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## The God We Hardly Knew

*William Willimon*

No one can celebrate  
a genuine Christmas  
without being truly poor.  
The self-sufficient, the proud,  
those who, because they have  
everything, look down on others,  
those who have no need  
even of God – for them there  
will be no Christmas.  
Only the poor, the hungry,  
those who need someone  
to come on their behalf,

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will have that someone.  
That someone is God.  
Emmanuel. God-with-us.  
Without poverty of spirit  
there can be no abundance of God.

**OSCAR ROMERO**

**PROBABLY MOST OF US** have had the experience of receiving, right out of the blue, a gift from someone we really don't know all that well. And perhaps, to our consternation, the gift turns out to be nice, something that we didn't know we wanted and certainly didn't ask for, but there it is, a good gift from someone who is not really a good friend. Now, what is the first thing we do in response?

Right. We try to come up with a gift to give in return – not out of gratitude (after all we didn't ask for it) or out of friendship (after all we hardly knew this person), but because we don't want to feel guilty.

We don't want to be indebted. The gift seems to lay a claim upon us, especially since it has come from someone we barely know. This is uncomfortable; it's hard to look the person in the face until we have

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reciprocated. By giving us a gift, this person has power over us.

It may well be, as Jesus says, more blessed to give than to receive. But it is more difficult to receive. Watch how people blush when given a compliment. Watch what you do when your teen-aged son comes home with a very expensive Christmas present from a girl he has dated only twice. "Now you take that expensive sweater right back and tell her that your parents won't allow you to accept it. Every gift comes with a claim and you're not ready for her claim upon you." In a society that makes strangers of us all, it is interesting what we do when a stranger gives us a gift.

And consider what we do at Christmas, the so-called season of giving. We enjoy thinking of ourselves as basically generous, benevolent, giving people. That's one reason why everyone, even the nominally religious, loves Christmas. Christmas is a season to celebrate our alleged generosity. The newspaper keeps us posted on how many needy families we have adopted. The Salvation Army kettles enable us to be generous while buying groceries (for ourselves) or gifts (for our families). People we work with who usually balk at the collection to pay for the

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morning coffee fall over themselves soliciting funds “to make Christmas” for some family.

We love Christmas because, as we say, Christmas brings out the best in us. Everyone gives on Christmas, even the stingiest among us, even the Ebenezer Scrooges. Charles Dickens’ story of Scrooge’s transformation has probably done more to form our notions of Christmas than St. Luke’s story of the manger. Whereas Luke tells us of God’s gift to us, Dickens tells us how we can give to others. A *Christmas Carol* is more congenial to our favorite images of ourselves. Dickens suggests that down deep, even the worst of us can become generous, giving people.

Yet I suggest we are better givers than getters, not because we are generous people but because we are proud, arrogant people. The Christmas story – the one according to Luke not Dickens – is not about how blessed it is to be givers but about how essential it is to see ourselves as receivers.

We prefer to think of ourselves as givers – powerful, competent, self-sufficient, capable people whose goodness motivates us to employ some of our power, competence and gifts to benefit the less fortunate. Which is a direct contradiction of the biblical ac-

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count of the first Christmas. There we are portrayed not as the givers we wish we were but as the receivers we are. Luke and Matthew go to great lengths to demonstrate that we – with our power, generosity, competence and capabilities – had little to do with God’s work in Jesus. God wanted to do something for us so strange, so utterly beyond the bounds of human imagination, so foreign to human projection, that God had to resort to angels, pregnant virgins, and stars in the sky to get it done. We didn’t think of it, understand it or approve it. All we could do, at Bethlehem, was receive it. A gift from a God we hardly even knew.

This theme struck me forcefully a few years ago while counseling someone from my church. It was December. She was telling me about her worry and confusion over a number of problems. Having taken several counseling courses in seminary, I knew how to be a good counselor. That is, I knew to keep quiet, listen patiently, ask questions, and offer no direct guidance. After I had given her ample opportunity to vent her feelings, I remarked as I had been taught: “I believe that you have the solution to your problems within you. I believe that down deep, you know

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what your real problem is and that you have the resources to handle it.”

You have heard the message before. One certainly does not have to come to church to hear this popular gospel: You have, within you, the solution to what ails you.

And then it hit me. It was the middle of December, late in Advent. In less than two weeks I would be standing in front of the congregation reading the nativity story from one of the Gospels, demonstrating through a strange story of a virgin birth to a peasant couple in Judea that the solution to what ails us has very little to do with us. After having tried for generations to cure what ails us, God reached for something inconceivable. God put on our back doorstep a solution so radical that many missed it.

Rabbi Michael Goldberg, in his book *Jews and Christians*, says that as a Jew he is impressed in reading Matthew's account of the nativity by how utterly passive the actors are. As a Jew, he answers to the story of the Exodus, a story of how God liberated the chosen people through the enlistment and prodding of people like Moses, Aaron and Miriam. But the Christmas story implies that what God wants to do

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for us is so strange, so beyond the bounds of human effort and striving, that God must resort to utterly unnatural, supernatural means. It tells of an unimaginable gift from a stranger, a God whom we hardly even knew.

This strange story tells us how to be receivers. The first word of the church, a people born out of so odd a nativity, is that we are receivers before we are givers. Discipleship teaches us the art of seeing our lives as gifts. That's tough, because I would rather see myself as a giver. I want power – to stand on my own, take charge, set things to rights, perhaps to help those who have nothing. I don't like picturing myself as dependent, needy, empty-handed.

Working with students at a university, I've decided that this truth is a major reason why many children come to despise their parents. It's humbling to see one's life, talents, capabilities, values, weaknesses and strengths as gifts from one's parents. We would rather be self-made men and women, standing on our own feet, striding bravely into a new world of our creation. It's humbling to look into a mirror at twenty-one and admit, “My God, I look just like my old man.”

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I suspect that the difficulty of receiving is a factor in marriage, too. It's painful to be thrust into such close proximity to another human being, day after day, year after year, until one gradually comes to see that one's identity and character are due to an alarming degree, to what one has received from one's spouse. Marriage is an everyday experience of living in the red – debtors to someone whom we have just begun to know.

If one asks the Gift Records Office of my school who are our most antagonistic alumni, they'll tell you they are the ones who were here on full scholarship. We talk a great deal about "right to life," "freedom of choice" and "self-determination," but not too much about indebtedness.

It's tough to be on the receiving end of love, God's or anybody else's. It requires that we see our lives not as our possessions, but as gifts. "Nothing is more repugnant to capable, reasonable people than grace," wrote John Wesley a long time ago.

Among the most familiar Christmas texts is the one in Isaiah: "The Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Emmanuel" (Isaiah

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7:14). Less familiar is its context: Isaiah has been pleading with King Ahaz to put his trust in God's promise to Israel rather than in alliances with strong military powers like Syria. "If you will not believe, you shall not be established," Isaiah warns Ahaz (7:9). Then the prophet tells the fearful king that God is going to give him a baby as a sign. A baby. Isn't that just like God, Ahaz must have thought. What Ahaz needed, with Assyria breathing down his neck, was a good army, not a baby.

This is often the way God loves us: with gifts we thought we didn't need, which transform us into people we don't necessarily want to be. With our advanced degrees, armies, government programs, material comforts and self-fulfillment techniques, we assume that religion is about giving a little of our power in order to confirm to ourselves that we are indeed as self-sufficient as we claim.

Then this stranger comes to us, blesses us with a gift, and calls us to see ourselves as we are – empty-handed recipients of a gracious God who, rather than leave us to our own devices, gave us a baby.