

THE GIFTS OF CHRISTMAS: PRESENCE

Isaiah 7:14, 9:6-7

This is a copy of the sermon preached by Dr. Paul Mims, Pastor, Cornerstone Baptist Church, November 27, 2011.

The truth is that nobody celebrated Christmas before year one A.D. Year after year, and year after year, the evergreen trees grew in the woods and nobody came to get them. Nobody thought of lighting them up with bright lights and ornaments. The holly berries glowed red, and the mistletoe gleamed white in the treetops, but no one paid any attention to them. The twenty-fifth day of December came and went like the twenty-second or the twenty-ninth without any thought of celebration. Boys and girls grew up into men and women and never heard a Christmas carol, never had a Christmas tree, or never received or gave a Christmas gift – because he was not yet come.

But God saw the sin and sorrow that was afflicting people on the earth. He heard the little children and even grown men and women weeping because they were trying to be good, but did not know how. So he decided to make himself known in a new way. He decided to come to earth, not in royal robes of splendor, but as a little child – to be born, grow up, and live among the people to teach them how to live. He would live a short life and die for the people who lived on the earth. (Introduction adapted from “When the King Came” by Hodges)

So, at this Advent season, we celebrate God’s gift to us – his presence. Of course, he was with his people in the Old Testament as the scriptures proclaim. But what we celebrate is more personal, more now, more internal, more permanent. To wrap this glorious gift and place it under his tree, the cross, I want to ask the reporter’s questions of Who, When, and What.

FIRST, WHO IS WITH US? Isaiah 7:14 “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” Isaiah 9:6-7 “And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace...”

Isaiah’s prophecy was given about 750 years before he came. But the promise of a Redeemer goes all the way back to Genesis 3:15, when immediately after our first parents messed up their lives, God provided a way to straighten them out again. For thousands of years, the people heard that this was going to happen. As the time for his arrival drew closer, Isaiah described him in beautiful terms.

He said that his name would be called Immanuel which means, “God with us.” Matthew’s account of his birth indicates that God did clothe himself in human form and became like us. “All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the Prophet: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel which means “God with us.” Matthew 1:22-23. This immediately affirms the deity of Jesus that he is God in human form. He has come to be like us, but at the same time altogether different from us. The emphasis is on the word “with” us. No longer would God have to be considered so transcendent that we could not reach him. No longer would he be so impersonal to persons as to seem distant and uncaring. Mankind would not be alone in this great universe. We would know our maker and would be able to talk to him daily.

In 1994, two Americans answered an invitation from the Russian Department of Education to teach morals and ethics (based on Biblical principles) in the public schools. They were invited to teach at prisons, businesses, the fire and police departments, and a large orphanage.

It was nearing the holiday season for the orphans to hear for the first time the traditional Christmas story. They told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem and finding no room in the inn, the couple went to a stable, where Jesus was born and placed in the manger.

Throughout the story, the children, according to one of the Americans, “sat in amazement as they listened. Some sat on the edges of their stools, trying to grasp every word.”

As a follow-up activity to the story, each child was given three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger. Each child was also given a small paper square; cut from yellow napkins which the children tore into strips of paper and carefully laid them in the manger for straw. Small squares of flannel from a thrown away nightgown were used for the baby’s blanket. From pieces of tan felt, a doll-like baby was made.

As they made their way around the room to observe the children this is what one of the Americans noted, “All went well until I got to one table where little Misha sat. He looked to be about 6 years old and had finished his project.

As I looked at the little boy’s manger, I was startled to see, not one but two babies in the manger. Quickly, I called for the translator to ask the lad why there were two babies in the manger.”

The observer goes on to note that Misha very accurately recalled the story that had been told until he came to the part where Mary put Jesus in the manger. “Then Misha,” it is noted, “started to ad-lib. He made up his own ending to the story as he said, “And when Maria laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no momma and I have no papa, so I don’t have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with him. But I told him I couldn’t because I didn’t have a gift to give him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I told him that I would give him my heart. He said that was the best gift I could give and he would give me his heart also.”

SECOND, WHEN IS HE WITH US?

He is with us WHEN WE ARE SUBMISSIVE TO HIM. “The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.” “May it be to me as you have said.” Luke 1:28, 38. Mary is a perfect example of submission. When the Lord comes to us through the Holy Spirit and prompts us to serve him in a particular way, we can rest assured that he will be with us and give us the guidance and strength to do it.

He is with us WHEN WE ARE SORROWFUL. Just as David said in Psalm 23:4, “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me” it is vividly portrayed in John 11:17. Jesus arrived at the home of Mary and Martha on the occasion of the death of their brother, Lazarus. He gave them hope and comfort and assurance of eternal life by his presence and the demonstration of his power to raise the dead.

He is with us WHEN WE ARE SERVING. As Jesus sent his disciples out to evangelize the world, he said, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.” Matthew 28:19-20. Advent also marks the missions’ emphasis through the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions. Here are some fast facts of what we are doing in missions.

Field personnel under appointment

(11/16/11)	4,887
Career/apprentices	4,254
2-yr. ISC/Journeymen/Masters	633
Field personnel appointed 2010	381

Career/associates/apprentices	215
2-yr. ISC/Journeyman/Masters	166
Student volunteers 2010	4,100
Overseas baptisms 2010*	360,879
Overseas churches 2010*	163,756
Overseas church membership 2010*	3.1 million
New churches 2010*	29,237
People groups engaged**	763
Unreached People Groups not Engaged**	3,629
World population 2010**	6.8 billion
LMCO goal for Christmas 2010	\$175 million
LMCO receipts for Christmas 2010	\$145.6 million
LMCO goal for Christmas 2011	\$175 million
IMB budget for 2011	\$308.5 million
World Hunger/General Relief 2010 receipts	\$7.9 million

Do you think that Cornerstone could give at least \$2,000 to help raise this \$175 million?

THIRD, HOW IS HE WITH US?

He is with us as WONDERFUL COUNSELOR. Every one of us has a personal counselor. He is **Jesus**. He is with us to counsel us in our daily affairs. He will show us how to settle family disputes, job tensions, church disagreements, financial plans, and will guide us in the design that he has for our lives.

He is with us as **MIGHTY GOD**. Some artists have depicted him as the gentle Jesus, meek and mild. Even we, when we face insurmountable odds, sometimes wonder if he can do anything about it. But if we view him as Mighty God, we can allow him to work in our lives like that. He always works on our behalf in proportion to our faith. This is when we become triumphant Christians. We know that he can work all things together for our good and for his glory. We know that we will not be overcome by evil and that he will never fail to keep his promises to us.

He is with us as **EVERLASTING FATHER**. The Trinity is a mystery that our finite minds cannot comprehend. But Jesus is the fullest expression of God ever given to man. There is so much of the Father in him even in his humanity that he could say, "Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father living in me who is doing his work. Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me... On that day you will realize that I am in the Father, and you are in me, and I am in you." (John 14:10-11, 20)

He is with us as **PRINCE OF PEACE**. What the world needs now is peace. There is unrest in the Arab countries with the dictators being overthrown and the radical Muslims trying to take control. There is rioting in Europe over the austerity measures that governments must take to keep their countries from collapsing financially. There is unrest in America because of the 15 million people who are without jobs and the direction our country is going. All of this causes us to be unsettled in our own outlook for the

future and we need personal peace. We know who can give it if we know how to get it. It comes as we wait in his presence and hear him say to us as he did to his disciples, "...my peace I give you, I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid." (John 14:27) This was said to them when they thought that they were going to lose everything by his going back to the Father.

FOURTH, WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES HIS PRESENCE MAKE?

To multitudes, his presence makes no difference at all. They go on living their lives of quiet desperation, being their own god and their own savior. These are those who have heard and have rejected him because they have not accepted his gift of presence. All they will know at this Christmas is the sentimental materialism that engulfs them.

But to those who are seeking and are open to him, this could well be the time of their salvation. The truth of God's redeeming love could well get through to them if one of us will be a witness to them. When we truly are in God's presence there is an imperative that we seek the salvation of others or else our whole approach to God becomes a sham. You see, it is impossible for us to enjoy the presence of God in our lives and not think of those who do not know him. This is because he makes such a great difference in our daily lives and there is such an obvious contrast to what we see around us that we cannot be uncompassionate.

During a Christmas play, one child had been forced to be in the program by his parents. The young teen continued to voice his concerns as they practiced. He would mutter things like "How can people believe that Jesus is the Son of God?" and "just what makes everyone believe that this is the way to heaven?" He finally said "How do we know He was the Messiah and that He was the way to Heaven?" When one small girl spoke up, "She said, "We believe it because the song said it." "What song?" the teen huffed back. She politely said, "You know what song I'm talking about, that one - that God made A WAY IN A MANGER".

Praise Be To His Name!