

2. The Best Present is Presence
Christmas Absences
2 Peter 3:8-15a

This is the second Sunday of Advent. Our theme for this Advent season is, “The Best Present is Presence.”

What that means is that just having the people you love around you on Christmas is the second-best present you can have. The best present of all is the presence of Christ in your life.

But recognizing that presence is the best Christmas present of all, we also have to recognize the reality of absence.

Let’s be honest. There are a great many of you who will have to deal with the sadness of people who won’t be home for Christmas. Some of you will be remembering family and friends who are present to God, but not to us, except in our hearts and in our memories. We have the consolation of knowing that someday we will be reunited with them in the eternal presence of God. But, for now, we very much feel their absence. For many, Christmas will be a time of grief. There is no way to avoid it. Nor should we try to avoid it. In a way, the ones for whom we grieve are present with us in our grief. So, on Christmas Day, say it out loud. Say to one another, “I really am missing Mom today.” Maybe even shed a tear together. Then, gratefully enjoy the ones who are with you on Christmas Day.

Others of us will be dealing with much less painful absences. Very few families will have everyone there for Christmas. Becky and I will be alone on Christmas morning. Our son and his family are stationed in Albany, New York. He can’t get free from his duties there. So, Becky and I are flying up there this afternoon and spend a few days with them.

Our daughter is the pastor of a church in Virginia Beach, Virginia. She will be busy on Christmas Eve. The good news is that she and her family will fly out on Christmas Day and will be here that evening.

So, on Christmas morning, Becky and I will probably spend some time reminiscing of the days when our children were running into our bedrooms at the crack of dawn on Christmas Day, pleading with us to get up and gather around the Christmas tree. We will be thinking about them gathering around the Christmas trees in their homes and their small children learning about the joys of Christmas.

Even though we won’t be physically present with them, we will be together in our thoughts, and probably by telephone too.

Absence is a reality at Christmas time.

But what about a Christmas without Christ? Have you ever felt like Christ was missing at Christmas time? It can happen. Last week, in my Advent study on the book, *Hurry Less, Worry Less at Christmas*, we listed about fifteen things that cause stress during the Advent and Christmas season. We talked about how Advent and Christmas should be holy days. But they get turned into holidays. We can get so caught up in cooking, shopping, partying and paying bills that we lose the awareness of Christ’s

presence in our lives. We can easily find ourselves celebrating a Christmas without Christ.

The Bible teaches us that one day Christ will come into the world in such a powerful manner that no one will be able to ignore him. He will come down from heaven surrounded by the saints and angels to rule the world in righteousness. All the world will be forced to see him and make their decision for him or against him. We have been watching and waiting for that day for about 2,000 years. We know it will happen someday. But it hasn't happened yet.

That does not mean that Christ is not here with us right now. He is. His spirit is with us. But we can ignore him. We can go along for days or weeks, or maybe even a lifetime, totally unaware of the presence of Christ. When we do, we have lost the best present of all.

The purpose of Advent and Christmas is to remind us of the importance of being aware of the presence of Christ.

How do we do that? You know the answer. We need to make space for Christ in our hearts and in our lives. Christ is here. The Spirit of Christ is always present with us. The problem is not that Christ isn't with us. The problem is that we aren't with Christ.

We need to slow down, get quiet, and invite Christ to come to us. If you ask him, he will come. He makes his presence known in many different ways. Often he catches us by surprise.

During this Advent season, ask Christ to come into your heart and your life in a new and more powerful way. That is a prayer to which Christ will always say "yes." Expect to experience the presence of Christ more powerfully than ever before. That will be the best present you will receive this Christmas.

Dr. Wesley Welborn
Senior Pastor