

A Sermon for Dayspring Baptist Church
By Chris Fillingham
“All I Want for Christmas”
Joel 2:12-13, 28-29.
Second Sunday of Advent
December 4, 2016

There's a tradition in my family in which I'm not very good at participating these days. I feel kind of bad about that too, because my folks really want me to, and shoot, it would probably be helpful. The Tradition is: the wish list.

I imagine many of you do this too. I used to be good at it as a kid. The JC Penney's catalogue would come in the mail about this time and I'd pour over that catalogue for days, with my greed glands salivating over all the really cool toys in there.

Of course, I knew I couldn't have just anything I wanted, so I had to choose wisely. After days of looking over it, I'd pull out my pen and paper and start writing down my list:

Remote Control Car? Yes and thank you.

Lego set? Sure.

Tinker Toys?

Lincoln Log village? Oh man that would be cool.

But what about that play tent? I don't know. I guess I'll just put them both down.

I loved this part of December as a kid... looking, dreaming, writing it all down. But these days, I'm really bad at this. My mom still asks for a list, and I try to come up with something... but inevitably, it won't happen.

I'd like to say that's because I've outgrown all those impulses toward greed and materialism.

I'd like to tell you that it's because I want my Mom to just give me one of those cards that say, "This year we gave a donation to the food pantry in your honor"because you know, your pastor is just that holy.

But the truth is, I'm not. The truth of the matter is, because I'm this terrible mixture of a little bit of greed and a whole lot of being indecisive, I'm just way too conflicted to ever write anything down.

How about you? Do you know what you want for Christmas this year? It's time to figure that out, you know... What is it you're hoping will show up on Christmas Day? Have you made your list yet?

Because if you haven't you'd better get on it. After all, you know what happens when you *don't* make a list, right?

You'll tear open that wrapping paper with everyone watching, and instead of being excited about what's in there... you find the last thing you would have put on your list, and so you'll have that sinking feeling in your stomach...

And then you'll get this really awkward expression on your face because you're trying to look happy and grateful, but you're feeling a bit sour, because you feel like they should have known better...

So, don't let that happen to you again this year!
Do yourself and everyone else a favor and put together that list.
What is it you want?

I mean, do you know?

Because if you don't know, it's past time for you to figure it out. And making that list might just be the best way for you to figure it out. What is it you really want? What are you hoping is going to show up in your life this year? Do you know?

Have you taken time to think it over lately? Have you been pouring over the catalogue of life, with your journal open, and given it more than a passing wistful thought lately?

If not, it's probably time you do, because if you don't **know** what you want... what you really want deep in your being, there's a good chance it's not going to come to you... and in a few weeks, another page in the calendar of your life will turn and you'll have just some lagging sour feeling in the pit of your stomach.

What is it you really want?

The prophet Joel is preaching sometime late in the story of the people of God. Scholars aren't exactly sure if he was preaching during the exile or if this was during those generations that continued to struggle after the exile.

We don't know exactly when these words were first spoken, but one way or another, we know it's late in the story, and it's in a time when the people are trying to figure out what to hope for anymore.

And into the midst of a very uncertain world, Joel says there's a day coming when the Spirit of God will be poured out on all people...

men and women, young and old,
the high and mighty and the low and struggling...
The spirit of God will be poured out on us all.

It's this same beautiful line from Joel that Peter quotes during that famous sermon he preaches on Pentecost morning, out on the streets of Jerusalem, in Acts 2.

"I will pour out my spirit on all flesh..." says the Lord.

It's not a bad one for the list this year, is it? I mean, having the Sprit of God poured deep into our lives, filling us ... giving us clarity about our life. I think I'd take that.

Just imagine what that might be like... to ***be filled*** with the Spirit of God, to be filled with the Life of God:

It would mean we'd spend a lot less time in the next year wringing our hands, anxious about what is and what might be,
and a lot more time in deep abiding joy, giving thanks for what already has been.

It would mean less energy wasted in comparison, comparing my life to someone else's life, less time wasted in envy, and more time enjoying the precious gifts of today...

It would mean I'd be less controlled by my impulses
and more patient with my family members.

It would mean I could look at each person I encounter in love, rather than in suspicion. I could appreciate them for who they are, rather than resent them for who they are not.

It would mean I'd have more clarity about what to say yes to and what to say no to.

It would mean I could work for change and justice in our world, without slipping into hate or self-righteousness.

It would mean I'd be a gift to people, a blessing to my neighbors and a blessing to my co-workers, rather than a stumbling block for them.

If I were filled with the Spirit of God, then I'm pretty sure I'd be able to recognize God's presence all around me and in me... I'd be able to see beauty and light hidden in the soul of each and every person.

It would mean that I'd be more distracted by wonder
than distracted by worry.

That's what the deeply spiritual life looks like, I'm told.

So, I don't know about you, but that sounds like a good one on the list this year.

What do you say? Do you want it, too?

I mean, do you really want it? Do you want it enough to put it down at the top of your list? Or is your list already crowded with other things... that you'd rather have.

Do you even know? Do you know what you really want?
Because unless we know, we'll never go after it.
Unless we know, it's probably not going to just show up one day under the tree.
Sure, something will be there, ***but will it be what you really wanted?***

Because according to the Saints, the spiritual life requires really wanting it... wanting it enough to shape your life around it, wanting it enough to struggle for it.

You can hear that in Paul's letters. In Philippians 3 he writes: ,

"I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection..."

"Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own,... Beloved, I do not consider that I have already arrived; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal... of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus."

It's pretty clear what's at the top of Paul's list. He knows what he wants... There is in him this deep longing to know God more and more fully... to be filled with the life of God... more and more.

And that longing is shaping his life.

Just before this passage, he writes about how he's given up all his titles and his positions, all his self-importance and his recognitions... because he knows what he wants: to be filled with the Spirit of God, more and more...

How about you? Do you know what you want? Because if this is at the top of your list this year, then Joel has a word from the Lord that will help us find our way.

**"Return to me with all your *heart*...
tear your heart and not your clothing."**

It's a poignant image in Joel's day. You probably know that when people mourned or wanted to express a profound openness to God, they would tear their clothing. What we don't always remember is that most people had only one or two pieces of clothing.

Their clothing was one of their most valuable possessions, because in that day,
every piece of clothing
was handmade...

and the cloth used to make the clothing
was woven by hand,
and the string used in the weaving
was created by hand.

One piece of clothing took an immense amount of time to create. That's why most people had only one or two. It was one of their most valuable possessions.

So, tearing your clothes was a dramatic act. You couldn't run up to the mall the next day to buy a new one.

No. When you tore your clothing, something drastically changed that **could not be repaired.**

And here God says to us, **“I want something more.... Don't tear your clothing. Tear open your heart... tear open your very being... all that you are.”**

This isn't just about emotions here. In the spiritual tradition the heart is much more than the seat of our emotions. It's the place where our intellect and our emotions meet. It's the place where all the parts of our personality come together.
It's the seat of your essence.

“Tear open your heart...” says the Lord.

And then we hear again those words spoken in Exodus,
those words spoken to the prophet Jonah,
those words that echo throughout the Old Testament...

**“For the Lord your God is gracious and merciful,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love.”**

Tear open your heart, and receive this mercy and love that has no end.
Tear open your heart, that the Spirit of God might be poured into you,
Tear open your heart and allow the life of God to begin to grow in you.

This is the invitation. This is the gift available to you this year.... and to me. But it only comes when we want it enough to put it there... up on the top of our list of our life....

when we want it enough to tear open our lives and let it even sting a little.

In one of the sayings of the Desert Mothers, Amma Syncletica says, **“In the beginning, there is struggle and a lot of work for those who come near to God. But after that, there is indescribable joy. It is just like building a fire: at first it's smoky and your eyes water, but later you get the desired result. So we ought to light the divine fire in ourselves with tears and effort.”**¹ she says.

Tears and effort: There is a striving that Paul describes, which is why you have to really want it. It won't burn brightly without your participation in it. You have to want it enough to tear open your life again and again...

Because the more you do, the more the divine flame burns brighter and brighter...
filling you...
filling your life,

¹ Joan Chittister, *In God's Holy Light: Wisdom from the Desert Monastics* (Cincinnati, Ohio: Franciscan Media, 2015) 22.

filling our world with its warmth, and its light, and its life.

I don't know about you, but that sounds pretty good to me. I can't think of anything I want more in my life...

If you do too, then start now by opening up your heart to God,
because what God really wants for Christmas... is you.

Let's Pray:

*O Christ, you said that our Heavenly Father will give the Holy Spirit to those who ask.
Today, we are asking.*

We confess that it is hard to open our hearts fully.

And we know that the list of our lives is cluttered.

But O God, We want to want you.

Hear our feeble longing.

And stir in us your holy fire.

We ask this in the name of the One who taught us to pray, saying: Our Father...