

Ann Weems has a wonderful poem in her book "Kneeling at the Manger."

*"When the song of the angels is silent;
When the star in the sky is gone;
When the kings and princes are home;
When the shepherds are again tending their sheep;
When the manger is darkened and still;
The work of Christmas begins --
To find the lost To heal the broken
To feed the hungry To rebuild the nations
To bring peace among people To befriend the lonely
To release the prisoner To make music in the heart."*

My friends, God has given us the present of his presence. We can reach out our hand and receive that gift, knowing that Christ will always be in our hearts. God has given us the present of the present moment. We are free to let go of the past, stop worrying about the future and embrace the now.

Let's show our gratitude by doing the work of Christmas and using God's presents in a way that is a gift to God.

Amen!! Thanks be to God!!

*This sermon was preached by Rev Mark J Dunn at
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A Message from Mark!

The Present of God's Presence

20 December 2009 - Advent 4

Scripture: Luke 1:39-45

A little girl was asked to light an advent candle at the start of worship. This candle was called "**The Presence Candle**", symbolising the presence of God. This tot was only four at the time and she got things slightly confused. She thought it was the presents candle, as in Christmas presents – and a quick thinking Sunday-school teacher altered the order of service on the spot, calling all the children to the front to receive their books from the pile due to be presented later in the service.

Actually both would work, for the present God gives us at Christmas is the gift of his presence. That gift comes in the form of the Christ child born in Bethlehem. Jesus comes to us as the greatest gift ever given. He comes to be "**God with us**". Jesus comes to live among us and reveal God to us. His present to us is that he promises his presence in our lives always.

The Rev Henry Carter ran a home for emotionally disturbed children. He tells of an encounter he had one Christmas that gave him a new insight and perspective into the gift of Christ's presence. The house mother came to say that young Terry had crawled under his bed and refused to come out. Henry followed her and looked at the bed she pointed out. He talked to Terry as if he were addressing the bucking broncos on the bedspread. He talked about the brightly lit tree, the presents underneath it and the other good things that were waiting for Terry out beyond that bed.

No answer. Henry dropped to his hands and knees and lifted the spread. Terry was 8, but he looked like a scarred 5 year old. Henry could easily have pulled him out, but it wasn't pulling that Terry needed - it was trust and a sense of deciding things on his own initiative.

So, crouched on all fours, Henry launched into the menu of the special Christmas Eve supper to be offered after church. He told of the heavy stocking with Terry's name on it, provided by the Women's group.

Silence. There was no indication Terry heard or that he even cared about Christmas.

At last, because he could think of no other way to make contact, Henry got down on his stomach and wriggled in beside Terry. He lay there with his cheek pressed against the floor for a long time. He talked about the big wreath above the altar and the candles in the window. He talked about the carols all the kids were going to sing. Then, finally running out of things to say, he simply waited there beside Terry.

After a while, a small child's little hand slipped into his. Henry said, "***You know, Terry, it's pretty crowded in here. Let's go out where we can stand up.***" As they slid out from under the bed, Henry realised he had been given a glimpse of the mystery of Christmas.

Hadn't God called us too, as he had called Terry, from far above us? With stars and mountains and the whole majestic creation, hadn't God pleaded with us to love him and enjoy the universe given as a gift? And when we wouldn't listen, he had drawn closer. Through the prophets and lawgivers and holy people, God spoke to us face to face. But it was not until that first Christmas, until God stooped to earth itself, until God took our very place and came to dwell with us in our loneliness and alienation, that we, like Terry, dared to stretch out our hands to take hold of his love.

With the birth of Christ, God shows us himself and how much he loves us. He becomes one of us and lives among us to bring us love and joy and peace. Those presents are ours because of the presence of Christ. Jesus is present not just as a baby born in Bethlehem, for he is present with us right here and right now. He has told us, "***For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them.***" (Matthew 18:20)

Christ has promised us, "***I am with you always, even to the end of the age.***" (Matthew 28:20). Jesus is here, in this very space, and we can rejoice in that good news. We can give thanks for that gift.

Eleanor Roosevelt it was who said, "***Yesterday is history. Tomorrow is a mystery. Today is a gift. That's why it is called the present.***"

This time, this present moment, this day is also a present from God and we have the opportunity to use it for God's glory. Sometimes we can get so hung up on what has happened in the past or so worried about what might happen in the future that we fail to live in the present. Sometimes in the busyness of Christmas we lose sight of what is really important about this season.

A woman from my previous parish was so caught up in the Christmas rush, she realised she hadn't sent out any Christmas cards. She immediately raced to the shops and was overjoyed to find a lovely set of cards that she really liked. They had a beautiful, peaceful picture portraying Bethlehem and the manger. She was grateful that such nice cards were still available. She quickly wrote, signed and posted them. When she got home from the Post Office she noticed that she had one card left over. She had purchased a box of 50 cards and actually mailed out 49. She picked up the card and studied it more carefully. To her horror she saw something she hadn't noticed before. A small inscription down in the corner read, "***A gift is on the way!***"

Mary and Joseph received a message from God that a gift was on the way. That gift was the Messiah, the Saviour, the holy one of Israel. They received that gift with great joy and gratitude when Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

We have come today to celebrate that gift. However, it is not a gift that is on the way, it is already here. The angels announced to the shepherds, "***Do not be afraid; for see - I am bringing you good news of great joy for all people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ, the Lord.***" We already have the present of Christ's presence. And that is good news of great joy. We rejoice in knowing that, "***God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.***" (John 3:16).

God gives us the present of Christ's presence in our lives. God also gives us the present of the present moment. We are called to use that gift wisely and well. Hug your child or grandchild. Kiss your partner. Tell your parents or your brother or sister that you love them. Tutor a struggling student. Serve at a soup kitchen. Call or visit someone who is alone or lonely. Smell the roses. Stop and enjoy the view. Today truly is a gift which we should use wisely and well, for this present moment will never pass this way again.