

Christmas Eve A 2025

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It was Wednesday. The secretary alerted me that an anonymous individual stopped at the church to contribute from recent lottery winnings. To my knowledge no one had won Powerball. But there are numerous other opportunities for lottery players. Some of which provide more frequent opportunities for producing winners. Anonymity was tantamount. One would not want the word of such generosity to get out, be broadcast, rigorously circulated within the community, county, state, nation.

I imagined the back story behind the gift. I named the generous donor "George" simply to make the story easier to tell. George promised himself that if he ever won the lottery, he would donate a percentage of his winnings to the church. George didn't go to church with any regularity as an adult so it really didn't matter to him which church, just that he would give back a portion. He remembered something from his early years in Sunday school that the Bible used a special word to describe giving. He thought that it began with the letter T. It sounded like something from Star Wars, Sith but he knew Siths were from the dark side. That couldn't be it. But a tenth, maybe that it was it. The promise was made.

Somehow there was a delay in winning. Days ran into weeks and months and years. George's faithfulness meant that he knew all the minimart employees by name. There were as many of them as there were reindeer on Santa's sleigh. Even with time passing and waiting, George didn't give up hope. There would be a prize. He had to win. Darkness wouldn't win out.

Then Wednesday came and with it a winning number. A slip of paper that revealed the promise, light was shining on him. This was no time for greed. He would make good on his promise. Walking up George Street, seeing activity around the church, he approached the Springettsbury Avenue entrance, opened the door and was greeted by the secretary. She grasped the need for anonymity, provided a plain envelope in which to place his gift. George sealed the envelope, wrote an amount on the outside and pushed it through the slot in the office window. And the rest you might say is history.

This is a season marked with charity, goodwill, generosity and kindness unmatched during the other eleven months of a calendar year. I shouldn't be surprised to hear of such kindness being lavished on the church, particularly St. Paul's. It is Wednesday, December 24th and the special word from the Bible is Tithe. I once heard it pronounced "tith" so I understand George's connection to Star Wars and the Sith.

Tonight, light shines on you. After years, decades, centuries, the promised One comes. God makes good on the promise to send Messiah, Redeemer, Anointed One, the one to save us from our sins. Jesus is born and in him is the light of the world. He comes to shed light on the darkness that greed, evil, and despair heaps upon us to diminish the human condition. He comes at the right time. Oh, it seems like an unlikely time. It was the census, the inns were full, Mary was great with child, ready to deliver when they were making the trek to Bethlehem. And there

in a hectic crowded town, pubs and taverns filled with kin and stories and laughter and singing, Mary births Jesus.

The Vicar of St. Edward the Confessor Church in Romford UK tells of Mary amidst all the animals, sheep and goats and cattle and donkey, with such chaos the scene of Mary and Joseph with the Christ Child is always depicted as calm and peaceful. Why is that he asks? It must be the “stable” condition.

Into the chaos of our lives, families, community, nation and world, the one who brings stability is Christ Jesus. He is a gift greater than any lottery. He comes at the right time. He comes when you least expect him to show up. Oh, he is always where he promises to be, in Words and water, bread and wine, so don’t be strangers to worship and preaching and the sacramental life of the Christian community. But Jesus is also in unexpected places and unimaginable places. He comes into the places created by greed and evil and the heaping despair brought about by them. Jesus comes to change the human condition. While the power of darkness diminishes human condition, Jesus the light of the world reveals to all who will touch, taste, and see that God is doing a new thing. God through the tiny child of Bethlehem is opening up possibilities for all people (not just the ones we like). *“Do not be afraid;” said the angel, “for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”*

I suppose for most people it is easier to believe that George would visit us and gift us with a portion of his lottery winnings than it is to believe that God visited us and gifted us with the Only Son from Heaven. Jesus suffers for us and with us. He knows incarceration and unjust sentencing. He experienced the stable environment of household, family and work. And the threatening taunts of national leadership. This is God acting in an unexpected way. This is God gifting us with an extravagance beyond human comprehension. Unlike the anonymous gift of a lottery winner, the word of such generosity is unleashed, broadcast, rigorously circulated by the myriad of angelic voices, the eyewitness of the shepherds, the curiosity of magi, and then later by women at the tomb, the apostles and evangelists, and tonight those of us gathered here rejoicing in the news that we have been given life in Christ Jesus, the greatest gift. When we doubt, and we do, Luther reminds us to simply look at the slip of paper, your baptismal certificate, and recognize that you are claimed and made one with Christ.

At any time you may make a gift in appreciation for all that the Lord God has done for you, is doing for you right now, and promises yet to do in the future. But such a gift is only made and given in response to that first Christmas night, and the stable environment into which the Savior of the nation’s came. God made a promise. God keeps a promise. God gives a gift. Not a percentage, but God gives his only Son, Christ Jesus so that you and all people will have life and will have it abundantly.

George, making good on his promise, turned and went out the door, down the sidewalk toward the street, bearing his name. It was a week till Christmas. He was a winner. Now, what should he do with the \$144 safely tucked into his pocket. George was confronted with an unforeseen abundance and just at the right time. It is a blessed Christmas. Amen.