

1In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3And everyone went to his own town to register.

4So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

8And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. 11Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. 12This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

13Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

Here we go again, it's Christmas Eve, every year on this evening, it's Christmas Eve. The night on which children lie in their beds, giddy with the excitement of discovering what Santa will leave them under the tree in the morning. However, there may be some children whose giddiness is tempered with anxiety tonight because they know, that if truth be told, they were not a good little girl or boy this year and so, perhaps, instead of finding the newest American Doll or whatever the latest model of Nintendo, there may be a lump of coal left for them. After all, presents are for children who have been, over this past year, nice—not naughty. If Santa brought presents for both naughty and nice children . . . well then, what would be the point of being nice? After all, it can be very hard to be nice—just ask a little girl named Carol.

In mid-December, Little Carol came into the kitchen where her mother was making dinner. Christmas was coming up and she thought this was a good time to tell her mother what she wanted. "Mom, I want a bike for Christmas." Now, Little Carol was a bit of a troublemaker. She had gotten into trouble at school and at home and even at church. Carol's mother asked her if she thought she deserved to get a bike for Christmas. Little Carol, of course, thought she did.

Carol's mother, being a Catholic woman, wanted Carol to reflect on her behavior over the last year, and write a letter to God explaining why she deserved a bike for Christmas. Ticked with her mother's request, Little Carol stomped up the steps to her room and sat down to write God a letter.

Dear God:

I have been a very good girl this year and I would like a bike for Christmas. I want a red one.

Your friend,
Carol

Carol knew this wasn't true. She had not been a very good girl this year, so she tore up the letter and started over.

Dear God:

This is your friend Carol. I have been a pretty good girl this year, and I would like a red bike for Christmas.

Thank you,
Carol

Carol knew this wasn't true either. She tore up the letter and started again.

Dear God:

I know I haven't been a good girl this year. I am very sorry. I will be a good girl if you just send me a red bike for Christmas.

Thank you,
Carol

Carol knew, even if it was true, this letter was not going to get her a bike. By now, she was very upset. She went downstairs and told her mother she wanted to go to church. Carol's mother thought her plan had worked because Carol looked very sad.

"Just be home in time for dinner," her mother said.

Carol walked down the street to the church and up to the altar. She looked around to see if anyone was there. She picked up a statue of the Virgin Mary, slipped it under her jacket and ran out of the church, down the street, into her house, and up to her room. She shut the door and sat down and wrote her letter to God.

I GOT YOUR MAMA . . . I WANT MY BIKE.

When you really want something, it can be so hard to be nice, can't it. And it's not just difficult for children to do the right thing and be good and all that stuff that earns you a shiny new red bike or any other fine Christmas present. It can be mighty hard for us adults, too. As we celebrate Christmas Eve, my mind can't stop from wandering to the holiday we'll be celebrating next week at this time—New Year's Eve. And when I think New Year's Eve, I think New Year's Resolutions. And when I think New Year's Resolutions—well, I simply want to stop thinking—because, truth be told, most of us weigh just as much—if not more than—we did last year, we're still in debt or drinking too much or smoking or not exercising . . . I don't know about you, but I haven't always been good this past year and if Santa is keeping score, I think I might find coal, not a present, under the tree tomorrow morning.

But thank goodness that real gifts are not rewards and that God, the source of all good gifts, does not keep score. Gifts, especially gifts from God, aren't earned or deserved. A gift is just that—a gift—something that is, in truth, undeserved, unearned, and ideally, is unexpected. There's none of that "Here We Go Again" sentiment that accompanies yet another package of t-shirts or new socks or an appliance that you'll never use—there's none of that when it comes to real gifts—real gifts are inspired, wonderful surprises that catch you when you least expect them. And never was there a better example of a real gift, a truly inspired gift that reflected just how much the giver knew the recipient than the gift that God gives us tonight—the Gift of the Christ Child. Quite frankly, none of us deserves a savior this year. Do we need one, of course. But do we deserve one . . . Most of us, if we got what we deserved, would find a manger full of coal instead of a manger full of love this Christmas Eve night. And yet, that's never what you'll find in the manger, will you? Year after year after year the gift is the same and yet strangely unexpected—the gift of Emmanuel, God with us—loving us, forgiving us, surprising us, and bestowing upon us gifts, wonderful, beautiful, life-giving gifts that are truly a wonder to behold. Thanks be to God for the greatest gift of all, the gift of Jesus Christ.