

May I speak in the name of God, Giver, Forgiver and Lover. Amen.

I suspect that I am not the only one here this morning who has not completed all their Christmas shopping. Then there is the matter of the Christmas cards, purchased but not yet all written or sent. And let's not even think about the precise plans for what happens and when on Christmas Day itself. The simple truth is that I'm not altogether ready.

One person who is ready for Christmas is the economist and author Joel Waldfogel. A Professor at Wharton Waldfogel is the author of an invective against the extravagant consumption of the holiday season. Titled 'Scroogenomics' Waldfogel's book argues that the holiday season is a wasteful expenditure of billions of dollars. As an economist Waldfogel argues that the value spent on most presents vastly exceeds the value that the recipient places on them. In other words, for Waldfogel gift giving is an extravagant waste in which your hard earned dollars are devalued. Clearly he is absolutely right. But I will not be giving 'Scroogenomics' to anyone as a present this Christmas.

There are two reasons for that. The first is that Waldfogel himself warns his readers precisely against giving his book to others as a gift, as his whole point is that any recipient would never value the book as highly as the money one would have to spend to acquire it. But there is another more serious reason why I won't be giving this particular book for Christmas. And that is that while it may well be a welcome corrective to the orgy of consumerism that can be holiday shopping it misunderstands the nature of what gifts are.

I am sure that the economic theory behind 'Scroogenomics' is absolutely spot on. But I have suspicions that 'Scroogenomics' understands much

about the theology of gifts. If we were to apply the theories behind 'Scroogenomics' to the Christmas story I doubt that we would have heard and sung the Magnificat in church today. In the Magnificat Mary offers us a theological riposte to all the proponents of traditional economic theories. Against those who wish to judge the world against the cost of a dollar, Mary reminds us that the God of the gift upsets the natural economic order.

The simple truth is that on the cusp of Christmas, on this fourth Sunday of Advent, God wants us to revisit and recalibrate our fundamental values. And that means taking the theological fight to the bean counters and economists who would treat money as the fundamental value of human life.

If you are looking for sound investment advice you would be well advised not to listen to the God of Abraham and Isaac, Sarah and Rebekah, Elizabeth and Mary. But if you are looking for sound life advice, you will want to ponder the powerful words of the Magnificat. In her stirring song Mary reminds us that God chose her not for the prestige or the influence that she could wield, but for her lowliness.

I am persistently surprised that feminists have not made more of Mary within the tradition of the Christian church. While it is true that she has been appropriated by many who have wanted to affirm traditional gender roles, the words that scripture attributes to Mary speak truth to power in a patriarchal culture in a way that is every bit as direct and liberating as those of contemporary feminists. She is a strong woman, and it is time that all of us started listening to her.

Mary's words are, of course, controversial because Mary assumes that the God of the gift is to be trusted. Unlike advocates of 'Scroogenomics' Mary is willing to take the personal risk that responding to God's gift requires each of us to spend something of ourselves. And this gets to the heart of the difference between economics and theology.

Economics wants something for everything. It wants to be able to close the circle and show a reward and a return for even the smallest piece of expenditure. The rich in this model do well, they will become richer as they leverage their wealth against the cycle of return.

By contrast, theology is all about something coming out of nothing. For God all that matters is the gratuitous expenditure of love that seeks no reward, no distinction and no return. The poor in this model will do well, for in not expecting a reward they are already closer to understanding the implications of the divine gift.

Mary understood that the gift that God offers humanity is one of radical renewal and hope. And Elizabeth saw this too. And maybe it is not just a coincidence that it is the women in the bible who seem to have a better sense of the nature of God's gift to humankind. My wife and I have an ongoing debate about why it is that when our baby cries at night that nine times out of ten my wife is the one to get out of the bed and soothe her back to sleep. According to recent research men are simply worse at hearing the cry of a baby. Men are better at hearing things like the howl of wind that might threaten the entire family, but when it comes to detecting a crying child our evolutionary abilities really do seem to have favored the female with better detection.

The researchers don't comment on whether there are also other things that women are better at hearing. But maybe they are on to something. Maybe the reason we have Elizabeth and Mary in our readings today is that women are also better equipped to hear the voice of God in the powerless and the underprivileged. Like the cry of a baby, and like the annunciation, maybe Magnificat is a powerful reminder that it is a woman who both listens to and understands the nature of God's coming.

It is very unfashionable in theoretical circles to assert this kind of gender essentialism, but the biblical text makes it absolutely clear. The birth of

Jesus is anticipated and ushered in not by fast talking members of the masculine priestly or prophetic hierarchy, but by a lowly woman.

As you prepare for Christmas I urge you to take comfort in the good news that is Mary's song. And wherever you are in your Christmas shopping remember that for a gift to be a gift it requires you to sacrifice something for it. A gift is not a gift if we expect something superlative in return. And clearly refraining from giving just because the dollar value decreases to the recipient is just about the most ridiculous reason to not give a gift. Giving has always been about letting go and losing something that is yours for the benefit of another. No amount of quantification is ever going to change that. Regardless of whether the study is done in Wharton or even the Tuck here at Dartmouth. Nor should it.

If we were all to apply the logic of 'Scroogenomics' we might save a few dollars here and there but we would absolutely impoverish ourselves and our world. A world where everyone cautiously counts the cost and is wary of giving away anything without a good return is not a world so much as a prison.

At the same time the important thing is not that we give bigger or better in the next few days. The important thing is that we get better about lifelong giving without any expectation of return. Only then will we be ready to discover the true meaning of Christmas. The choice for each one of us clear. We can be like Scrooge or we can be like Mary. This year you get to tell God who it will be. Amen.