

Second Sunday of Advent (Communion)
“UNEXPECTED GIFTS – PURPOSE”

Texts: Isaiah 40:3-5, 9-11
Luke 2:8-15

Preached: 12/7/14

God has not just one gift, but several for us this year. They are gifts that He has already given, but ones that we are freshly “unwrapping.”

Last Sunday we celebrated the gift of hope and learned from two mothers.

Elizabeth said to Mary, “Blessed is she who believed that the promise made to her by the Lord would be fulfilled.” And Mary responded, “My soul proclaims that greatness of the Lord.” This was before either woman had delivered, before most of the world understood the Savior was coming. Yet Mary and Elizabeth rejoiced in the hope they had in God.



This Sunday we delight in a different gift. We leave the women to their musings and we turn to working men on a quiet hillside.

It was no accident that the angels came to poor shepherds out in the fields – unlikely messengers, as they might seem to the rest of us. The angels of God came to those humble men tending their flocks and appointed them number one announcers of the good news that was to come to all the people. Who chooses shepherds as heralds?

But the shepherds, by their very being and occupation, could uniquely proclaim the God who was coming... Remember the words of the ancient prophet, Isaiah, who called out, “*Behold your God! Behold, the LORD comes...*” instructing the “herald of good tidings.”

Who is this LORD, what will he do? -- The prophet explains: “*He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those who are with young.*” Who had more purpose than ordinary shepherds? By their very nature they embodied the message.

Surprised out in the fields, they accepted their calling. They understood and embraced their purpose. They had to go and see this thing that had taken place, which the Lord had made known to them.

We know that after they had encountered the angels, they “went with haste” and found the holy family, with the child lying in the manger. They were overcome with what they saw and spread the word concerning their meeting with the angels, making known all that had been told them about the child. All those who heard it were amazed. They finally returned to their jobs – taking up again their task of caring for their sheep – but they were changed men. From that night on they glorified and praised God for what they had heard and seen.



The shepherds understood the gift of purpose. God called them and used them as spokespersons, witnesses and proclaimers of the Good News -- just as God has called us. *But do we understand this purpose we have?*

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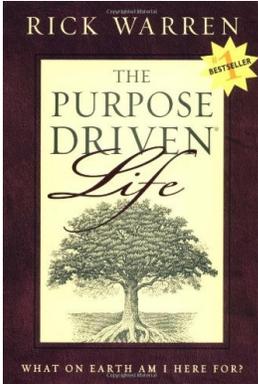
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The Letter to the Ephesians says,

¹¹In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined *according to the purpose of him* who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, ¹²so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory.

Paul says again in his Letter to the Romans:

²⁸We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called *according to his purpose*.



Several years ago some of us read and studied the book by Rick Warren, A PURPOSE DRIVEN LIFE. Warren insisted, “It’s not about you. The purpose of your life is far greater than your own personal fulfillment, your peace of mind, or even your happiness. It’s far greater than your family, your career, or even your wildest dreams and ambitions. **You were born by God’s purpose and for his purpose.**”

The search for the purpose of life has puzzled people for thousands of years. We mistakenly ask self-centered questions like,

What do I want to be?

What should I do with my life?

What are my goals, my dreams for my future?

A man and his wife found themselves lost in the mountains. When they stopped to ask for directions to their campsite, the ranger smiled and explained, “You can’t get there from here. You must start from the other side of the mountain!”

In the same way, *you cannot arrive at your life’s purpose by starting with a focus on yourself*. You must begin with God, your Creator. You were made by God and for God...only in God do we discover our origin, our identity, our meaning...our purpose.

There are countless “self-help” books that suggest ways to discover your purpose in life. They approach the subject from a self-centered viewpoint, usually offering predictable steps to finding your life’s purpose:

Consider your dreams.

Clarify your values.

Set some goals.

Figure out what you are good at.

Aim high.

Go for it!

Be disciplined.

Believe you can achieve your goals.

Involve others.

Never give up.

Of course, following these recommendations can lead to great success. You will usually succeed in reaching a goal if you put your mind to it. But being successful and fulfilling your life’s purpose, (God’s purpose for you) are not at all the same!

The secret to a purpose-driven life is not about finding the right career, achieving your dreams, or planning your life. It is not about how to cram more activities into an overloaded schedule. Actually, it will teach you how to do less in life — by focusing on what matters most. It is about becoming what God created you to be.

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Purpose is a gift, perhaps not one we expected. This special season reminds us who we are and whose we are. We can learn from the humble shepherds. Even the early Puritans saw this and left us this prayer:

“O God, take me in spirit to the watchful shepherds, and enlarge my mind; let me hear good tidings of great joy, and hearing, let me believe, rejoice, praise, adore, my conscience bathed in an ocean of repose, my eyes uplifted to a reconciled Father. Amen.” – *A Puritan Prayer*

C.S. Lewis, that great Christian apologist of the Twentieth century, suggested that we cannot help but do God’s work, even if we are oblivious to our purpose. Lewis said,

“For you will certainly carry out God’s purpose, however you act, but it makes a difference to you whether you serve like Judas or like John.”



Wherever you find yourself on the journey to Bethlehem, however improbable you imagine yourself to be as a herald — ***know that God has a plan and a purpose for your life.*** God will feed you like a shepherd, gather you into his arms, carry you and gently lead you. Thanks be to God for such a gift!