The Word of the Lord from St. Matthew, chapter 1: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us." This is the Word of the Lord.

The story is told of a man and his son. For the weeks and days before Christmas, the son kept pestering his father, saying, "Dad, what are you going to get me for Christmas?" Hard to believe for you parents, I know. "I want this" and "I want that," and "What are you going to get me?" Finally, the father said, "Son, stop saying that. Christmas isn't about getting. It's about giving."

This clearly took the child aback, and he was quiet for a while. Finally, he said quite seriously to his father, "Dad, on Christmas, what are you going to give me?"

Thanks to Old Adam, we have a distinct way of messing up the whole idea of gifts. Gifts are, by definition, undeserved. A paycheck is not a gift because you've done the work to earn it. A bonus is not a gift, because—even though it's more than you usually earn—you've still worked to earn it. A gift is a gift because nothing has been done to earn it, and nothing has to be. The gift stands by itself. Likewise, a gift by definition has not strings attached. When someone gives a gift and thinks, "If I give A, then they'll do B," it isn't really a gift. It's a payment made in anticipation of work that will be done. So, you see, in a perfect world, people only give gifts because they want to, with absolutely no expectations. They say, "I'm giving this gift freely; and even if they throw it away after burning it to ashes, I'll love them just the same." And, I suppose, in a perfect world, people receive gifts with thanks and contentment for what they have, not jealousy for what they didn't.

Alas, we do not live in a perfect world. We live in a very sinful one, and we are not immune. Within this room, there is, without a doubt, a man who is reasoning, "If I give her this, maybe she'll do that." There is a woman thinking, "If I give him this, maybe he'll stop doing that." There are some who are plotting, "If I give this gift, I gain the upper hand," or "they'll owe me" or "maybe they'll get the hint" or "I'll prove I'm more generous than they are." There are some, perhaps young, who have reasoned, "I can earn that gift if I put in the hard work of bugging the giver until they get sick of the hassle and buy it for me." All such thoughts indicate that you are quite interested in getting, not giving. Sadly, unhappy thoughts lie with the receiver, too. This is a world where gifts aren't always gifts, and are often accepted with suspicion. "He gave me that—what does he want in return?" "If I accept that gift, it puts me at a disadvantage." Or, "Yikes! I have to wear that?" Or, "That's it?! What a crummy gift!" Or a resentful, "I wanted what he got, not this! How can I get him to trade with me?"

So here we are at Christmas, and Old Adam is hard at work. Few, if any, gifts are ever given with absolutely no strings attached. Few, if any, gifts are received with true graciousness and no suspicion. If Christmas is about gifts between people, then disaster lurks just beneath the surface. And all of this shows us how much we need a Savior.

That's why, on this Christmas Eve, I declare to you that Christmas is not about gifts. It's about...
presence.

Not presents, but presence. It's the phenomenal reality that Jesus Christ dwells among us.

The birth of a baby in Bethlehem is not life-changing news. Babies get born all the time. And as the world laments that far too many children are born in poverty, it makes no sense that this birth should bring us hope or comfort or joy—so poor is this family that the Baby's first bed is a manger, a trough! Furthermore, trace His life: He grows up, traveling and teaching, doing some miracles, and then getting executed. Not exactly a success story. Not exactly an inspiration for tidings of comfort and joy.

But it's not just another baby. The virgin has conceived and borne a Son, and His name is Immanuel. His name means "God with us." The Son of God, begotten of the Father from eternity, has become flesh and been born of Mary. He is not doing this to test drive a human body. He's not slumming on Christmas break, just to see how mortals live. His incarnation, His enfleshment is a gift to us. Where we were born in sin, He is born holy to redeem us. Where we could not live a sinless life, He lives a perfect, righteous life so that He can give us the credit for us. Where we deserve death for our sins, He dies our death for our sin and rises again three days later—so that He can share His death with us in Baptism and raise us from the dead to life everlasting.

And what is the cost to you and me for this great sacrifice? Nothing. He does all the work and demands nothing in return. You don't work at all for it, because it is pure gift to you. He offers forgiveness, faith and salvation to all people; if you believe, He loves you. If you don't, He still loves you enough that He's already given His Son, and will continue to offer you forgiveness and life. He is the perfect Giver, giving the perfect gift.

That's why, quoting Isaiah 9, the title of this Christmas program is, "Unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given." The Lord has given His Son to take on our flesh, to take our place in life and death so that we could have life everlasting. Those offerings that we give to Him are not to earn His favor or blessings—what do we have that is not actually His? And what more does He have that He does not already give to us freely? The Lord gives you all good things, and uses all things for your good. How do you know He favors you so? Look in the manger. That Baby is born for you, given to die for you, to redeem you from sin for eternity.

He remains present even now, forgiving you in His Word and Sacraments. One of the children in our congregation often greets me, taking the salutation "The Lord be with you" and changing it to "Immanuel be with you"—"God with us' be with you." It's not quite hymnal cricket, but it reinforces the truth that the Lord in the manger remains present with His people even now in His means of grace; and so He is with us always, even to the end of the age.

I do pray that you all have a blessed Christmas. May each gift you give or receive be most of all a reminder, a faint symbol of the great gift of God's Son for you. And where selfish expectations or disappointment or jealousy creep in, make the sign of the cross and say, "It is because of this that Christ was born for me! He came to dwell among us to take my place and save me!" That's the great gift of Christmas—the gift of His presence. Where we are selfish, He is selfless. Where we resent, He humbly bears our sin. Where we attach strings, He pours out grace upon grace. Where we by nature think, "What am I going to get?" He says to His penitent people, "I give you forgiveness for all of your sin."

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen