

“Christmas Presence”

John 1:15

December 25, 2016

Christmas Day

Sometimes, Christmas traditions are unclear and difficult to understand. I remember finding that out many years ago, when someone was trying to explain their tradition to me and I just wasn't understanding. They said, “We are having our Christmas tomorrow.” This seemed odd to me because it was only the second week in December. I then began to hear other similar comments. “Our family is having Christmas on Thanksgiving weekend.” “We are having Christmas on New Year's Day.” I was confused. When did Christmas become a movable holiday that was different for everyone? Isn't Christmas on December 25 for everyone? Then I began to understand what they meant. These people were not talking about the *day* of Christmas. They were talking about the *celebration* of Christmas. “Having Christmas” for these people meant gathering together and exchanging presents.

Being together with family and receiving presents are fun traditions. There is nothing wrong with doing this. But there are some limitations to these traditions and how much they can help us. For instance, some people have no family or only have family that lives far away. They can't be with family no matter when Christmas is celebrated. Also, some people receive no presents on Christmas. Watching people exchange Christmas gifts can be a painful reminder to some people of what they do not have.

But even if you have all the presents that your heart desires, these presents may not help you as much as you hope. For one thing, presents can only give you temporary help or relief. For example, liquor, cookies, and candy will all be consumed and be gone. Toys will break or lose our interest. Clothes will wear out or eventually be grown out of. Also, presents, no matter how good they are, cannot help you with serious problems. Even the best presents cannot help you with the meaning of life or the coming of death.

What we need is not more Christmas presents. Instead, we need (as it is spelled out in the bulletin) more Christmas presence. We need the presence of God and THAT is what Christmas delivers to us.

God had created humanity to live in His presence. Holy people living in the presence of a holy God was the ideal setting. There was no suffering, want, or need. Death did not exist. But Adam and Eve lost the presence of God for themselves and all their descendants (including us) when they decided to go their own way instead of obeying God's way. That's what we call sin.

For that, they were expelled from the Garden of Eden. God barred their way to the garden and the tree of life by placing the cherubim with a flaming sword as a guard. From that point on, sinful people would be separated from a holy God. Their sin and the sin of their descendants would separate them from God's love so that they would face only God's wrath. They would be separated from God's mercy and experience only His judgment. They would be separated from God's life and be doomed to death, both physical and spiritual, forever.

But God, in His great love, reached out to restore people to His presence once again so that they might be shown His mercy, experience His love, and live forever in His presence once again. Almost immediately after Adam and Eve separated themselves from God, God began making promises of restoration. To Satan in the serpent, the Lord said, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall crush your head and you shall bruise his heel.” (Genesis 3:15) Satan, the architect of separation, would one day be crushed by the Seed of the woman and people would be united with God in His presence once again.

Through the years, the Lord would reveal more about who this “Crusher” would be that would bring people back into the presence of God. He would say through the Prophet, “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel [which means God with us].” (Isaiah 7:14) This is astounding news! Even though we, in our sin, had separated ourselves from God, He would come to us and join Himself to us.

Initially, God's presence with His people was in a place. God dwelt as a pillar of fire or a pillar of cloud in the tabernacle, the tent sanctuary of the people of Israel in the desert. He later dwelt with His people in the temple in Jerusalem. But God wanted more intimate fellowship with us. He wanted to do more than any structure could do for us. He wanted to become one of us.

This is what Christmas is all about. Last night, on Christmas Eve, we heard the story about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem; the notification of the shepherds in the field about the birth of Jesus; and the

response of the shepherds to the birth of Jesus. Today, on Christmas day, we hear the explanation of the birth of Jesus and what it means for us.

In the Gospel according to St. John, it says, "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." (John 1:1, 5) This birth in Bethlehem was not merely the birth of a poor peasant baby. Nor was it the birth of a mighty human helper. This was the birth of God. This was God Himself taking on flesh and blood and becoming truly human, one of us. We could not go to God because of our sin and our self-imposed separation from Him. But God, because of His inexhaustible love, was able to come to us to break down that wall of separation between Himself and us due to our sin. He not only became one of us, but He dwelt among us. The word used here literally means, "to pitch a tent". The Son of God became flesh and blood and "tabernacled" (as God did in the Old Testament) among us.

He did this so that he might be with us in our guilt, in our suffering, and in our death. Since He is truly a man, Jesus is able now to empathize with us in all of those things. More importantly, He is able to take our guilt, our suffering, and even our death on Himself on the cross. By enduring God's wrath for our sin, suffering the punishment for our guilt, and dying our death, Jesus was able to break down the separation between God and all of humanity. Jesus' death on the cross as "the Word become flesh" gains forgiveness for all sin and righteousness for all guilt. Jesus' resurrection from death and the grave to life again brings new life to us in our Baptism and guarantees eternal life for us past the grave.

God became flesh like you so that you could become like God in spirit. You have His life. You have His holiness. You even have His presence among you here and now. The Word became flesh, not only so He could dwell among people as a Baby in a manger, as a first century Rabbi, or even as a Man on a cross, but so that He could dwell among His people now and forever.

Jesus Christ, true God and true Man, still dwells among us today. His presence is as true and real today as it was in Bethlehem on that first Christmas, as it was in Galilee during His three year ministry, and as it was in Judea at His suffering and death on a cross and His rising from the tomb alive again. Because He is our God, Jesus is present everywhere with all people. Because He is our Savior, Jesus is present among us, His people, in a very special and intimate way.

Jesus has promised to be among us as we gather to worship. He said, "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them." (Matthew 18:20) When we gather here for Divine Service, Jesus is truly present with us.

Jesus has promised to speak to us as we gather to hear His Word. His voice comes to us through the voices of those He has called to speak. Jesus said to those whom He was sending into the world, "The one who hears you hears me." (Luke 10:16) When we hear pastors proclaiming forgiveness and preaching the Law, condemning us and our sin, and the Gospel, forgiving us and restoring us, we are hearing the voice of Jesus.

Jesus has even promised to be bodily present among us as we gather here. Remember one of Jesus' most astounding promises. "Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.'" (Matthew 26:26-28) Every time you come to this communion rail, you are approaching the God who is among us in the body and blood of His Son, Jesus Christ. You receive the very body and blood of Jesus into your mouth for the forgiveness of your sin and the strengthening of your presence with Him.

We have not opened presents at our home yet because we are awaiting the arrival of our son, Tom, and his wife, Beth this afternoon. But we have already had our Christmas. We have already had our presence – the presence of God. Last night and today, we have heard the Good News about God becoming flesh and dwelling among us. We have experienced that presence among us in most astounding ways. Jesus is present in our assembly here. We have heard the voice of Jesus declare our sins to be forgiven. We will, in just a little while, taste the body and blood of Jesus and experience the mercy and blessing of God in a very unique way. What could be a better Christmas? What could be better presence? Amen.