

Being Present for Christmas

Luke 1:26-38

The angel Gabriel greeted Mary and told her she had nothing of which to be afraid. “God has a surprise for you: you will become pregnant and give birth to a son and call his name Jesus. Mary said ‘But how?’” (from Luke, *The Message*) The angel said, *essentially, it’s a God thing!*” And Mary said, Let it be with me just as you say.” (The Message) She offered one question and one response – “But how?” and then “Let it be.” Amen.

The tradition of a supernatural virgin birth with regard to Jesus was late coming to the Christian tradition. The Apostle Paul never mentioned it. He described Jesus’ birth in such a way that it appeared to have happened in the usual way. The unique story in Luke’s gospel of the announcement to Mary that she was going to have a baby under extraordinary circumstances – that it would be a God thing – and all indications that Mary was okay with that is likely not a description of what happened. Luke’s story describes how Mary made sense of the realization that she would be giving birth to God in her life. Fr. Richard Rohr described Mary, the mother of Jesus as,

A Jewish girl who grows to womanhood in the company of a son who is as much a mystery to her as a child can be. That’s very real, as any mother today can testify. And yet she is a woman of extraordinary faith, which is what sets her apart and makes her a model for the rest of us. Even though she does not fully understand what God is asking of her, she believes with all her heart that it can and will be done, and she acts accordingly. (Richard Rohr, *Great Themes of Scripture*, 102)

Our Advent journey to Bethlehem is almost complete. As we approach the manger, there are two questions I want to ask you. “Is there room in the manger of your heart for Christ to be born?” “What is that child in you?” I suggest that what is waiting to be born in us is the ability to see God, see others, and see ourselves honestly, openly, and clearly. Jesus was God with a human face. In his life, while interacting with him, people were enabled and challenged to see themselves and to see God. Jesus offered a clearer picture of the nature of the universe, the nature of God, than possibly anyone else every had.

What is waiting in Bethlehem for you this Christmas? What is waiting to be born and to grow up in your life? *Shalom* is the Hebrew word for peace, yet more than peace. It describes the peace of oneness within ourselves, with others, and with the divine nature of life itself. In a recent concert at Crossroads Church, Ken Medema introduced us to the word *ubuntu*, an African word that means much the same as *shalom*. True peace is not so much moving away from conflict, but moving toward oneness, openness, honesty, acceptance, justice, and respect in love.

Shalom and *ubuntu* are waiting to be born in our hearts, but the only way to experience the birth of God in your life is to make space, wrote Author Scott Peck, by cultivating emptiness in life – not to control and not to achieve, but just to be. Make space for “the

other, the different, the unexpected. Make space in community for the stranger, the other person.” (Scott Peck, *A Different Drum*)

The truth is that space is already present, but we fill it up by projecting our opinions, ideas, conclusions” [all through that space until it becomes cluttered with] memories and experiences of yesterday [so that] we never see, never listen, are never quiet.” (Krishnamurti, *On Freedom*) And we are never fully present nor fully at peace.

What is the best Christmas present you’ve ever received? Why was it the best? I am reminded of the song *I’ll Be Home for Christmas*. The chorus has these words:

Christmas Eve will find me
Where the love light beams
I’ll be home for Christmas
If only in my dreams

There is a compelling need to be home *for Christmas, if only in my dreams*. This song emphasizes the importance of Christmas *presence* even if that presence is “if only in my dreams.” What is the most precious and important gift you can give for Christmas? There are many wonderful presents around. Some are very expensive while others not so much, but the most important present anyone can give or receive is your *presence*. Whatever else you give or don’t give, be sure to give the gift of your presence this Christmas.

Children tend to give their full presence naturally and wonderfully. The distractions and cares of growing up, however, lead adults to tend toward withdrawing that presence and substituting *stuff* instead. Be sure to give the gift of your presence -- not just be there in body, but also in mind, heart, and spirit. Such a gift does not cost much money. That is good in these tough economic times. It does cost time, energy of effort, and a willingness to listen and to hear.

Presence is a gift that keeps giving all year long. I was in a meeting recently with representatives from the Kansas City Department of Health to talk about an exciting new initiative in our neighborhood. This health equity initiative has the potential to make a significant difference to the life of this larger community. In my meeting, part of the influence I brought to the table was the presence of the faith communities of the Metro Organization for Racial and Economic Equity, of which our congregation is a member. The presence of that organization, represented by my presence, was and is a powerful force to those who resist change in our community. The presence of the Crossroads congregation was also very much with me. Whatever authority I had came from your presence.

If the gift that needs to be given is presence, how should we be present this Christmas? One way is just to show up! It is so much better when everyone comes. This is true for play rehearsals, worship services, special events, and family gatherings. We give the gift of presence by being present.

Another important factor is how you're present. Resolve to listen. Make time to listen to that person in your family, or perhaps your church family, who drives you crazy or irritates you. Listen! Ask questions! Respect the space between you. Don't fill that space with the past, with judgments, with how you'll respond, or with the need to make sense of it all. Listen to them. Hear them. See them. Love them. All these actions are within your power. They require nothing from the other persons and represent evidence of the new birth of God in your life. Cultivate some emptiness in your life – space to be present to God who is already present to you.

God is present and a genuine response happens in three ways: to the world and people as they are, to yourself as you are (with all your strengths and weaknesses, warts and secrets), and to the tiny *nudgings* of God who invites you to put yourself, as you are, at the service of other people as they are. (Francis Dewar, *Invitations*). Make space in your life this holiday and this new year to listen, see, hear, and love your family, friends, community, and world as it is -- without fixing and without understanding.

Ask questions without needing to control the answers. Allow yourself to be filled up like a reservoir that can then give of its abundant overflowing. And give thanks for the peace of Christ. Give thanks for the oneness of our lives in the in life of God.

*We gather in a holy place where God already lives
We gather to find Jesus' face, the strength his presence gives.
We gather in the Spirit's life. We hope to see her face.
Our presence is an offering, a gift of holy grace.
But prayers are never finished 'til justice comes on earth.
In us the life of Jesus is finally given birth,
Until we seek maturity along a faithful way,
The culminating worship of living love each day.
We gather now and worship at the crossroads of our way.
Opportunity and challenge confront us every day.
The call of Jesus meets us with the Holy Spirit's power.
The eternal God invites us to partnership this hour.
We worship in community, each one a vital part;
Our songs and prayers and laughter in unity of heart.
We live along a journey of mystery and pain.
Immersed in Spirit passion, we're called to life again.*

(Jack Price, *Crossroads Gathering*, 2008)