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Study guide

Uplifting Christmas gifts

By Robert C. Blezard

How many gifts have you received over a lifetime? Hundreds? Some are easily forgotten—stored in your attic of faded memories. But others you remember and cherish in your heart all your life, even longer than the item itself may have endured or after the person who gave it to you has passed on. What do you remember?

Exercise 1: Meaning and value

- When it comes to gifts, how would you define meaning? Value? How are the two terms similar? How are they different? As a pair, how do meaning and value complement one another?
- Are meaning and value connected to price and cost? Why or why not?
- Generally speaking, what qualities imbue a gift with meaning? Value?
- For meaning and value, describe the importance of the following factors:
 - Relationship with the giver.
 - How the gift was given.
 - Why the gift was given.
 - How the gift connects to your life.
 - How the gift relates to the shared relationship between you and the giver.
- How does the search for a meaningful and valuable gift affect your gift-buying habits?

Exercise 2: Your gift-giving

Describe how you choose gifts for the people on your list.

- How and when does the cost come into significance?
- Do you shop for everybody the same way? Explain.
- How do you decide what to give for each person?
- What are the considerations that come to mind for *every* person on your list?
- What special considerations come into play for the really special people?



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- In gift-giving, how do you experience these two motivations: The joy I feel in giving someone a gift that is meaningful, and the joy I want the other person to feel in receiving it.
- Of the two motivations above, which is more powerful? How do you balance or cope?

Exercise 3: Kinds of gifts

Gifts come in all sizes, colors, shapes and modes. For the following types of gifts, discuss how they can be especially meaningful and why; how they might not be especially meaningful and why. Under what circumstances might you want to receive such a gift, and under what circumstances might you not want to receive such a gift?

- A store-bought gift.
- A hand-me-down gift.
- A handmade gift.
- An antique or vintage gift.
- An edible (or drinkable) gift.
- A gift of service.
- A gift of entertainment (such as a play or concert).
- A gift of presence or love.
- A gift of cash.
- A “gift” from the ELCA Good Gifts catalog, or a contribution to a charitable organization made in my name.

Exercise 4: Special gifts given

Describe a special present that you gave to someone. Something chosen or prepared with great thought and care. Something that was received with great joy. Something that made a connection with the recipient. Something that filled you with satisfaction and joy to have given it. What made this gift so special?

Exercise 5: Special gifts received

Describe a special present that you received and have always treasured.

- What was the gift? Describe it in detail.
- What made it special?
- What immediate impact did it have on you? Why?
- How has it affected your life over time?



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- How do you preserve the memory?
- What happened to it?
- How do you tell the story to others?

Exercise 6: Share stories

Play a game where members of your study group share stories of gifts of a special variety. Fold a sheet of paper into eight rectangles by folding it on itself three times (in half to make two rectangles, half again to make four rectangles, half again to make eight). On each rectangle write one of the following categories:

- The best gift I ever received.
- The gift I treasure most.
- The most unusual gift I ever received or gave.
- The dumbest gift I ever gave or received.
- The gift I received that I really disliked.
- The present that was “re-gifted” (received or passed on).
- The most expensive gift I ever gave or received.
- The gift I received or gave from someone I didn’t like.

(If you can think of better topics, go for it! Additional topics? Make another sheet.) When done, cut out the rectangles, fold them into quarters and put them in a basket. Have each person pick out a topic and tell a story.

If there is extra time, the study group members can return their topics to the basket for another round, or give their topics to another person for them to share a story.

Exercise 7: Writing prompts

Many people are surprised at how well they can write if they are only prompted and given the opportunity. As a writing exercise, have your study group create stories. Give everybody lined paper and a pen, and keeping the time with a clock or on your cellphone (most have a timer or stopwatch function), ask them to write for five minutes on this prompt:

My favorite Christmas gift

Here is the one and only rule: No stopping. Once the exercise begins, everybody has to keep their pens moving until the five minutes is up. Let those thoughts flow from brain to paper, from memory to ink. When done, share.



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If you have time and desire, choose another prompt, perhaps from the previous exercise.

Exercise 8: Gift anxiety

You see those ads every Christmas that use the ploy: “Looking for that *perfect* gift for that *special* someone who is *hard to shop for*?”

- Does gift-giving sometimes cause you anxiety? Under what circumstances and why?
- Do you feel pressure to give a present that will be meaningful and of value? Explain.
- Why are some people so hard to shop for? Who is your hardest person to shop for? Why?
- Is it hard to buy presents for people who already have everything and don't seem to need anything? How have you coped with this issue?
- Have you considered a gift to a charitable organization in honor of your loved one, such as something from ELCA Good Gifts (elca.org/goodgifts)?

Uplifting Christmas Gifts

Edited by Erin Strybis

Earlier this year, *Living Lutheran* invited readers and writers to submit personal stories of gifts that illuminated the true meaning of Christmas for them. From a kind note to beloved people to a dozen potatoes, the responses surprised, delighted and moved us. Select submissions are included here; you can read all of them in the web version of this story at livinglutheran.org.

These heartfelt meditations remind us of God's best gift ever—Jesus, a child born for us, a son given to us (Isaiah 9:6), a savior incarnate. May they bring you Christmas joy.



A quiet, holy night

The *Hamilton* tickets for Christmas—epic. The mama bear necklace with two baby cubs following the birth of my second child—precious. A few laps around the Kansas Speedway in a Ferrari for my husband one Christmas—priceless. But the best gift I've received? Does it count if I gave it to myself?

One Christmas season, while the world prepared for the birth of a savior, decorated and shopped, I stayed home with my newborn daughter.

The first few weeks of her life were a blur. Nursing, changing diapers, scrolling Facebook at 3 a.m. while nursing, rocking, showering occasionally, melting down, snacking constantly and repeat. As a pastor on maternity leave, I didn't have to plan or lead services. By the time Christmas Eve came I still hadn't been to church with the baby. I had no plans to attend either. And that was my gift that Christmas Eve—a quiet night at home with my 1-month-old.

I have a picture from that night where I am dressed up holding my daughter: she's asleep in that newborn haze and I'm smiling, the light from our Christmas tree in the background. That evening, I gave thanks for the life of Jesus, born a baby, while I held my own. I felt a kinship to Mary, full of wonder and awe, celebrating the gift of a child on a beautiful, silent night.

—*Kimberly Knowle-Zeller, writer and ELCA pastor,
Cole Camp, Mo.*

“It flew like the wind!”

My Christmases involved bicycles. My first one, a Christmas present when I was 7, had a chain problem that always threw me off. It couldn't be fixed. The next bike, a Christmas gift I received at 15, was old and very heavy. Living in hilly Pennsylvania, pedaling was a struggle.

Much later I was in the Navy and stationed in Mayport, Fla. At a bike store near the base, I spied a nice super-light English racer on display. When I was discharged, Christmas wasn't far away so I headed directly to the bike store, hoping it still had that beautiful racer. Indeed it did. I stopped and bought the racer with some severance money. It was my Christmas gift to me—and it flew like the wind!

There's more to the story: A friend from work told me she came to America as a German refugee on an orphan rescue ship. Hers was the very last orphan rescue trip; it was 1945, the war in Europe had ended. She said she had always wanted a bicycle and asked if I knew where to buy one. Well, to share my joy, I gave her that racer and said, “Merry early Christmas!”

—Tom Bessa, member of Reformation Evangelical Lutheran Church, Orlando, Fla.

From the heart

My most meaningful Christmas gift that I ever received was a half dozen potatoes. Back in 1995, our family was going through some tough times. My 8-year-old grandson told me that he knew I liked potatoes, so he gave me some. It was the most precious gift I ever got because it was from his heart.

—Leone Thorne, member of Calvary Lutheran Church, Rio Linda, Calif.

Humble service

In 1996, I attended a Christmas Eve service at an Episcopal church. There was an appeal for volunteers to serve a Christmas Day meal at their outreach center for Atlanta's homeless community. I signed up and, admittedly, regretted my decision the following morning.

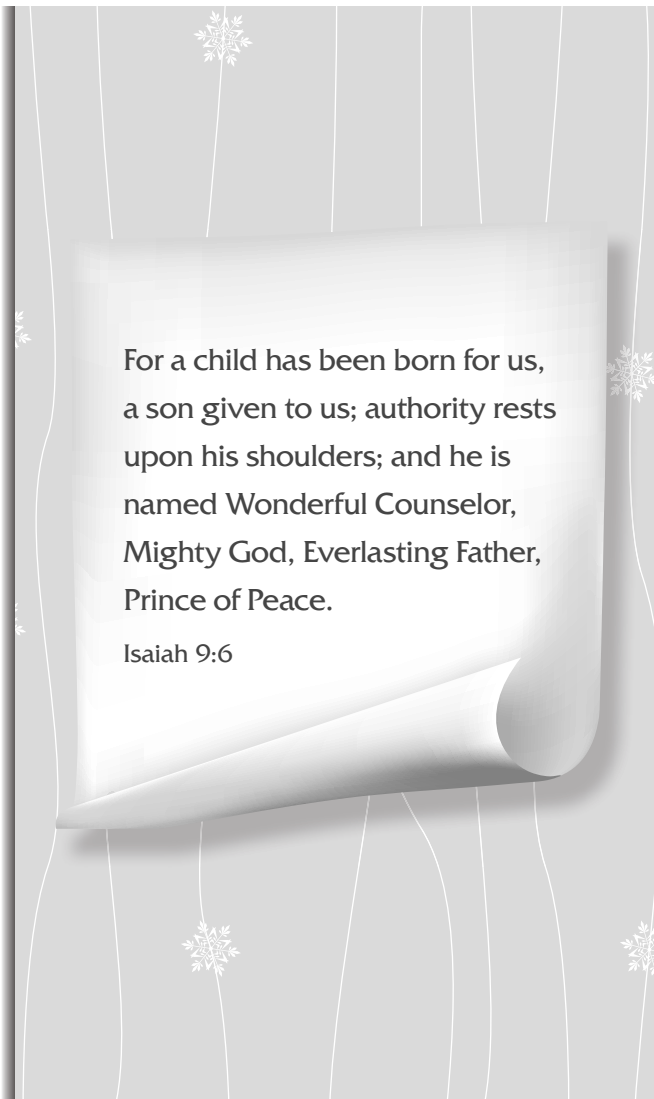
After arriving at the center, my assignment was to wait on its residents. Instead of opening presents, I was serving tables, like those who are humble and harassed. Ultimately, the experience was a gift.

Receiving presents is often about new *things*, but serving others brings about new *life*.

Jesus—the babe born in a lowly manger—came to earth to serve us, telling his disciples: “I am among you as the one who serves.” Waiting on others, ministering to the needy and lifting the fallen, Jesus is the greatest servant and the greatest gift.

—William Flippin Jr., writer and pastor of Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Atlanta.





For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us; authority rests
upon his shoulders; and he is
named Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God, Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6

An act of kindness

It was 1993—a bleak December New York City morning. Woolworth’s was closing. Change was inevitable, I knew, but this was going too far.

Running errands and grieving, I barely noticed the individual calling me, “Frau!” I looked up. There was Gunther, a man who was homeless. He usually occupied the back pew of our little German church, separated by 10 empty rows from the elderly women who sat farther forward to avoid him. During the passing of the peace, I was the only one who went to greet him.

Smelling of alcohol and urine, the strong grip of his roughened hand had felt vaguely threatening. What did he want of me here, now, on the sidewalk?

He rummaged around in a dirty cloth sack. “Here,” he said gruffly, pushing a prickly object into my hand—a tiny shopworn Christmas tree with faded branches and miniature colored balls. The tag hanging from one limb read “Woolworth, \$4.50.” He had likely gone through the trash behind Woolworth’s and picked this up. I barely had time to thank him before he moved down the street.

Twenty-five years later, I still remember this act of kindness and memorialize Gunther by setting out his gift every Christmas.

—Marianne Bahmann, an ELCA member from Allentown, Pa.

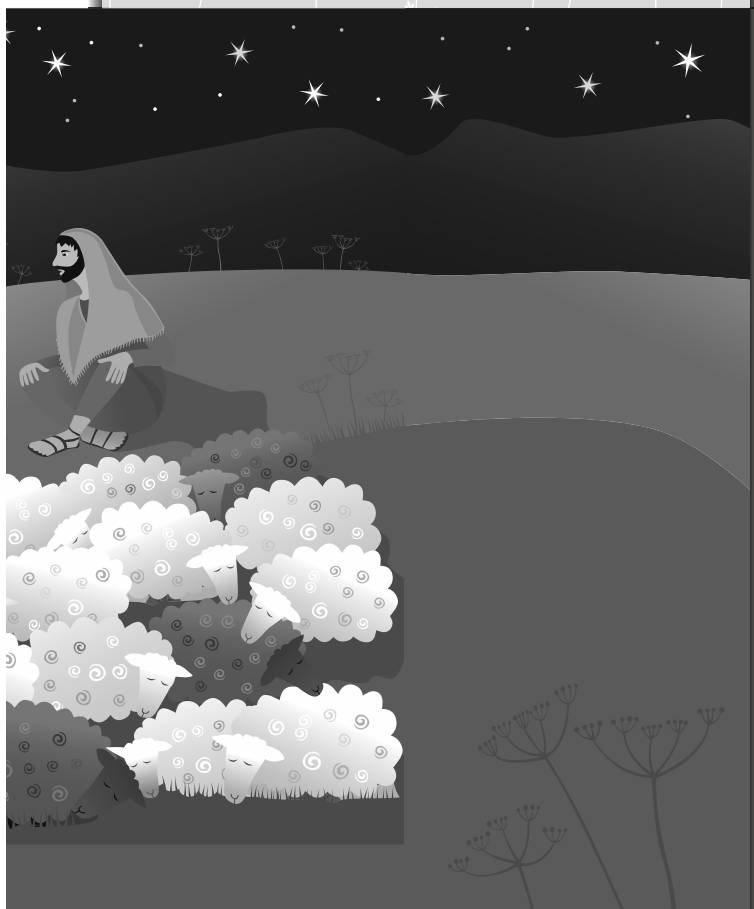
Christmas joy

I received my best Christmas gift as an adult in 1980. I was recently married at the age of 32. Not only did I gain a wonderful wife, Sandy, but also a teenage daughter, Wendy.

I always, of course, had a family, but not one that I lived with and spent every day with. Because of this, I could not wait to celebrate my first Christmas with my new family. My anticipation was great leading up to Christmas, and the joy of that day was more than I expected.

Incidentally, I first met Sandy when I was choir director in a Lutheran church and invited members to join the choir for our Christmas Eve Service. She did just that in 1979, and we were married the following July.

—Dale T. Rodgers, member of St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church, Quakertown, Pa.



The gift of time

It was the morning of Christmas Eve, and I had so much to do. My two young sons were full of pre-Christmas excitement and I was having a hard time focusing on what to do next.

The phone rang. My mother-in-law said, “Bring the boys over at noon. I’m giving you the afternoon free. Merry Christmas!”

It was an unexpected, perfectly timed gift of just what I needed most. Dropping my sons off at their grandmother’s, I discovered they were joining their cousins for the afternoon. She’d given the mothers instructions not to return until 6 p.m. to pick them up.

We were back promptly at 6 p.m. We found Grandma exhausted from her afternoon with nine grandchildren, but she smiled, listening to the mothers share how they had used her gift of time. One did last-minute shopping. One wrapped presents. One did some baking. And one admitted to taking a bubble bath, followed by a nap.

That unexpected gift of time represents to me the essence of selflessness—giving what is needed most, despite the cost to the giver. Kind of like God’s unexpected but perfectly timed gift of Jesus, the baby in the manger.

—*Katharine Redpath, pastor of St. John Lutheran Church in Santa Fe, Texas.*

“Words that stay”

When I was 9, my parents got divorced. My dad suddenly became this missing part of my story who visited every three years—if we were lucky. In the interim, he sent boxes filled with outfits and gifts for birthdays, graduations and Christmases.

One Christmas we received a package that contained a yellow Post-it note that said, “Love you, Dad.” I saved this simple treasure in a shoebox, alongside other notes I had received from family. Whenever I read them, I am transported by these small time capsules, which echo the voices of my loved ones.

In my life, my dad’s notes were and are still rare, but my heart jumps every time I see one because taking time to write thoughts and feelings is a gift that can’t be purchased. Letters take time and intention. So when my dad asked me what I wanted as a wedding gift, I asked him to write me a letter—to gift me with words that stay.

As Christmas approaches, I find myself looking back on my dad’s wedding letter and all the words of love I’ve collected. They inspire me to consider how, in my own life, I form part of God’s love story with the world. They remind me of the great gift we received when God sent us Jesus, “the Word became flesh.”

Even though Jesus no longer physically walks among us, we are all reminded of how much we are loved through Bible stories left for us. Jesus’ life and words remind us everyone matters in God’s ongoing story.

—*Kristina Diaz, a portrait photographer and writer, attends Getsemani Lutheran Church in Dorado, Puerto Rico.*

Then the people rejoiced because these
had given willingly, for with single mind
they had offered freely to the Lord

1 Chronicles 29:9

A precious moment

Growing up, I remember our living room shelves were cluttered with Precious Moments figurines my mother collected. I'm not certain if she collected them because she loved them, or because she loved that just about every Christmas we bought them for her. I mean, when you get a gift, sometimes it's all about the gift, and sometimes it's all about the giver, right?

And at Christmastime, we unpacked the Christmas Precious Moments figurines that stayed in the attic most of the year. Our favorite was the nativity set: Mary, Joseph, a shepherd, three sheep, a wooden stable to house them all and a sleeping baby Jesus nestled safely in a straw-stuffed manger.

This nativity set became "well-loved," as my parents used to say, which was a code word for "dingy." The poor shepherd's crook broke off one year as some little boy, who will remain nameless, processed the shepherd and sheep to the manger scene, playing the story out in real time. The well-worn gifts are usually the favorite ones, right?

Fast forward a decade, and I'm in my brand-new apartment, newly married, starting graduate school in a new city hundreds of miles away from my parents. As I'm unpacking the small box of decorations they gifted me, I see at the bottom the same Precious Moments nativity set and my heart warms. My mother had secretly packed it away, probably imagining that someday her son's little family would unpack it again and again each December with the same amount of love, fascination and care. An old gift given to a new generation.

Which is what each Christmas is, right? It's the 2,000-year-old gift of God in Jesus Christ given again, and again, and again, unpacked with awe each year, given to each generation. A truly precious moment.

—*Tim Brown, writer and pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Raleigh, N.C.*

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Erin Strybis is a content editor of *Living Lutheran*.

