

My Dear Sisters and Brothers in Christ,

I have a question for you this morning. What is the toughest thing God ever tried to do?

Was it the creation of the world? No, I don't think so. All he had to do was create a hand-full of atoms, throw them up in the air, and watch them bounce off each other, and BAM the world was created.

Was it making something or someone in his own image and likeness? Probably not! All he had to do was look in the mirror and create someone who looked just like himself. When he created man, however, the picture was incomplete. So then he created a woman and put the man and the woman in a loving embrace, thereby creating the perfect image and likeness of himself.

Was it empowering Jesus to perform miracles? Was that the toughest thing that God ever tried to do? Not really! He had power over all things and could pass that on to whoever he chose.

Was it watching Jesus suffer and die on the Cross? That had to be the most terrible thing God ever had to witness. Imagine a father, watching his son tortured and killed who was completely innocent of any wrongdoing. That really had to be tough. But I'm not sure that was the toughest thing God ever had to do.

Well, then, was it raising Jesus from the dead and getting people to really believe he was alive? Probably not! All he had to do was send his Spirit into the hearts of people to believe that he had power over life and death.

Now, do you want to know what I think is the toughest thing God has tried to do? I think the toughest thing that God ever had to do is to get us to understand who he is and how much he loves us.

So God made the tough decision to leave his mighty throne in glory to bring to us salvation's story. That is what the last line of our Gospel text explains to us today, "and all flesh shall see the salvation of our God".

God decided to come among us small and helpless, cold and homeless. He chose to come to us in this fashion so that we could understand how much he wanted to be with us and how much he loves us, so that we could come to love him too.

St. Paul explains it this way in his Letter to the Philippians: "Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness; and found human in appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross."

In Christ Jesus, therefore, as Isaiah prophesized and John the Baptist proclaimed, “we see the salvation of God”. We know that God has humbled himself and come into the world. We know that his purpose was that the world through him might be saved.

This, I believe, is the toughest thing that God ever did. He gave himself to us in the weakness and smallness and brokenness of our very humanity. How do we respond to such a stupendous gift?

There are some interesting statistics in a recent issue of the *Harvard Business Review* that you might find enlightening in this season of gift-giving. One of the most popular gifts in stores today is gift cards. Research shows that 39.2% of shoppers will purchase a department store gift card for friends and family, followed by 33.4% of shoppers opting for a restaurant gift card. According to estimates reported in the *Journal of State Taxation*, the typical American home has an average of \$300.00 in “unredeemed” gift cards lying around unused. These cards are often misplaced, accidentally thrown out, or only partially redeemed. According to this report between 2005 and 2011, \$41 Billion in gift cards went unused.

That’s amazing! What good is a gift card that is never used? What good is the gift of God in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ if you and I never open our hearts to receive His love?

In Jesus we are the recipients of a great free gift. That is why it is right for Christmas to be a time of gift-giving. When we give gifts we do so to express our love and appreciation for those to whom we give them. We delight in the joy of the recipients of our gifts. How much greater must be God’s delight when we joyfully receive the gift of Jesus in our hearts.

Having received this greatest gift of all, how do we use it or how do we apply it? Do we love like Jesus loves, embracing all, regardless of race or religion; language or nationality; or sexual orientation or political persuasion? Do we give generously of ourselves, remembering that Jesus gave himself completely unto death, without counting the cost? Do we reach down to pick another up as Jesus taught us, rather than tear down another to make ourselves seem greater?

Advent reminds us that we “see the salvation of God”; we are the recipients of the greatest gift of all, God’s gift of Himself in the person of Jesus. Will we use this gift joyfully in ways that delight the heart of the giver? Or will we stuff it in a drawer or misplace it or forget about it or just redeem part of it as just another gift card?