of a gift. A few grains of rice wadded up in a ball, smeared with dirt. That's it. If you saw it on the ground you'd throw it away. If you even saw it on your plate you might throw it away. Certainly you would never think it was a gift. But for the man holding it this ball of rice was an interesting story along the road to finding a gift worth giving. His name was Louie Zamperini. In the 1940s he was an Olympic runner. But World War II came along and he became a bombardier aboard a B-24 bomber running over the Pacific Ocean.

Louie was part of a good number of missions before his plane experienced mechanical failure and crashed killing eight. The three surviving crew members floated in shark infested waters for 2000 miles till they came to the Marshall Islands. There they were captured by the enemy and made prisoners of war. The conditions of the prison camp were terrible; daily violence against them, sickness from diseases, and almost a total lack of food. Death followed each POW around as many starved. That's when Louie received the gift. Duva, a kitchen worker, slipped him a few grains of rice wadded up in a ball and smeared with dirt. The most wonderful gift Louie ever saw. Those few grains meant he would live.

Context makes all the difference. If you were given that same ball of rice after Christmas dinner later today you might say, "No thanks, I've already eaten." But if you're starving, literally starving from lack of food, a ball of rice with dirt or no dirt makes the best gift. In fact, it's a gift worth giving. This morning we search Luke's gospel to...

Find a gift worth giving

Put yourselves into the sandals of the shepherds for a minute. How disappointed are you? The night sky became like daytime with the arrival of the angels. The first had said "***I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.***" The scene only got better from there as the one angel was joined by a multitude of angels all singing praises to God. The Glory of the Lord provided the brilliant light. And it wasn't just the scene but what they said. They distinctly said good news for all people. "***A Savior...Christ the Lord.***" This wonderful amazing message for the whole world came first to these shepherds.

Such buildup, such anticipation. Imagine their thoughts. What kind of child is this going to be? God wouldn't send angels if the child wasn't going to be some sight to behold. With minds racing they hurried off and searched frantically through the stables and caves of Bethlehem. When they found the one occupied by the family and the manger filled with baby they stopped. But he wasn't majestic or glorious looking at all. He wasn't in a palace or born into riches. His parents were poor and they were in a barn because there was no room in the inn. He wasn't anything that they might have expected. How couldn't they be a little disappointed?

My sister put the gifts under the tree too early. My nephew for the past three weeks has been asking almost nightly if they can just open the presents. They're sitting there, why not open them? The anticipation is getting to him. If that happened to us when we were younger my dad cooled our growing anticipation by saying, "I don't know what you're excited for, there's just coal in them anyway." What kind of disappointment would there be if there really was coal in them? Kind of like a friend pushing into your hands a smeared ball of rice. Disappointing, unless you're starving.

Starving people don't want iPads or brand name jeans. Starving people don't care about DS games or Lexus ring tones. They don't care about the presents under the tree. All starving people want is food. Anticipation builds as you crave food. It doesn't matter the shape, color, or if it's covered with a little dirt. A few grains of rice is a lifesaver when you're starving. It means life. It's a gift worth giving.

With four weeks of preparation for Christmas, really a Christmas season that probably started for you about six or seven weeks ago is it almost a disappointment this morning? Have you found a gift worth giving? Maybe all the presents are already opened. Maybe the fun is already over for another year. Maybe the kids are already bored with this year's toys. The world already is thinking about getting into return lines tomorrow because they didn't get exactly what they wanted today. The world is returning to starving even though it doesn't know it. We might be starving too.

Death is right over our shoulder, stalking us, waiting for a sign of weakness. Sin is a constant companion. Failures creep up from our past and stare us in the face from the future. We're starving alright, starving for forgiveness, love, and grace. We're in desperate need. God shoves into our hands, a few grains of rice wadded up, the perfect gift, a little baby Jesus. There's a reason the messengers were glorious and the message they spoke of was not. Jesus is the all powerful God made small. He's the all knowing and infinite God made finite. He's the immortal God made human. We see the true worth of God's perfect gift when Jesus died on the cross. Death doesn't stalk us anymore. Sin and guilt have lost their sting. God's gift means life. It's a gift worth giving.

That man who gave Louie the rice, he just kept giving him rice through the whole winter. It kept Louie alive. But each rice ball came with one instruction, "Share this with Phil." Phil was the other crew member that made it alive with Louie to this point. Each time Louie got his few grains of rice he would eat half and stow the others until he could get it to Phil without the guards seeing. It was just a few grains of rice smeared with dirt, but from Louie's hands to Phil's hands it meant life. It was a gift worth giving.

The shepherds that night found a gift worth giving. That's just what they did with it too. It was God's gift to them and they knew it had to go to others. **"When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told."** They shared what they knew, and they knew that this child was God's gift of a Savior to the world.

Does your Christmas celebration move you in the same way? Are you too focused on what's underneath the tree, yet to be opened, or yet to be enjoyed to be moved like the shepherds? Is it a laser like focus on yourself that's keeping you from singing praises to God like the angels? We rightly praise God for the gifts of family, friends, and vacation time. But are we forgetting the greatest gift, the gift that's worth giving to others? Who is your Phil? Who needs the gift worth giving in your life? A child that didn't come this morning? A spouse who misses the reason for the season? A friend with no hope? Or is it you? Do you consider Jesus just a ball of rice not worth much most of the time?

Judging by what the shepherds saw that night Jesus might not seem like he's a gift at all, much less one to share. Unless you're starving. Unless you're someone finding it hard to love yourself or love others and you need to know that Jesus is God's unconditional gift to this world. In Jesus God loves you. Unless your starving because of failed health or hardships. Then you need to see in Christ Jesus the one who conquers all such hardships with a once for all victory over death. Unless your starving wondering just who you are or what you're supposed to do. Then you need to see Jesus in the manger and on the cross as the gift that gives true life. **"Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord."**

I had a professor who used to describe Christmas this way. Christmas is largely about exchanging gifts. It's important to remember God sent you a gift on Christmas. It was wrapped in the womb of the Virgin Mary and it had this for a note attached. From your Father, with love, to you! Jesus is the gift worth giving.