

Brown Paper Packages

Luke 2:1-7

December 24, 2001

Peter Hiett

[Peter enters the stage with a black nose and with sheep ears on his head.] “Baah. Baah. I’m a sheep . . . from the manger . . .”

Just kidding. Every year I’m a character from the first Christmas, but I’ve run out of characters. So Aram suggested I should be a sheep. Someone else suggested if not a sheep, an ox or an ass . . . but that’s too easy. I thought about the *star* — a giant ball of hot gas . . . but I’ve done that a lot. Gary thought I should be Mary . . . but that could destroy your faith.

So this year I’d like to tell you one of my favorite Christmas stories from times more recent:

Every year when Miss Thompson met her new students she would say, “Boys and girls, I love you all the same. I have no favorites.” Of course, that wasn’t completely honest. She, being human, couldn’t seem to help having favorites and having some students that honestly she just *didn’t like*.

Teddy Stallard was a boy that Miss Thompson did not like. When she spoke to Teddy, he answered in monosyllables. He always had a deadpan, blank expression on his face, and his eyes were glassy and unfocused. His clothes were musty; his hair was unkempt. He was not attractive. He was not likeable. And he smelled.

Teddy was very easy to place in a category labeled “Failure.” Of course, at the time Miss Thompson would never have admitted a thing like that, not even to herself. Yet when she marked Teddy’s papers, she got a certain perverse pleasure out of putting “X’s” next to the wrong answers. She marked “F” at the top of his papers with a flair.

Perhaps she hadn’t paid close enough attention to Teddy’s progress reports. But then again, maybe she didn’t really *want* to — that complicated things.

The reports read:

1st Grade: Teddy shows promise with his work and attitude, but poor home situation.

2nd Grade: Teddy could do better. Mother is seriously ill. He receives little help at home.

3rd Grade: Teddy is a good boy, but too serious. He is a slow learner. His mother died this year.

4th Grade: Teddy is very slow, but well-behaved. His father shows no interest.

Christmas came that year and the boys and girls in Miss Thompson's class brought her Christmas presents, lovely packages tied up with beautiful ribbons and bows. They piled their presents on her desk and crowded around to watch her open them. It was easy to tell which one was Teddy's gift. She was surprised he had brought one. It was wrapped in brown paper and held together with a string.

When Miss Thompson opened Teddy's present, out fell a gaudy rhinestone bracelet with half the stones missing, and a bottle of cheap perfume.

The other kids began to giggle and snicker over Teddy's gifts, but Miss Thompson at least had enough sense to silence them by immediately putting on the bracelet and putting some of the perfume on her wrist. Holding her wrist up for the other children to smell, she said, "Doesn't it smell lovely?" The children, taking their cue from the teacher, agreed.

At the end of the day, when school was over and the other children had left, Teddy lingered behind. He slowly came over to Miss Thompson's desk and said softly, "Miss Thompson, Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother . . . and her bracelet looks really pretty on you too. I'm glad you liked my presents."

When Teddy left, Miss Thompson dropped to her knees and pleaded with God to forgive her. When she stood up she was a different person, and she was a new teacher.

I've wondered what exactly it was that made Miss Thompson change. I mean, it *was Christmas* . . . as Teddy said to Miss Thompson, "I'm glad you liked my present." Maybe that present reminded her of Jesus. It was so much like that first Christmas. Teddy had taken his greatest treasure, indeed he'd taken his nine-year-old heart—his deepest longing—and he had wrapped it in ordinary, brown paper and tied it with string.

His deepest love wrapped
In such a way that the world would snicker,
All in order to give his treasure
To one so undeserving and callous

On that first Christmas God took His love—His deepest longings—His heart—Jesus from "the bosom of the Father"—and wrapped Him in ordinary, brown, peasant flesh, born of Mary in a stable and laid in the food trough, such that the world would snicker . . . all in order to give His deepest love to ones so undeserving and callous.

"The true light that enlightens all men was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not." We crucified Him. And He freely suffered and died that He might pay the judgment on our sins. He rose victorious that He might be born a living presence in our brown paper hearts, through faith by grace.

He is Emmanuel . . . it means "With Us God" — "God With Us."

He became incarnate . . . it means “God in ‘Carnos’ (flesh . . . blood, sinew, membranes, bone),” that we might touch Him, see Him, know Him.

He entered our world that we might enter His.

I mean, maybe Miss Thompson realized that if *God*—the *Logos*—the *Meaning*—The *Word*—had become flesh to love her, touch her, and save her . . . to pay the ultimate price for her . . . well, then, maybe she could become more than reasons, programs, and blackboards to Teddy. She could *love* him.

“Emmanu Thompson” (like “Emmanuel”): Miss Thompson *with* Teddy. And not just *with* him, she’d be “In Teddy” (like “Incarnate”): She’d enter Teddy’s world, feel Teddy’s sorrows, and pay for Teddy’s pain.

Maybe *that’s* why Miss Thompson chose to change, chose to love Teddy, chose to work with Teddy . . . give her heart to Teddy . . . tutor Teddy.

Jesus said, “As the Father sent me, even so send I you.” Paul said, “I have become all things to all men so I might by all means save some.” So Miss Thompson *chose* to “love as she had been loved.”

So perhaps it was the present—the treasure wrapped in brown flesh in a manger, or perhaps it was *Teddy* himself. Teddy was so much like that gift:

plain,
less than ordinary,
glassy eyes,
deadpan face;
 . . . but that was wrapping around . . .
a heart that was priceless,
“a treasure in an earthen vessel,”
flesh that encased the image of God,
a spirit that was breathed into Teddy by God,
a spirit that longed for communion, for love,
 for God, for eternity, for home.

And the best way that nine-year-old could articulate that longing was with the word “mother” and then the word “teacher.”

So *maybe* she saw the image of God in Teddy as his eyes brightened for a moment and he said, “Miss Thompson, you smell just like my mother.” Maybe she saw the image of God, but even more, maybe she was *Jesus himself* (“the very image of the invisible God, first born of all creation”).

- His Spirit makes His home in those who turn to Him and trust Him.

- Jesus is “the light that enlightens all men,” drawing His own to surrender to His love.
- And Jesus did say, “Whatever you did to the least of these, my brethren, you did it to me.” (Teddy was the least.)

Maybe she realized then just whose paper she enjoyed marking with an “F.”

Maybe she realized then that Jesus was at work in the plain, little, ordinary, brown flesh she called “Teddy.”

Maybe she realized then that all good things come from the Father, and that she’d never before received a compliment that good and that undeserved: “You smell like my mother.” Love and grace like *that* only come from one place.

Maybe she realized then that Teddy was just like his present: priceless treasure wrapped in brown paper, extraordinary in the ordinary; so much like Jesus, Son of God, wrapped in ordinary flesh.

Isaiah wrote, “He had no form or comeliness that we should look at him and no beauty that we should desire him.” That is, if you were in Bethlehem that night 2000 years ago, it would have looked so plain and ordinary; perhaps *less* than ordinary (even wretched). It would have been packed with poor peasants, there for the Roman census. No wise men yet, just poverty, confusion, shepherds, and smells.

So you can just forget about your Hallmark nativity scenes with the glowing baby Jesus and the Grade A “ox and ass-a-lowing,” and the well-dressed and manicured “shepherds-a-kneeling.” The Scripture says that when the shepherds told their tale “all who heard it wondered.” Why did they wonder? — Because certainly it was such an extraordinary tale for such an ordinary night, such extraordinary treasure wrapped in such an ordinary manger.

If you were to see that manger, do you know what you would say? “Look! The Son of God who taketh away the sin of the world! I have seen the Messiah, and I am undone!” *No.* I think you’d say something like this: “The government really needs to do something about those homeless people. How pitiful. They put that baby in a food bin!”

Would you see “the light that enlightens all men,”
 “by whom and through whom all things were created”
No. You’d see something like Teddy Stallard.

Some of you complain that you’ve never seen God. Well, have you ever seen Teddy Stallard? I mean, really *seen* him? It took revelation from angels to see the extraordinary in the ordinary that first Christmas night. Maybe Miss Thompson had a revelation as Teddy said, “You smell just like my mother” (the revelation of what brown paper packages often contain; the revelation of Jesus).

How many people must have walked past the stable that night?
How many times have I walked past Teddy Stallard?
How many times have I walked past Emmanuel?

He waits for me to see Him—to recognize Him. I don't, and then I complain, "God, where *are* you?"

I wonder if Joseph wondered, "God, where *are* you? I'm tired, hungry, confused. My wife just gave birth in a stable! God, *where are you?! . . .* " And he was holding Him in his hands.

Maybe we look for God in the wrong places, and we need a revelation.

Maybe He does not dwell in buildings and books and seminaries.

Maybe His temple is still made of ordinary, brown, white, black, and red flesh.

Maybe we encounter Him, when we hand a child some water, in a way we don't when we enter a building, read a book, or take a class.

Maybe we need a revelation.

Paul wrote, "From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view. Even though we regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard Him thus no longer."

The *human* point of view saw a baby in a manger.

The *heavenly* point of view: The Revelation is
"Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, the Everlasting
Father, Prince of Peace, Emmanuel."

The *human* point of view sees Teddy Stallard and the people in this room.

The *heavenly* point of view: The revelation is the New
Jerusalem coming down, the Bride of Christ, the body
of Christ, the temple of the Living God.

Now, we are *not God* as Jesus was God, but we are His dwelling—His temple—His home through Christ. And we are Christ's body. "This is the mystery hidden for ages, Christ in us, the hope of glory." *Emmanuel*. That word changes things. *He* changes things.

Once there was an old monastery of a dying order that contained five, old, tired, very ordinary monks. A few miles away lived a wise, old hermit, some said a prophet agonizing the impending demise of their order. The monks decided to visit the hermit.

They explained the situation: no one was interested in joining their order. They asked, “Is there anything you can tell us that will save the monastery?”

“No, I’m sorry,” said the hermit. “I don’t know how your monastery and your order can be saved. The only thing I can tell you is that one of you is an apostle of Christ.”

The monks left disappointed yet fascinated with the hermit’s word. They each secretly pondered this extraordinary word (for they were all so ordinary), wondering, Could it be Brother Thomas? He certainly is intent in his devotion. Could it be Brother Elrod? He is disagreeable, yet he is usually right. Could it be Brother Stephen? He’s so passive and boring, yet no one is more trustworthy and loyal.

And so it went. And as they pondered the hermit’s words, they each began to treat the other not as ordinary but extraordinary, on the off chance he might be the apostle.

They never found out who that apostle was, but their monastery was saved. Soon men came from far and wide to join this extraordinary monastery full of extraordinary monks.

There wasn’t just “an apostle”—one treasure wrapped in brown paper; they were *all* treasures wrapped in brown paper.

So, brothers and sisters, one of you is an apostle of Christ. (An apostle is a delegate, one who is sent.) And *all* of you are, or *could be*, the temple of the Living God.

The way you see people
changes the way you treat people, and
The way you treat people
changes people.

Choose to see what God says is true, and God uses you to help people become who they really are.

God told Mary, “You shall bear a son—Jesus—Son of the most high—Emmanuel—God with us.” God tells you, “Anyone in Christ is a new creation.”

So God used Mary and her body to shape and nurture Christ Jesus. Her soul magnified the Lord, and she gave birth to Christ. Perhaps Miss Thompson gave birth to Christ . . . in Teddy, and her soul sang Mary’s Magnificat as she nurtured Christ in Teddy—the new Teddy—the new creation.

So I wonder what made Miss Thompson change as Teddy handed her the brown paper package and said, “You smell just like my mother, and her bracelet looks good on you too”?

Perhaps she thought of Jesus, that brown paper package in Bethlehem; maybe then she remembered that Jesus was in this brown paper package named “Teddy,” and seeing *that*, she realized Jesus was in a brown paper package named Jean Thompson, and that Jesus would be born or formed in Teddy through her.

If you think I'm only speaking in metaphors, I'm *not*. Paul wrote to the Galatians, "I am in birth pains until Christ be formed in you." Paul thought he gave birth somehow to Christ in the Galatians. Maybe Miss Thompson gave birth somehow to Christ in Teddy, just as Teddy gave birth somehow to Christ in her (God in her).

If you think I'm stretching, read I Corinthians 15. For *this* Christ was born and conquered: "That God may be everything to everyone." He's in brown paper packages *everywhere*.

Jesus is the living, resurrected presence of God invading this dark world. He's born into, through, and out of brown paper packages tied up with string.

Well, Miss Thompson was a new teacher, and by the end of the year Teddy showed dramatic improvement. He caught up and even excelled. Then summer came. And Miss Thompson didn't hear from Teddy for a long time. Then one day she received a note that read:

Dear Miss Thompson:

I wanted you to be the first to know. I will be graduating second in my class.

Love, Teddy Stallard

Four years later, another note came:

Dear Miss Thompson:

They just told me I will be graduating first in my class. I wanted you to be the first to know. The university has not been easy, but I liked it.

Love, Teddy Stallard

Four years later:

Dear Miss Thompson:

As of today, I am Theodore Stallard, M.D. How about that? I wanted you to be the first to know. I am getting married next month, the 27th to be exact. I want you to come and sit where my mother would sit if she were alive. You are the only family I have now; Dad died last year.

Love, Teddy Stallard

Miss Thompson went to that wedding and sat where Teddy's mother would have sat . . . as if *she* had given birth to Teddy. Maybe she did . . . or even better, Jesus *in* Teddy — *Christmas*.

I love that story. But I must tell you, I don't know if it's historical or fictional. I've heard both, and maybe it's somewhere in between. So I don't know if Teddy's story is fiction, but it is *true*, for I am absolutely sure that Christmas is true as well as historical.

I don't know if Teddy's story is fiction, but I know *this* story is not:

About thirty years ago a nine-year-old boy played on his neighborhood street near Boston. A brown paper package . . . he looked like all the other little boys. They were mean little boys, for they teased the old widow that lived on their street. But for some reason the widow had picked this boy out; she didn't tell him, but she prayed for him and was kind.

At a bachelor party when he was 17, he gave his life to the living Christ our Lord. When he returned home he knew he was supposed to tell the old widow. When he did, she ran and got some cake and threw a party and informed him, "Aram, I've prayed for you every day for 15 years."

Just a brown paper package . . . with distinctive Armenian features. Now Aram Haroutunian is our Pastor of Congregational Care . . . an apostle of Christ, delegate of Christ Jesus.

I don't know if Teddy's story is fiction, but I know *this* is not:

Karen was a pastor's daughter, and the most messed-up kid in school asked her out. He was a "stoner," a thug, and an atheist . . . a brown paper package tied up with string and a *warning label*: UNSAFE. But she told him she would go out with him if he went to youth group with her. She'd enter *his* world if he would enter *hers*.

At the first meeting he was greeted by a kid with a black eye. He had given it to the kid the week before. But the youth group loved him and gave him a Bible. He had to sneak it home and hide it under the mattress from his atheist father. He read it at night in secret—the Living Word, and the seed took root and was born in that brown paper stable of a heart. His name is Duncan Sprague, our Pastor of Missions and Outreach.

I don't know if Teddy's story is fiction, but I know *this* is not:

Seven-year-old Kristen sat on her pink, frilly bed and asked her daddy, "How do you know if you have Jesus in your heart?" He was a nominal Christian (a brown paper daddy), so he said, "Ah, I don't know." But all at once he *did* know. He knew he needed to ask Jesus to be there and reign there, and he knew it was more than Kristen asking the question. She was a brown paper package too.

And so they knelt by the pink, frilly bed and prayed that Jesus would make His home in them. That next week seven-year-old Kristen and her daddy Keith Bushaw were baptized together. Keith Bushaw is our Youth Pastor.

I don't know if Teddy is fictional, but *Jill* is not:

Jill's husband was a drug addict and an adulterer, and he abused Jill. She was a new believer, and he was a brown paper package. She could have easily marked an "F" on that package and discarded it. But she decided to love him and pray for him, with her new friends from church. It must have hurt, but she gave birth to Jesus in her husband. Her husband is now our Church Administrator and my good friend. His name is Bobby Fisher.

I don't know if Teddy is fictional, but Aram, Duncan, Keith, and Bobby are *not* . . . and I could go on . . . Gary, Alva, Mike, Julie, Gretchen, Peter . . .

I'm certainly not saying we should all be church staff (God forbid!), but I'm just saying that whether or not Teddy Stallard is fiction, Christmas is *not*.

And that means you're sitting in a room full of brown paper packages . . . in a *world* full of brown paper packages.

So this Christmas may you have the faith to unwrap your gifts with love. They only open with the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Merry Christmas, Miss Thompson!
Merry Christmas, Bride of Christ!
Merry Christmas, Mother Church!
Enjoy your presents.

*O holy Child of Bethlehem!
Descend on me, I pray;
Cast out my sin and enter in,
Be born in me, tonight.*

If you just prayed that prayer and meant it, He is doing it. It may hurt . . . take some time to understand . . . but He's real and He's alive, and it *is* Christmas.

Some of you will open a bunch of gifts tomorrow, and they'll be easy to open. They won't be worth all that much . . . but the greatest gifts are in this room. They're not as easy to open, but they're *so much better*.

Some of you are struggling; some of you are hurting. But hang in there. Look how much it cost Jesus to open His gift!

He wasn't just born in a manger;
He died on a cross.
So see people the way God sees people;
Treat people the way God treats people.

He died for them and for the joy that was set before Him.

In Jesus' name, Merry Christmas. Amen.

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