

“Unexpected Gift”

Matthew 1:18-25

If you are a procrastinator, you know what time it is: The last minute.

It could be the last-minute for buying Christmas presents.

Fortunately, *Fast Company* magazine and Elaine Quint has a list of gifts for you to consider. All are unique, unforgettable and quite weird. Put one of these under the Christmas tree, and your generosity will *never* be forgotten.

Guaranteed.

First, Elaine Quint shared at Wednesday morning Bible Study that for \$1500 you can buy a pair of Nike Air Max 97's with a crucifix on the tongue, Matthew 14:25 on the side (verse where Jesus walks on water) and water from the Jordan River in the midsole. “These Jesus shoes” are sponsored by the rapper Msch – so you can walk on water.

For another \$20, you can buy your loved one an Ostrich Pillow. This napping pillow goes completely around a person's head, and can help them get some sleep on a couch or even at a desk. The company's motto: “Dreams Happen Anywhere.”

Even at work.

If your budget is a bit tighter, \$15 will get you a toilet nightlight, which will provide much-needed guidance in the dead of night. Or maybe there is a man in your life who would be interested in a clip-on man bun. Available for only \$9.99, this hair accessory enables a businessman to be conservative all day and then turn into a hipster at night!

And for a cat-loving friend or family member, \$25 will buy the weirdest gift of all: A cat brush shaped like a tongue.

This brush is held in your mouth, and you use it to bond with your kitty by pretending to lick it like a mother cat. By doing so, you are “communicating in their love language.” Using the Licki Brush is said to be an “oddly meditative practice,” soothing for both owner and cat.

For most people, a Licki Brush would be a *truly* unexpected gift.

So what were the people of Israel expecting during the rule of Emperor Augustus of Rome? They had no Christmas to celebrate, so they weren’t looking for anyone to surprise them with a Licki Brush or an Ostrich Pillow. But the people had hopes and dreams in their time of oppression, and some of these expectations were based on their Hebrew Scriptures.

So what they get is a girl who’s pregnant.

This is a really odd sign or gift.

The prophet Isaiah had explained that “the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). Such a prophecy was thrilling, because the name Immanuel means “God is with us,” and the people of Israel were longing for God’s presence and power. In the face of threats from foreign rulers, Isaiah was predicting that God was going to free them from oppression and bring peace to their land.

So maybe the gift was a girl *with child*, who would bear the child, yet another gift — a child named Immanuel, a sign of God’s presence and power.

The people also knew Psalm 80, a prayer for the restoration of Israel. “Stir up your might, and come to save us!” says this desperate appeal to God. “Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved!” (vv. 2-3). The people of Israel heard their enemies laughing at them, and they sensed that their neighbors were looking down on them, so they cried to God, “Let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself” (v. 17).

So perhaps the gift was a mighty messenger, God’s right-hand man.

Both of these were expected gifts — desirable and deeply appreciated. Both Immanuel and the mighty messenger were part of the expectations of the people. But the gospel of Matthew tells us that “the birth of Jesus the Messiah” took place in a way that no one saw coming (v. 18).

He was an *unexpected gift*.

“When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit” (v. 18). Pregnant by the Holy Spirit — that’s *unexpected!*

In the original Hebrew of the Old Testament, Isaiah speaks of a “young woman,” not necessarily a virgin, and there is no mention of the Holy Spirit.

“Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly” (v. 19). Joseph planned to separate from her discretely — that’s *unexpected!* He could have shamed her in public and even had her stoned, which back then meant throwing stones at her until she was dead. Very different than getting stoned today.

“But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child

conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (vv. 20-21).

An angel appeared to Joseph in a dream — that’s *unexpected!* And the angel gave him the name Jesus, which means “Savior” — that’s *unexpected!* Jesus came to save us from our sins.

Of course, Matthew fulfills the expectations of Israel when he says, “All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ‘Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,’ which means, ‘God is with us’” (vv. 22-23).

Jesus may be an unexpected gift, but he is not weird at all. Instead, he shows that God is truly with us, and that his mission is to save us from our sins.

In the gospel of Luke, we hear some additional surprising news: When the shepherds of Bethlehem were watching their flock at night, “an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them” (2:9). The appearance of an angel to a bunch of laborers in a field — that’s *unexpected!*

Then the angel said to them, “To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (v. 11). The child is not only a Savior, but the Messiah and the Lord — that’s *unexpected!*

And finally, said the angel, “you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger” (v. 12). The Savior, Messiah and Lord is born not in a luxurious palace, but in a rustic cave — that’s *unexpected!*

Just about everything about Jesus is unexpected. He may be the most surprising gift of all time.

And also the most transformative.

So how can we respond to such a gift? A short thank-you note may be appropriate for a pair of air-conditioned shoes or a clip-on man bun, but thanks for the gift of Jesus takes a bit more thought.

This Christmas, our challenge is to accept Jesus into the deepest parts of yourself as a surprising and transformative gift.

The gift of Jesus as *Immanuel* means that God is with us in every time and place and situation. Jesus comes to us as nothing less than the presence and power of God in human form. He is with us when our friends desert us. When our marriage is falling apart. When our jobs are unsatisfying, unstable or unexpectedly taken away from us.

In all of these traumatic experiences, Jesus is Immanuel, present with us in surprising and life-giving ways.

The gift of Jesus as *Savior* means that God is with us to help us, save us and transform us. Jesus is not simply standing by our side, as a supportive friend would be. No, he comes in decisive action. The name Jesus literally means “God helps” or “God saves,” which tells us that he has a particular agenda in the world.

When we are feeling overwhelmed, Jesus helps.

When we are overcome by sin, Jesus forgives.

When we feel lost or defeated or powerless, Jesus saves.

Together, these actions are transformative. We are new creations in Christ. The old has passed away. Everything is now new. A re-invention has taken place.

All possible because Jesus is Lord.

The gift of Jesus as *Messiah and Lord* means that Jesus is leading you as your Lord and master. We might be reluctant to accept this present, because we like to stand up as independent people and say to the people around us, “You’re not the boss of me!” You can tell I’m being influenced by grandsons! But the truth is that we all need guidance as we make our way in the world.

To accept Jesus as Messiah and Lord is to fall in line when Jesus says, “Follow me” (4:19). It is to make a serious effort to “love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (5:44). It is to accept the truth of Jesus’ words, “You cannot serve God and wealth” (6:24), and to structure our lives so that we are storing up treasures in heaven, instead of on earth. By this point in the month of December, it may be too late to buy the perfect Christmas present for a friend or family member. But it is not too late to accept the unexpected gift that God is offering you — the gift of Jesus as Immanuel, Savior, Messiah and Lord.

All you need to do is accept it, and allow Jesus to go to work in your life, in surprising and transformative ways.

May the peace of God . . .