

4. The Best Present is Presence  
The Power of the Presence  
Luke 1:26-38

This is the long-awaited last Sunday of Advent. Next Wednesday is Christmas Eve, and Thursday is Christmas Day. During this Advent Season, our theme is that the best present is presence.

We've been talking about how just being there is more important than the gifts we might give. Our presence is more important than our presents.

This morning I want to go a step further and say that as important as our presence is, we have an even better gift to give—the Presence of Christ. As much as our being with people is a wonderful gift, the gift of the Presence of Christ is that much greater. People are hungry for the presence of Christ.

And our Lord wants to be with us. The Bible is the story of God trying to be with us. We all know the story of Adam, how God would come down each evening and take a walk with Adam. They would talk about the day's events and the plans for the next day. Mostly they just enjoyed one another's company. Until Adam sinned. Then, when God came to Adam, Adam went and hid in a bush. People have been hiding from God ever since. God loves us too much to leave us hiding in the bushes. So, God has been trying to get us out of hiding and into His Presence ever since. He was willing to do anything, even come to us as a weak and helpless baby,

People need the presence of Christ, and God uses people to bring Christ's presence into the world. As wonderful as we are, people need Christ more than they need us. But Christ comes to people through us.

Let's talk about Mary. Mary is one of the most loved persons in the history of Christianity. She is adored by many. Now, I'm sure that Mary was a very pleasant person. I'm sure people enjoyed it when she took time to be with them. But that's not the reason Mary is adored. She is so greatly loved because she allowed herself to be used by God to bring Christ into the world. She was the means by which the presence of Christ came into the world. As wonderful as Mary was, her greatest gift to the world was not her presence, but the presence of Christ which came through her.

And the same is true of you and me.

Mary bore Christ. That is a distinction that belongs to her and to her alone. But we can all be Christ-bearers.

A Christ-bearer is someone who brings the presence of Christ into a situation. The term "Christ-bearer" comes from the legend of St. Christopher. St. Christopher was born in the year 225 and his name was originally Offerus. He was an ugly, giant of a man. He converted to Christianity as an adult. And he felt that he was called by Christ to use his size to carry people across a river which was just deep enough and strong enough that most people could not ford it on their own. According to legend, a small child came to cross the river. Offerus took him on his shoulders and started across the river. As he walked the child became heavier and heavier, until Offerus was afraid that he would stumble under the load, and they would both be drowned. When he spoke to the child

about how heavy he was, the child revealed to him that he was Christ and that he was so heavy because he bore the weight of the sin and suffering of the world. Offerus was given the strength to carry the Christ child to the other side of the river. After that he became known as Christopher, Christ-bearer.

We are all called to be Christophers or Christ-bearers.

As wonderful as we all are, people don't need us as much as they need the presence of Christ that we can bring to them.

How do we bring the presence of Christ to people? We can follow the example set by Mary. The Angel Gabriel came to Mary to announce that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and the power of the Most High would overshadow her and enable her to bring Christ into the world. Mary's response was, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; Let it be to me according to your word."

We cannot bring the presence of Christ into the world. But the Spirit of God at work in us can. The first step in bringing the presence of Christ to others is to let the Spirit of Christ dwell in us. We need to spend time in Christ's presence. We need to let the power of the presence of God overshadow us and fill us with God's presence.

Christ is present with us this morning. Are you feeling that presence? Do you feel the loving touch of Christ? Do you feel his healing power at work in your bodies and your souls?

Now, feel the presence of the people around you. One of the sad realities of every day life is that we don't enough attention to the people in our lives. In the play, "Our Town" by Thornton Wilder, the people who have been buried in the town cemetery watch the living and talk about them and about life. One of those buried in the cemetery, Emily Webb, asks for and gets the opportunity to relive her 12<sup>th</sup> birthday. It turns out to be a sad experience for her, because her family are so busy doing things that they don't take time to enjoy being together. Emily says, "We don't even have time to look at one another."

We need to take time to really feel the presence of the people around us.

Feel the presence of the ones sitting beside you. Feel the presence of those behind you. Feel the presence of those who in front of you.

Now, feel God's love for those around you. Feel Christ's powerful desire to be with them, to touch them, to talk with them, to encourage them, to really look at them and see what's going on in their hearts and in their lives, to listen to their thoughts and their feelings.

Christ wants to really be with the people around you, and he wants to do it through you. Christ is calling us to really pay attention to the people we encounter from day to day.

One of my favorite Christmas stories was told by a pastor who was the director of a children's home. It was Christmas Eve, and he was desperately trying to put together a sermon for the Christmas Eve service at the children's home that evening. But with all the Christmas preparations, he was having constant interruptions. He closed the door to his study and asked not to be disturbed. But it wasn't long before there was a knock on the door. One of the house parents said, "I'm sorry to bother you. But we have a problem." The pastor sighed and said, "What is it?" The house parent said, "Timmy is hiding under his bed and refuses to come out."

Timmy was a new resident. He was about six years old and had had a difficult time in his short life. All the hustling around, getting ready for the Christmas Eve activities had frightened him, but everyone was so busy they didn't notice how frightened he was. Timmy did what we naturally do when we are frightened, he looked for a place to hide. He needed to escape from the noise and activities, and the only place he could find was under his bed.

The pastor went to Timmy's room and looked under the bed. There was Timmy. He began talking to Timmy. He told him about the wonderful meal they had planned. He told him about the Christmas presents. He talked about singing Christmas carols and seeing the Christmas decorations. He asked him if he wouldn't like to come out from under the bed and enjoy all these things. Silence! Timmy just lay there still and quiet.

Finally, the pastor just slid under the bed and lay on the floor beside Timmy. He didn't say anything. In a little while he felt Timmy's hand in his hand. He held his hand a few moments. Then he quietly asked, "Are you ready to come out?" The little boy nodded his head, and they slid out from under the bed.

When the pastor got Timmy seated at the dinner table he returned to his study to work on his sermon. As he sat and thought, he realized he had his sermon.

Timmy, like all of us, just needed someone to be with him, to know that someone cared about him, someone to give him all their attention, someone to be with him.

That's why Christ came on Christmas, to be with us in the darkness, to give us the courage to come out of hiding into the presence of God.

The best present we can give is the presence of Christ. When we abide in the presence of Christ and Christ abides with us and we are fully present to people and open to their full presence, we become a door through which Christ comes to them and they come into the presence of Christ.

We can't do this on our own. But as the angel said, "Nothing is impossible with God." It is the Spirit of Christ at work in us which enables to bring the presence of God into the world.

Let the power of the Presence of the Most High overshadow. Allow the presence of Christ to enter into the world through you. Be a Christ Bearer.

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