

Christmas came for me some months ago – when an energetic two year old came running to me, as I walked toward the group of children who were gathered in a small room of the care center. Muse knew I was there for him. Instead of a soft tiny baby being placed into my arms, this was like God coming at me full steam ahead – ready or not, here I come! Christmas came that day, at that moment, of first meeting my son Muse in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia.

The very essence of Christmas – not the one we see in the stores, but Christmas for us, the people of God – the essence of Christmas, it strikes me – is about receiving. At its most simple yet most complex, this night is about receiving what God gives to us – a baby who makes every baby holy, a baby who will grow up not just to change the world, but who gives himself on the cross, and gives us the hope of the resurrection. Tonight, we receive the Savior Jesus into our hearts. We receive God tonight – this is Christmas.

Like the instinctive response when a child is passed into your arms – this is how God gives to us, as if handing over a child, giving him away, giving the Christ-child into our arms to receive. But we say it is a season of giving. That it is better to give than receive. Right? We love giving! And right we do – it is fun and exciting to give gifts...and essential too, to give... essential to our human nature **and** nurture. And when we're talking about presents, the things in our stockings, under our tree or sent by UPS, yes, giving is wonderful. And, in God's terms?? Well, maybe it is better to receive, to accept what God has given to us, what God **is** giving to us.

When I held my son Muse in my arms, held by gratitude and love – it was Christmas! Receiving, accepting, welcoming, and embracing that which is passed to us from God. God has so much to give, indeed has already given us all that we need to live as God's people. And Christmas brings us to that moment of deciding if we will receive and accept the gifts God gives to us, receive them with open arms, and embrace them or not.

Our giving from the heart is possible when we first accept God's gifts to us. God is the first giver, and when we receive God's love and grace, God's forgiveness...then we are given the heart to give. When we accept the love God has for us, we can – and will – **become** loving towards others. When we are full to overflowing with gratitude for God's blessings, it is then that we become a **blessing** to others.

On Christmas – when we gather to hear the story of Jesus' birth that took place so long ago – we open our hearts to believe, to trust, that God has come, indeed is still coming to us. Accepting God's love for us may well be the most important thing we will ever do. For God's love **changes** us. By receiving God's love for us, we become people who are giving, who are generous, who are thankful.

So, tonight we continue receiving the gift of the babe in the manger, and tomorrow we continue again. It is every day with God, isn't it, just like a parent with a child. And every Sunday we receive again the gift of God in the holy bread and wine, and we choose to say "yes" to Jesus.

It's true that not all gifts are as easy, or as compelling, to receive as my son Muse was when he came running toward me, or when my daughter Azalech was placed in my lap a few short years ago. And yet, what if we accept God's generosity, God's gifts, and God's loving-care for us? What if we welcome God among us, recognize that God is here? Well, I dare say, accepting God's gifts **will** change us! It will make us new – totally new – it will remake us, and make us whole. We will see that we have been given everything we need, that God is here with us, holding out to us the most holy gift – God's own child, our saviour.

Welcoming the arrival of my children blessed me in realizing that God could give more generously than I desire or deserve, that God could open my heart to receive more deeply than I thought possible – and that in receiving God's grace I would have more to give than I had ever given before. Christmas for me, this year, is about receiving gifts – but not the wrapped present kind. The gift, my friends, the holy and blessed gift that God so generously gives is Jesus – the gift that transforms us as we come to trust that we have all that we need to live faithfully and with hopefulness as God's beloved children.

And like the loving care we instinctively give to a child placed in **our** arms, God has such tender care for us, and invites us to accept this love deep in our hearts – that we may become more fully the people God calls us to be. Amen.