

Matthew 2:1-12

“Let’s Make A Deal” (2016 Star Gift Selections)

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I have a friend in ministry who had the following experience with one of their youth outside the church’s doors one Sunday morning.

She walked by the church and noticed this youth standing outside pacing back and forth.

She inquired what the youth was doing.

The youth replied, “I can’t do it. I can’t go in there. They don’t get me and I don’t get them.

They don’t understand what it is to be a young person these days. They don’t get me. I can’t do it anymore. Until they change I can’t go in there.”

Now, my friend is very smart, so she looked this young person in the eyes and said, “They need your voice. I need your voice in this conversation. They need to hear your struggle. I need to hear your struggle. Let’s make a deal...we go in together and we sit in this struggle together and we move through this together.”

With that this young person entered the sanctuary and worshipped not feeling like an outsider anymore, rather as one of God’s people.

And that my friends is pretty much what the Christian journey of faith is all about – agreeing to sit alongside the other people of God who together are seeking to become who it is God is calling us to be – both as a community and as individuals.

The cool part for me is that it dove tails nicely into the example God gave to us in Jesus the Christ. God became one of us in Jesus the Christ that God might know our struggle and that we might know God can do something with our struggle – something we never could imagine on our own.

And when we come to understand that then we can let go of the things which hold us back.

Enter, Linus from the acclaimed Charlie Brown Christmas Special by Charles Schultz. Earlier in this Christmas Rev. Wright reminded us how Charles Schultz stood up to the producers of that Christmas special and would not take out Linus’ famous recitation of Luke 2:8-14 on stage and thereby reminds us “That’s What Christmas is all about Charlie Brown...” It was a way of sharing faith – there is also a part in the scene that I had never noticed before until recently when I read a blog post by Jason Soroski...

As we watch the scene, I want you to take notice of when Linus drops the blanket... **[930 – CW – show Linus clip]**

[815 & 1100 – Traditional]

If you’re familiar with the scene – Charlie Brown has just finished his exasperated rant:

"Everything I do turns into a disaster. I guess I really don't know what Christmas is all about."
He says to Linus.

Then he throws his hands up and yells, "Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?"

Linus responds with calming assurance, "Sure Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about."

He takes center stage and asks for "Lights Please." Then begins to recite Luke 2:8-14.

"And there were in the same country Shepherds, keeping watch over their flock by night...."

About 40 seconds into the scene something happens when Linus is telling of the Angels visit to the shepherds – when Linus recites the Angel's first words to the shepherds he does something monumental...He say, "Fear not" then he drops his blanket!

He goes on to recount the Angel's words that the basis of this not fearing is because unto you is born this day in the City of David a Savior...which is Christ the Lord...and on earth Peace and Good Will toward men."

Soroski believes it is not by chance that Linus drops his blanket on those words "Fear not" – rather he sees them as Schultz's way of saying we can let go of the things we hold onto so tightly that our knuckles turn white because we believe those things provide us security though in reality they are anything but secure.

"Looking at it now," Soroski writes, "...what Charles Schultz was saying, [is] so simple it's brilliant.

The birth of Jesus separates us from our fears.

The birth of Jesus frees us from the habits we are unable (or unwilling) to break ourselves.

The birth of Jesus allows us to simply drop the false security we have been grasping so tightly, and learn to trust and cling to Him instead."

Soroski continues, "Linus' symbol is his security blanket.

Throughout the Peanuts story, Lucy, Snoopy, Sally and others all work to separate Linus from his blanket.

Even though his blanket becomes a source of ridicule for the otherwise mature and thoughtful Linus, he simply refuses to give it up.

Until now. When he simply drops it.

In that climactic scene when Linus shares "what Christmas is all about," he drops his security blanket, and I am now convinced that this is intentional.", Soroski concludes.

This 1965 cartoon continues to inspire by reminding us that in the midst of fear and insecurity, that true peace and true security can be found in the one place it has always been and can always still be found – In Jesus the Christ.

Now upon posting this reflection, Soroski was inundated with agreeing posters to his blog – however one question seemed to recur – many posters mentioned that when Linus is done

with his recitation – he stoops down, picks up his blanket and walks back into life. Soroski’s readers wondered why after such a profound proclamation Linus would pick up his old security blanket.

So, being a good blogger, Soroski posted a reply, “At some point, out of habit, we reach down and pick that thing right back up. Faith, while powerful, is also delicate.

Linus clearly knows the truth, and clearly proclaims the truth. The knowledge is there and the wisdom is there and the passion is there. So why does he pick it back up?

I think the answer is strikingly clear. It is because we all do the same thing.

We know. We feel. We proclaim.

Yet we gaze in the mirror one morning to find that tattered old blanket draped over our shoulder yet again. And we realize that we have become so used to it being there that we hardly even noticed it.

But that is not where this blanket story ends.”

Soroski then goes on to help us to see another moment in Schultz’s Christmas Classic...the closing scenes when the gang gathers to decorate Charlie Brown’s Christmas Tree and upon finding it Charlie Brown and the gang begin to sing.

Soroski notes how the singing style is different here than in other parts of the cartoon. He indicates that a perfect song here could have been “O Christmas Tree” the notes of which had already been playing quietly in the background.

Instead Schultz has them singing “Hark, The Herald Angels Sing.”

It is, for Soroski, a moment of worship. And, if you look closely at the tree there at the base of the tree is Linus’ blanket as the tree skirt.

We tend to do this in our Christian faith journey – don’t we?

We find those moments of clarity when we can drop what it that holds us back from knowing true peace. The difficulty is that when we drop them just anywhere we have a tendency to pick them back up again. Yet when we drop them at the foot of the tree – in worship – we have a better chance of not picking them back up again.

Linus dropped the blanket the first time on stage.

He dropped the blanket – or rather he lovingly laid the blanket at the foot of that Christmas tree and he never looked back.

We might do well to recall that for many churches they save their Christmas Trees which adorn sanctuaries to recall birth of the Christ and make from them crosses which are brought out during Lent to recall death to sin and birth of new life through the saving grace of our Lord’s life, death and resurrection.

2016 is a chance to do this.

Actually any day – any moment is a chance to do this – however, at this time of year we are poised both in our calendar and in our frame of mind to as the saying goes, “to turn over a new leaf.”

Or, as Linus might say, “To lay our [burden] blanket down.”

You see...

We need each other.

We need each other’s voice.

We need each other’s story.

We need each other to make it in this world.

And, we need a focus.

We need a word of hope to cling to when the burden blanket beckons.

So today, as has become a bit of tradition around here, we choose our 2016 – Star Gifts on this day when we celebrate Epiphany.

The Magi came to visit the Christ Child.

There they laid their gifts in worship – in homage – and it is there they realize the road they came by is not the road they are to leave by.

To go home the same way would prove detrimental.

Life is about mid-course corrections.

Life is like a flight plan a pilot files with the tower.

You have a destination – you have a starting point – you take off and you fly.

Along the way the computer recognizes when you’re off course from your chosen destination and adjusts accordingly.

Worship is how we stay on course.

Like Linus – we have things we need to jettison along the way.

Like Linus – we recall the best place to do so is in worship.

Like Magi – we have choices to make in where we go and how we’ll get there.

Like Magi – we need a focus point – we need a star – we need a word...

Like faithful followers who preceded us – we choose to surround ourselves with other disciples to make the journey together.

Like faithful followers who preceded us – we follow a star to know how to be human – the way God intends.

So, let’s get ready...

Let’s get ready to select our Star Gift 2016...

In preparation, I offer the same caution I do each year at this time:

This is not a magical word – it’s not even a miraculous word – this word is not gospel for your life in the sense that it must be adhered to without derivation or discernment – although it could be gospel in the sense that perhaps it is a bit of good news which you need to hear.

Secondly, this word is not necessarily something you have to do – it isn't meant to be guilt inducing to make you add one more thing to an already full plate – it might be liberating in that it reminds you of something you need to receive. It may simply mean to sit in God's presence with this word and contemplate this word until its message becomes clear.

Finally, this word might not mean the same thing as the year unfolds. Sometimes the word doesn't even make sense to us until well into the New Year. Sometimes we will find that we lose the word – find the word – lose the word then find it again... The point is that these words are intended to provide a starting point for reflecting on faith and in so doing these words will open us to seeing when and where we might encounter the living God in our day-to-day.

Now the instructions:

The basket will come down your row – send them down the whole row then to the row behind you – as the basket comes by simply reach in – NO PEEKING – and grab a star card.

Then consider the word to be a gift from God.

This moment is about stopping long enough to receive something from God.

Like any gift it can be received with joy or forgotten and discarded.

Do you want to see your 2016 word?

I invite the ushers to come forward.

[play music during star gift selection]

[close in prayer after star gifts are selected]