

## *Celebrating God's Unrecognized Gifts*

Christmas is the season of gifts. After all, this is the season when we stop to celebrate the greatest Gift: the gift of salvation in the birth of God the Son.

There's nothing wrong with celebrating that Gift by giving gifts to each other.

It's a real joy to see a child's delight upon opening the toy he or she "always wanted." And there's something indescribable about the warm-fuzzy feeling you get from discovering that you know someone well enough to get "the perfect gift." In these acts, we enjoy the briefest glimpse of God's joy in sending us the Gift that we would never have chosen for ourselves – but which saves our lives.

On the other hand, the frustration of browsing stores full of stuff that *don't* suit that special someone; the disgruntled mumbles of harried shoppers; the outright greed that the season can foster – in these, we see how our fallen nature can twist the delight of gift-giving into something far less than delightful.

Lately I've been reflect on the idea of gifts in general. And it struck me that our lives are *full* of gifts from God – that we seldom recognize. In fact, some of His kindest gifts are the ones that cause us to grumble and complain the most.

One icy morning last week, Grace was scrambling to get out the door for a trip to Luverne, so I offered to start the car. But it wouldn't. No matter what I tried – no combustion; no fuel consumption; no *go*. I ended up moving the car seat to the van ... and grumbling all morning about needing to fix the car.

It wasn't until later that I realized what a *gift* we were given. The car refused to start *in the driveway* – *not* in a distant parking lot; *not* on a cold country road!

Another gift received with grumbling: my snowblower broke. About a week and a half ago, we had a snowy, windy night. The drifts around the school and church were impressive, but the snowblower cleared each sidewalk with ease.

Then I engaged the blower for one last pass on my sidewalk on the way to the garage – and *what a racket!* A chilly half-hour's worth of poking and prodding revealed that a bearing had given out. Grumble, grumble, mutter.

But wait – wasn't this a *gift*? The worn-out bearing didn't become a problem until *after* the snow was all cleared on that sub-zero morning. *What a blessing!* And more: it happened just before a long snowless stretch, giving me the opportunity to find a replacement part. *What a gift!*

One last example: my van's new radiator. A few weeks ago, I had a meeting in Luverne. Grace needed the car, so I took the van. But as soon as parked in Luverne, I smelled the antifreeze. Turns out the (*mutter grumble*) top of the radiator (*mutter mutter*) is made of plastic, and the plastic (*grumble grumble*) had cracked. The solution: a whole new radiator (*MUTTER grumble mutter*).

Yet, again: what a blessing! Antifreeze started spraying on a trip to Luverne, and I noticed it while the van could still be driven home. That means it *didn't* occur during a trip to Pennsylvania, or central Iowa, or anywhere else that would have left our whole family stranded. *Thanks, Lord!*

The list of "unrecognized gifts" could go on for pages. The accident with a deer that totalled our minivan and lead us to find a vehicle more suited to our growing family. The stray dog that wouldn't leave, but became a great pet and a useful creator of chores for sons. The annoyingly long (but cheap) train ride that gave me time to fall in love with the woman I later married.

The more I ponder it, the more I realize that my life has been *packed* with events that I greeted with grumbling, only to learn *later* that they were *gifts*, perfectly selected by my heavenly Father to bless me.

The Bible is chock full of such "unrecognized gifts."

Did you ever stop to think about how Joseph first responded – what his thoughts were – upon learning that his fiancée was pregnant? Until a certain dream was sent to him (Matt. 1:20 ff.), He couldn't have been happy about it!

And how much grumbling do you think he did when told that there was no room for them at the inn? ("No room for a pregnant lady who's in labor? *Really*, ma'am – you're *that fully booked?!?!?*")

Then there was the midnight order to move to Egypt ... the unexpected change of detour back to Nazareth ... and, a decade later, the misplaced Son as they returned from a Passover pilgrimmage.

None of it could have seemed pleasant at the time. Unless he had far more patience than Job, it seems quite likely that Joseph did his share of grumbling.

Yet every apparent misstep, every change of plans, every inconvenience was stamped with God's plan. It fulfilled prophecy perfectly. It conspired to shape the earthly life of Him who would save this grumbling world.

Amazing gifts – which probably were *not* recognized as such at the time!

God still sends those unexpected gifts. They surround us on every side, filling our lives – mine, yours; ours – with His blessing.

Thus the Lord's command, through Paul: "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Php. 4:4). And "give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:18). Rejoice, and give thanks – because even when you can't see how, God is blessing you through it. Even when it comes in camouflage, it remains a gift from your Father!

As we enter the heart of this year's Christmas season, take some time to think about the gifts with which God has filled your life. Not all of those gifts are marked with pretty paper and a bow – but every one reflects your Father's love.

So *rejoice* in the gift of Christ – and give thanks *also* for the many *smaller* ways in which He has shown you His love!