**“Your Presence is our Present”**

A sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church

Bedford, MA

Throughout the year, I’m sure many of you receive invitations to various celebrations and gatherings of family and friends. And whenever these invitations arrive, there is always the question of whether to bring a gift, and if so, what gift to bring. Once such invitation I received awhile back provided clear guidance on this front. It said simply, “your presence is our present.” That invitation didn’t have anything to do with a holiday celebration, nevertheless, the phrase strikes me an appropriate way to begin our shared reflections tonight on the meaning of Christmas this year. Your presence is our present.

Presents, the wrapping paper kind, have been on my mind a lot this Advent. Maybe it is because this is the first Christmas that Nathan, my two-year old, is expecting gifts and so, suddenly the holiday has become a little more about purchasing and wrapping gifts for our family than in the past. Maybe it is because I’m especially behind this year in getting presents for family members and friends. Or maybe it is because my mind has been fixated on the piles of Christmas presents sitting in twenty basements in Newtown, CT that no longer have a little boy or girl waiting to unwrap them tomorrow. For whatever reason, that is the particular image I’ve been coming back to again and again in the past ten days as a kind of icon for my own grief, confusion and anger over this devastating act of violence. Unopened presents.

The word present derives from the Latin word *praesentare*, which means “to show”. At this time of year we give presents to show people we love how we feel about them. This of course has been going on since the first Christmas, or technically since the first Epiphany, when the Magi arrived from the east and opened their chests with presents for Jesus. These were presents meant precisely to show Jesus exactly how they felt about him. Gold honoring his kingship; frankincense honoring his priesthood, and myrrh honoring his prophetic voice. These wise people, whomever they were, gave presents to the baby Jesus to show them what they thought about him, and to honor his dignity and worth as their prophet, priest, and king.

Giving physical presents at Christmas has strong biblical roots. But of course, we know that the presents under our trees are meant to be just an-add on to the real celebration of Christmas. They are the dessert, not the main course. They might bring the most immediate gratification, but they can’t give us the true nourishment that we need. For that we need not Christmas presents under our trees, but a sense of the Christmas presence – God among us – abiding in our lives.

This abiding presence, above all else, is the gift God sought to offer humanity on that bleak mid-winter night two thousand years ago. The gift God’s presence brought in the form of Jesus was not deliverance from all suffering. It was not material comfort or security. It was not even liberation from oppression. It was simply companionship for all humankind. I say simply not because I think companionship is of little value; it isn’t – as all of us know from our personal experiences of loneliness and isolation. True companionship has the potential to transform any situation from an occasion of despair, anguish or rage, into one of healing, reconciliation and hope. It makes the darkest nights bearable, because when we receive the gift of presence, of companionship, it reminds us of our dignity and our inherent worth – no matter what parts of ourselves might be broken on the outside or ugly on the inside. It is a gift of extreme value.

And this is the gift God gave to each one of us by showing up as a helpless, crying newborn in a stable in Bethlehem. God’s presence was our present. God chose to become our companion in as complete a way as possible: to enter into reality from the human perspective; to hold nothing back from us, to reaffirm our dignity and honor our inherent worth as divinely created beings. And by doing so, to transform the world into a place of greater peace and love.

To emphasize this point, the first people invited into God’s presence are the shepherds, one of the least dignified or esteemed groups of people in the first century. Shepherds were always dirty and smelled bad. They were often assumed to be ‘takers’ who sought to graze their sheep on the lands of others. And their work of tending to flocks grazing in the countryside, by its very nature kept them isolated from the places where human community gathered. They were loners. So God started there, among people whose worth within the human family wasn’t widely accepted, and whose dignity was fragile. God sent the holy angels to shine upon these dirty, smelly, suspect people, and guide them towards his divine presence in the manger. That invitation to companionship showed them their true worth.

Though it is now centuries later, the same is true for us: God’s presence continues to be our most important present, showing us that we are worthy of love and reminding us of our dignity, especially when our experiences of life make those things hard to see. There are times for each of us, I suspect, when we fall into a kind of conscious or unconscious despair that God has become indifferent to us, left us to fend for ourselves, or even given up on the whole human project. But at Christmas we remember that God chose to be with us as one of us. God chose companionship over conquest, gradual conversion over instantaneous deliverance, abiding love over manipulation and control as the process for bringing reconciliation and healing into our lives and into the world. God refused to do it for us, but by coming to us as Jesus, instead gives us the most important things we need to do it together: companionship and dignity.

With those two gifts in our hearts, I can only think of one thing we could possibly have to fear: someone who doesn’t have them. When I try to puzzle out what causes the violence and rage that seems to be more and more commonplace in our human community – when I try to find an answer to how these kinds of tragedies happen, whether in elementary schools, in twin towers, or in brutal dictatorships, that is the sum of what I come up with. Violence and rage stem at the core from feelings of isolation and worthlessness that are allowed to spin out of control. If we believe that God’s presence in the world transforms anything – let alone everything – then it must touch the lives of all who feel on the margins of community and doubt their own dignity. If we believe God’s presence is our most cherished present, and if we have been blessed to unwrap that gift in our own hearts, then our Christmas present to the world must be our Christmas presence in the world. Like the Christ child in the manger, our lives must bring companionship those who are lost and lonely, acknowledge the worth of those who feel unworthy to be in relationship, and restore dignity where it has been lost or taken.

Of course, this kind of Christmas presence can’t simply be sent from Amazon.com, in fact it can’t be purchased anywhere. It can only be re-gifted, passed on in person from those who have received it already to those who so desperately need it. Each of us has desperately needed it at some points in our lives…and perhaps for a few of us, that point is right now. And if that’s true for you tonight, look around. See in this community a sign of the companionship and love that God offers to every person in the gift of the Incarnation.

Tonight we celebrate that God has given his Christmas presence to us, come to us as one of us, the humble and defenseless Jesus, asking only for our love and offering everything that matters in return. In our gratitude and joy, may we, with God’s help, bear this Christmas presence in all our lives: building community and restoring dignity until each one of us in this world really belongs to each other. And to nurture this presence in our own hearts, I invite you tonight, when kneel down to receive the bread and wine this Christmas Eve, to take a breath and pray this short simple prayer to Christ: Your presence is my present. Thanks be to God. Amen.