The celebration of stuff

By Chaplain Barry A. Metzger

We have come through "Black Friday" and "Cyber Monday." The day after Thanksgiving alone, $648 million worth of goods were purchased online. It seems the proverbial writer must have had some glimpse into our shopping and gift giving frenzy when he penned Proverbs 20:14 "*It's no good, it's no good!*" Says the buyer; then off he goes and boasts about his purchase." At this point in this article I will provide a shameless plug for the post office. To ensure "stuff" gets to loved ones in the United States on time, get them mailed off by Dec. 10.

Comedian George Carlin had this to say about "stuff" in a classic routine several years ago, "You can see that when you're taking off in an airplane," he explains. "You look down; you see everybody's got a little pile of stuff, all the little piles of stuff. And when you leave your house, you've got to lock it up. Wouldn't want somebody to come by and take some of your stuff, especially the shiny stuff. That's what your house is for, a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get. . . more stuff!" Bazaars are a wonderful thing. On the other side of the coin one could say we are blessed as we do seem to have a lot of stuff.

It seems kind of odd that material things are emphasized so much during the holiday season. Christ himself was born in a smelly cattle shelter, wrapped not in a royal robe but in poverty and swaddling clothes while laid in a feed box. Christian tradition says he died on a cross belonging to another man and was buried in a borrowed tomb.

We hear Mary's song in Luke 1:48, 49 "*Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the mighty one has done great things for me, and holy is his name.*" Mary didn't say she was blessed because she had a nice house filled with stuff. She wasn't even talking about security, education or good health, though those are all things for which we can be thankful. But she says she is blessed because God, the mighty one has scattered the proud, brought down the powerful, lifted up the lowly, filled the hungry and sent the rich away empty (vv. 51-53).

There is a difference. The good stuff that God gives isn't really stuff. The gifts we receive at Christmas, no matter how much they are appreciated and come from the heart, don't provide us with lasting happiness. It is fun to give and receive, but honestly, where does most of the stuff end up? I know of one man who had portraits taken of himself and then proceeded to enlarge them up to about 42 inches by 84 inches. Really, I saw it! Well, with the help of a friend, we were able to lift it up so we could see. This was a gift to his parents. It did not find a prominent place on the wall.

Deneen Brown has this to say about the "stuff crisis" from the March 27 Washington Post. "We are either consuming it, acquiring it, complaining about it, cleaning it, or moving it from store to car to house to garage to a Pod parked in the driveway. We are worried about it, bored about it or happy about it. Our stuff has become our baggage."

So what is important as we focus on this holiday season? Mary starts her song in Luke 1 with the words "*my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.*" She is thanking God for saving her from a life of insignificance, meaninglessness and despair. She knows that stuff cannot save her. Only God can save; God alone is Mary's savior.

How often do we lose site of this, feel insignificant or worry that our life does not have enough meaning? We may try to alleviate this feeling by working hard to acquire power and prestige. We might find ourselves slipping into despair so we desperately hold on to what we have, hoping that our possessions and positions lift our spirits.

Mary seems to get it. She sings, "[T]he mighty one has done great things for me, and holy is his name" (v. 49). God alone can give our lives significance, meaning and hope if we open our hearts to the truly precious stuff that God is offering us. For Mary of course, it was the gift of a child. For us, the gift could be many things, perhaps forgiveness, getting rid of shame or unconditional acceptance in the community. It may be an opportunity to serve in a worthwhile cause or make a real difference in someone's life. God works through all these gifts to give us meaning and hope.

When we are rich toward God, we're filled with good things. When our meaning is concentrated solely on wealth or prestige we find ourselves empty. May we be filled with his blessings.

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