

1. The Best Present is Presence:  
Christ's Presence Rocks Your World  
Isaiah 64:1-4

Today we begin the Advent Season. Our theme the services this Advent Season is: The Best Present is Presence. We will be talking about how the best gift you can give is yourself. The best gift you can give is your time, your attention, your thoughts, your prayers, your listening ears, your appreciation, your love and your friendship. Nothing else that we can give will bring as much joy and satisfaction as truly being with the people who love you.

That is true of God as well. The greatest gift we can ever receive is God's presence.

That's what Advent is all about. It is waiting expectantly for God to come to us and be with us.

Now, we say the words, "waiting for God to come to us" somewhat blithely. But if we are honest, we will confess that we have mixed feelings about the presence of God coming into our lives.

A few years ago Becky and I picked up our son from Fort Polk and drove to the Grand Canyon. I have a list of things I want to see during my lifetime. The Grand Canyon was on that list. I believe it is something that every American ought to see at some time or another. As we drove out there, I was filled with anticipation and fear. I felt like a moth being drawn to a flame. You see, I have a fear of heights. When I am watching a movie and it shows somebody standing on the ledge of a tall building or climbing a cliff, I have to look away, because I get dizzy and panicky. So, here I am going to stand on the edge of a canyon that drops that goes down one mile. I both wanted to see awesome majesty of the Grand Canyon with my own eyes and dreaded it all at the same time. We did get there, and I spent two days walking the rim of the Grand Canyon. I did spend much of the time dizzy and panicky. I'm glad I had that experience. It was awesome. It was something I will never forget, and I hated every second of it.

That's what you call mixed feelings.

And compared to God, the Grand Canyon look like a crack in a sidewalk. If God were to come down, would the heavens be torn open? Would the mountains quake? Would the nations tremble?

We are caught up on the horns of a dilemma. We want to be with God. We need to be with God. And, yet, as the Bible warns us, no one can look upon the face of God and live. To be in the presence of the holy and eternal God is to be overwhelmed by our own sinfulness and insignificance. We need God to come to us, and yet we fear God's presence.

God understands our dilemma and has provided a solution.

God has come down. And, other than a few shepherds, three wise men and a young couple, no one even knew that anything had happened. A baby was born in a cave, on a calm, silent night. God came into the world, and there was no rending of the heavens, no earthquake, no turmoil. No one knew anything had happened, except for a

handful of people—a few shepherds, three wise men, a stable of animals, and Mary and Joseph. Of course, it turned their worlds upside down. They would never be the same again.

My experience is that is the way God's presence comes into our lives.

I recall when the presence of God entered my life. Some people tell me they have always known the presence of God in their lives. That was not the case with me. For the first twenty years of my life, God was not real to me. I believed in God. I wanted very much to know God. But there was an iron curtain that stood between God and me. God was a cold, empty void in my life.

Then one night as I was praying alone at the altar of a church, suddenly the Spirit of Christ broke into my life.

As far as the rest of the world was concerned, nothing happened. There were no earthquakes or tornadoes or wild fires. There was a group of people meeting in a room next to the sanctuary. They were totally unaware that anything had happened.

But, I'll tell you, my world was rocked. It will never be the same again.

I was talking with one of our members earlier this week, who talked about how the world changed for him when he began seeing it in the light of the reality of the presence of God. He used a phrase that I like a lot. He said that he had to get used to the "new normal."

I knew exactly what he was talking about. It's like the movie *Pleasantville* where people live in black and white, and then, one by one, suddenly their lives turn into color. Everything is both the same and, at the same time, very different.

When I walked out of that sanctuary, it was like I stepped into a world of color, after living in black and white for the first twenty years of my life. Nothing in my life had changed. And yet everything had changed. God was present in my life and in the world. And God's presence brought beauty and joy and meaning to a world which had seemed to me to be flat and boring and empty and hopeless.

Nothing had changed—except this one thing, the Spirit of Christ's presence had come to me.

We know that God is the source of all good gifts. God pours out all kinds of gifts to us on a daily basis. Everything we have ever had or will ever have is manna from heaven.

But nothing that God gives us can even begin to match the greatest gift of all—the gift of Christmas, God coming to be with us in Jesus Christ.

Presence is the best present. Being there is the greatest gift of all.

When you are young, you look forward to the gifts under the tree on Christmas Day. But, as you grow older, you learn that the real presents are not the packages under the tree, they are the people gathered around the tree.

A young woman who had a very busy life called her parents and told them she would be home with them on Christmas Day. As they talked, she mentioned that she would be getting off work at noon on Christmas Eve. Her mother said, "Why are you waiting until Christmas Day? You could be home by supper on Christmas Eve." Her daughter said, "But, mom, I haven't had any time to do any Christmas shopping. I want to spend Christmas Eve looking for the perfect gift for you and dad." Her mother said, "You are the perfect gift. Your dad and I want to spend every moment possible with you. Please come home."

I remember the Christmas my son came back from Iraq. As we gathered around the tree, I looked at him and his wife and his little boy who was born two weeks before he left for Iraq. If you took all the Christmas gifts I had ever gotten and piled them all together, they couldn't possibly have come close to the joy of having my son and his family being there with us that day.

The best present is presence.

And the best presence of all is the presence of Christ in our lives.

During this Advent Season seek a greater awareness of the presence of Christ in your life. Let Christ transform the dull black and white areas of your life into the vivid colors of heaven. Bask in the joy and love of Christ. Prepare to let Christ rock your world.

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