

THE GIFT OF YOU

Preparing for Christmas
Date: December 21, 2025

Who's excited to be in God's house today? Come on, make some noise! If you are here for the first time, or you are joining us online later in the week, you picked a great one to be a part of! I believe God wants to bless you today. Do you believe that? I believe He already has through our amazing volunteers who serve every Sunday. I believe He has through the worship we just experienced as we encountered God. And I believe He's gonna bless you through the preaching of His Word AND the breaking of the Bread at the end. SO, would you pray with me, and we will jump into this.

[PRAYER TIME]

Hey, before you grab a seat why don't you take a few moments and wish some people around you a Merry Christmas! Thank you worship team...

Well, it's the Sunday before Christmas, which means if you're anything like me, you're in full panic mode trying to figure out what to get the people in your life who already have everything they need. Amen?

You know the drill—you're scrolling Amazon at 11 pm, reading reviews for things you didn't even know existed, hoping something will scream "This is it! This is THE gift!" But here's what I've noticed: the people who are hardest to shop for are usually the people who have the most. The more someone has, the harder it is to give them something meaningful.

But can I tell you something that's been messing with me this week? God, who literally owns everything, who spoke galaxies into existence, who holds the universe together by the power of His Word—this God who has absolutely everything—there is still one gift we can give Him that He doesn't already have. There is actually one thing in all of creation that's truly ours to offer.

And it's not our money. It's not our service. It's not even our worship, as beautiful as that is. The only gift we can give God that's truly ours to give is... us. Our actual selves. Not the version of us we think He wants. Not the cleaned-up, dressed-up, acted-right version. But the real us. The broken us. The messy us. The us that we usually hide from everyone, including Him.

I want to read you two passages today that at first don't seem connected, but by the end of our time together, I think you'll see they tell one continuous story. First, Genesis 3, verses 8 through 10:

8 Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden. **9** But the Lord God called to the man, “Where are you?” **10** He answered, “I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid.”

Now jump forward to Matthew's Gospel, chapter 1, verse 23:

23 “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”).

Here we have two moments in Scripture. One at the beginning when humanity runs away from God's presence AND one at the first Christmas when God runs toward humanity's presence. **And somewhere between those two moments is where you and I live our lives.**

Today I want to preach a message to get us ready for everything we will experience in this place on Christmas Eve called:

The Gift of You.

Tell a couple people near you that you make a good gift!

In the chaos of what we have turned Christmas into we miss this, but Christmas isn't ultimately about what we give to each other, it's about what God gave to us in Jesus. But it's also about our response to that gift. AND the most profound response we can have isn't doing more for God. It's allowing Him to have more of us.

I wrote something in my journal this week that I didn't plan on sharing, but I feel like I'm supposed to. I prayed:

“Father, as obvious as this might be, I let you love me. I let you get up close to me. You are welcome to ALL the dark places of my heart. You can love ALL of me.”

And as I was praying that, I realized something. I realized that the word “let” in that prayer is doing a lot of work. “I LET you love me...” Why would I need to let God love me? Shouldn't that be automatic? Shouldn't that be the easiest thing in the world?

But it's not is it? Because love requires closeness. And closeness requires vulnerability. And vulnerability requires letting someone see parts of us we usually keep hidden. Even from God. Maybe especially from God.

SO, over the next few minutes, I want to talk about the gift that God actually wants this Christmas. Not what we can do for Him, but who we can be with Him. Not our performance, but our presence. Not our image, but our honesty.

Let me start with a question that might sting a little:

What kind of relationship do you actually have with God?

And I don't mean what kind of relationship you SAY you have. I mean what does it actually look like in practice? Is it a transactional relationship? We pray when we need something. We worship when we feel something. We serve when it's convenient. We show up to church when it fits our schedule. And we convince ourselves that this is relationship.

But is it? Or is it just religious activity?

There's a researcher named Brené Brown who I quoted from a few weeks ago who's spent the last two decades studying vulnerability, shame, and human connection. And here's what she discovered after thousands of interviews:

“Vulnerability is the birthplace of everything we're hungry for.”

Love, belonging, joy, courage, empathy, creativity—all of it requires vulnerability. All of it requires the willingness to be seen. Really seen. Not the filtered version. The real version. AND what she found is that the people who have the deepest, most meaningful relationships are the people who are willing to be vulnerable. Not perfect. Not polished. Not pretending. Just honest about who they really are.

Now, she's talking about human relationships in her research. BUT I think you can see the parallel. This is exactly what God wants with us. This is what He's always wanted!

Look at Romans 12, verse 1 from the Message translation. Paul writes:

So here's what I want you to do, God helping you: Take your everyday, ordinary life—your sleeping, eating, going-to-work, and walking-around life—and place it before God as an offering. Embracing what God does for you is the best thing you can do for him.

Not just your songs. Not just your service. Not just your Sundays. Your self. Your whole self. Everything you are. That's what God wants! We've turned Christianity into a performance instead of a presence. We've turned following Jesus into a checklist instead of a relationship. AND God's like, "I don't want your résumé. I don't want your highlight reel. I want your whole story. I don't want the version of you that you think I'll accept. I want ALL of you because I already love ALL of you."

This matters because you cannot have intimacy with God—real, transformative, life-giving intimacy—if you're hiding parts of yourself from Him. You can have religion. You can have rituals. You can even have results. But you can't have a relationship if you're not willing to be real.

It's like playing hide and seek with a 3-year-old. God already knows everything about you! He sees you even when you think you are hiding. He knows the thoughts you're embarrassed about. He knows the struggles you're hiding. He knows the sins you think would shock people if they knew. He knows the doubts you won't voice out loud. He knows it all. And He's not waiting for you to clean it up. He's waiting for you to bring it close.

The gift God wants this Christmas isn't your perfection. It's your proximity. He doesn't want you to have it all together. He wants you to LET (there's our word) let Him love you while you're still falling apart.

SO, if that's true, if God already knows everything and loves us anyway, then why is it so hard for us to be vulnerable with Him? Why do we keep Him at arm's length? Why do we maintain this professional relationship with God instead of a personal one?

The answer is right there in Genesis 3. Adam and Eve sin and immediately—I mean IMMEDIATELY—something shifts in their hearts. They felt shame for the first time. So, their first instinct is to cover themselves. And then look what happens next. Verse 8 again:

⁸ Then the man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they hid from the Lord God among the trees of the garden.

Now catch this. God didn't change His routine. The text implies God walking with them in the cool of the day was something they did regularly. This was their time together. This was when they connected. But for the first time, instead of running TO God, they run FROM God.

And God calls out, and this breaks my heart, God calls out, "Where are you?" Not because He doesn't know where they are. He knows exactly where they're hiding. But He's inviting them back into relationship. He's saying, "Come out. Let me see you. Let me see what you have done."

Adam's response in verse 10 reveals why we hide:

"I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; so I hid."

He was afraid. He felt exposed. He felt ashamed. And his response to shame was to hide. To cover up. To create distance between himself and God.

AND we've been doing the same thing ever since!

Shame makes us hide. Fear of rejection makes us hide. The worry that if God really saw us, like REALLY saw us, He'd be disappointed or disgusted or done with us... that makes us hide.

So, we create these barriers. These walls. These versions of ourselves that we present to God. We pray sanitized prayers. We worship with guarded hearts. We serve to prove our worth instead of express our love. We stay busy for God instead of getting close to God.

We think if we can just do enough good things, maybe God won't notice the bad things. We think if we can just perform well enough, maybe we can earn the right to be loved. We think if we can just hide the messy parts and highlight the good parts, maybe God will let us stay.

But here's what shame does—it doesn't just separate us from God. It separates us from ourselves! We become so good at hiding, so practiced at pretending, that we lose touch with who we actually are. We wear the mask so long it starts to feel like our face.

AND that's exhausting. Amen? Pretending is exhausting. Performing is exhausting. Always having to be "on" for God is exhausting. No wonder so many Christians are burned out! We're trying to maintain an image that God never asked us to have!

BUT there's something else happening here that we need to see. When Adam says, "I was naked," he's not just talking about physical nakedness. He's talking about vulnerability. About being fully seen. About having nothing to hide behind. And that terrified him after he sinned.

But here's what gets me, this goes straight to what God is like, God's response wasn't to turn away from them. His response was to cover them. Genesis 3:21 says:

²¹ The Lord God made garments of skin for Adam and his wife and clothed them.

He didn't expose them. He covered them! God's first instinct wasn't condemnation. It was compassion! BUT still we hide. Still, we perform. Still, we keep God at a safe distance because we're afraid of what will happen if He gets too close.

BUT this is where Christmas changes everything. Because what Christmas reveals is that God refuses to let us hide. He refuses to stay distant. He refuses to have a professional relationship with us.

Emmanuel. God with us. That's not just a Christmas card sentiment. That's a theological earthquake. That's God saying, "If you won't come to me, I'm coming to you. If you're hiding in the trees, I'm coming into the forest. If you're afraid to be close to me, I'm going to get so close to you that you can touch me."

John 1:14, I love this in The Message translation too, it says:

¹⁴ The Word became flesh and blood, and **MOVED INTO THE NEIGHBORHOOD**. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, **GENEROUS INSIDE AND OUT**, true from start to finish.

God didn't stay in heaven and send a memo. He didn't communicate through prophets and wait for us to get it together. He came. Himself. In person. As a baby. In a feeding trough. In a backwater town. Born to a teenage girl who nobody would've picked for the role.

AND what does that tell us? It tells us that God is comfortable with mess. He's comfortable with vulnerability. He's comfortable with humanity in all its fragile, broken, beautiful complexity.

The incarnation is God's way of saying, "I'm not afraid of your humanity. I'll take it on myself. I'm not disgusted by your weakness. I'll experience it personally. I'm not intimidated by your struggles. I'll walk through them with you." See:

The incarnation showed that God was not content to leave creation to its own devices, but desired to come close.

Let that sink in. God DESIRED to come close. Not tolerated it. Not allowed it. Desired it. Wanted it. Pursued it... I love the way CS Lewis wrote about this, he says:

“One has the picture of a strong man stooping lower and lower to get himself underneath some great complicated burden. He must stoop in order to lift, he must almost disappear under the load before he incredibly straightens his back and marches off with the whole mass swaying on his shoulders.”

Think about that. The God who could have anything He wants, who lacks nothing, who needs nothing—what He desired was closeness with you. What He pursued was intimacy with you. What He went to extraordinary lengths to secure, was a relationship with you!

See, Christmas is God's cosmic declaration that He's not interested in keeping a professional distance. He's not satisfied with religious transactions. He wants nearness. He wants intimacy. He wants you.

AND here's what the manger teaches us:

God meets us in our mess.

I don't want to give away my Christmas Eve message, but God became flesh in the middle of the mess. It was loud. It was humble. It was... human. AND if God was willing to enter our world in that way; vulnerable, exposed, dependent, then maybe, just maybe, we can be vulnerable with Him. Maybe we can stop pretending. Maybe we can stop performing. Maybe we can stop hiding.

Because Emmanuel means God is WITH us. Not far from us. Not disappointed with us. Not waiting for us to get our act together before He shows up. He's with us. In the mess. In the struggle. In the middle of whatever we're hiding.

SO, here's what I want you to understand today:

Christmas isn't just about God giving. It's also about God receiving.

He gave His Son. And what He wants to receive in response is you.

Not a better version of you. Not a future version of you after you finally get it together. Not the version of you that you think He'd be proud of. The actual you. The you that exists right now, today, with all your baggage and brokenness and doubts and failures and fears.

I know that doesn't sound like a very good deal on His part, but that's the exchange God is offering. He gave Jesus so you could give yourself.

But this isn't a transaction. It's not like, "I gave you my Son, now you owe me your life." That's not what's happening here. This is an invitation to intimacy. This is God saying, "I want you close. I want you near. I want you to know that you're safe with Me. That you're loved by Me. That you're wanted by Me."

Remember my prayer I shared at the beginning? "Father... I LET you love me. I LET you get up close to me. You are welcome to ALL the dark places of my heart."

That phrase, "the dark places," that's where we usually keep God out, right? It's like when you have guests over to your home. You clean where it's seen. You make sure the living room and kitchen and guest bath all look and smell nice. But no one is letting you into their laundry room with the underwear lying out or your closet so packed full of junk OSHA would shut you down if they inspected. Right? It's the same with God. We'll let God into the living room of our lives. The public spaces. The presentable areas. But the dark places? The parts we're ashamed of. The struggles we don't talk about. The sins we can't seem to shake. We lock those doors. We put up "No Trespassing" signs. We tell God, "You can have everything else, but not this."

But come on, God's standing at those locked doors saying, "I already know what's in there. And I'm not afraid of it. Let me in. Let me love you there. Let me heal you there. Let me be with you there."

Because here's the thing about darkness, it can't coexist with light. 1 John 1:9 says:

⁹ If we CONFESS our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

The word "confess" doesn't mean grovel. It doesn't mean beg. It literally means "to say the same thing." To agree with God about what's true. To bring it into the light instead of hiding it in the darkness. **AND** what happens when we do that? Forgiveness. Purification. Restoration. Not condemnation. Not rejection. Not disappointment. God's response to our honesty is always grace.

Church, do you realize what God is offering you this Christmas? He's offering you the freedom to stop pretending! The freedom to stop performing! The freedom to stop hiding!

He's saying:

- You don't have to dress up your prayers to sound spiritual!
- You don't have to fake your worship to look holy!
- You don't have to pretend you've got it all together when you're barely holding on!

He's saying:

- Bring me your mess and I'll bring you my mercy!
- Bring me your failure and I'll bring you my faithfulness!
- Bring me your shame and I'll bring you my covering!
- Bring me your darkness and I'll bring you my light!

This is what the Gospel does! It doesn't make you clean so you can come close! It brings you close so you can be made clean! It doesn't wait for you to get right so you can get near! It draws you near so you can get right!

AND the only thing—the ONLY thing—standing between you and this kind of relationship with God is your willingness to stop hiding and start being honest.

BUT let's get practical. Because I can feel some of you going, "This sounds great, Brian, but HOW? How do I actually do this? How do I stop hiding from God? How do I become vulnerable with someone I can't see or touch?"

Let me give you three things. Simple. Practical. And you can start doing them this week:

1. Tell God the truth about what's actually going on.

Stop praying the prayers you think He wants to hear. Stop using church language to dress up your real thoughts. Just talk to Him like He's sitting across from you at coffee.

"God, I'm really struggling with this person at work and honestly I want revenge more than I want to forgive them." "God, I'm terrified about my finances and I don't know how I'm going to make it and honestly you seem to not care." "God, I don't feel close to you right now and I'm not even sure I want to feel close to you." "God, I'm angry at you for what you allowed to happen, and I need to say that out loud." "God, save me from this temptation, but honestly I really just want to do it."

Whatever it is, just say it! God already knows it. He's just waiting for you to be honest about it so He can do something with it. Here's another practical step:

2. Bring your darkness to light with safe people.

This isn't just about being vulnerable with God. It's also about being vulnerable in community. James 5:16 says:

¹⁶ Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

Notice it doesn't say confess your sins TO God so you can be forgiven. That's already covered by Jesus. This is about confessing to each other so you can be HEALED. Because shame thrives in secrecy. But it dies in community.

You need people in your life who know the real you. Not just the Sunday you. Not just the social media you. The actual you. The struggling you. The questioning you. The broken you.

And I get it, that's scary! Imagine being me! Imagine being the pastor and choosing to open up to someone... What if they judge you? What if they reject you? What if they use it against you? Those are real fears. Which is why you need to be wise about who you're vulnerable with. Not everyone has earned the right to hear your story. But somebody needs to. Because you cannot heal in isolation.

Number 3:

3. Practice the presence of God throughout your day.

Stop compartmentalizing your relationship with God. Stop making it a Sunday thing or a morning devotional thing or a crisis thing. Start talking to Him throughout your day. About everything. The mundane stuff. The frustrating stuff. The beautiful stuff. All of it!

Brother Lawrence, a 17th-century monk, called this "practicing the presence of God." He said:

"We ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed."

Get this, he washed dishes for God! He swept floors for God! He lived his ordinary life with an awareness that God was there, present, engaged, interested in all of it.

What would it look like for you to do that? To include God in your commute? To talk to Him while you're doing laundry? To share your frustration when your kid won't listen or your spouse isn't hearing you or your boss is being unreasonable?

Stop waiting for “prayer time” to connect with God. Make your whole life a conversation with Him. That’s what it means to present yourself as a living sacrifice. It’s not a one-time decision. It’s a daily, moment-by-moment choice to let God into your actual life.

[COMMUNION TRANSITION]

In a few moments, we’re going to practice this gift-giving together. We’re going to come to these tables where we remember what Jesus did for us. And I want you to hear this clearly: these tables don’t say “Come when you’re ready.” This table says, “Come as you are.”

You don’t have to be cleaned up to come to this table. You don’t have to have it all together. You don’t have to understand it all or even feel it all. You just have to believe and come.

And when you take this bread and this cup, what you’re saying is, “Jesus, I’m not bringing you my perfection. I’m bringing you my need. I’m not bringing you my strength. I’m bringing you my hunger. I’m not bringing you my image. I’m bringing you my transparency.”

These tables are where we practice vulnerability with God. This is where we say, “Here I am. This is me. All of me. And I’m trusting that your grace is enough for all of it.”

So, as we prepare our hearts for communion, would you bow with me?