

## **“From Presents to Presence”**

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Matthew 1:18-25

You need to understand something about my philosophy of preaching on a day such as today. Some preachers go with the idea that “Boy, we have a good crowd here today, everyone’s in a good mood, you can really give it to them today.” If you usually preach 30 minutes, go for 45 minutes. If you preach 45 minutes, go for an hour.

I subscribe to the less is more theory on a day such as today. We could probably all do that at other times in our lives. Have you ever attended a funeral service and the minister starts going on and on and on about the person who died and you begin to wonder after a while, “Who is that guy he’s talking about?” Less is more. Just as the life of a person who has died speaks for itself, so this story speaks for itself. The greatest story ever told. We don’t need to embellish it. It seems as if God himself might subscribe to the less is more theory.

Think back to that first Christmas. If you were God, might you have planned some kind of great celestial meteor shower to announce the birth of a son who would save the world? But on that first Christmas there was only one star. Only one star. On that first Christmas night there was only one gift. Later the wise men would come with their gifts, but on that first Christmas night there was only one gift. The gift of God’s Son to the world.

It’s not hard for me to imagine that in some churches today when this scripture is read, the preacher will spend no small amount of time talking about the virgin birth and maybe even say “If you don’t believe in this . . .” well, you know what follows. If we were to ask for a show of hands of those who are present here this morning, I’d imagine that nearly everyone would say, “I believe that God created the world. I believe that God created the universe and everything there is.” Would it really be that difficult for that kind of God to create one little baby? We could go on and on about other things.

It is popular today to talk about the reason for the season. I can imagine that in some pulpits today preachers will go on and on about the over commercialization of Christmas. I suppose to some extent we’re all concerned about that, but some people who talk that way seem to wear their religion on their sleeves. I don’t really see any evidence that says, “Jesus *really is* the reason for this season.” I wonder if these folks give more to their church in honor of the birthday of Jesus. Do they go and serve in a soup line at a shelter for the homeless? What do they do? What differences are in their lives that *say* this is the reason for the season.

We come today on this fourth Sunday of Advent believing that the hopes and fears of all the years were met in the life of a little baby. Peace and joy are offered to us. It seems that during this time things such as peace and joy can be in short supply. How much peace and joy have you experienced in the past few weeks? Has it been peace and joy, or has it been more like we’ve got to get this done; we’ve got to fill out this list; don’t forget Aunt . . . It goes on

and on.

Recently, I was in the hospital on an elevator. The door was about to close and I heard a voice outside say, "Hold the door, hold the door." That is a moment of truth, if you think about it. You can reach down, punch the button that makes the door open again, or there is a button right next to that button and it will make the doors close even more quickly. You don't have to wait on that person who is rushing down the hall. I just put my hand between the door, which is probably not the smartest thing to do, but the door came back open and a young woman in her twenties or early thirties got on the elevator and as we were going up, she said, "I will be so glad when all of this is over." Do you ever feel that way? This is just a hassle. Come on, December 26<sup>th</sup>, get here as soon as you can and we will put all this silliness behind us.

As your minister, my hope for you for Christmas of 2007 is this: when the last present is unwrapped, after we have put away all of the decorations, somehow you will have experienced the presence of God during this Advent season in such a way that it will last forever. We won't say, "I'll be so glad when all of this is over."

I can imagine the living Christ saying to us, "You know, Matthew tried to tell you from the very beginning of his gospel until the end, the word was *Emmanuel*." Remember at the very end of Matthew's gospel we hear Jesus saying, "I will be with you always." It is not hard to imagine that also the living Christ would say to us "I want you to be with me. I want you to be for me. You do this by being with each other. Remember, as you did it to the least of these you did it to me. What have you done to be with the least of these so that you might be with me?"

Recently, I saw a program about a man who had written a book about the conflict that can exist during this season of the year. It can be especially difficult for families in which some family members are not speaking – grown parents and children might have gone for several years without ever saying a word to each other. One woman wrote a letter to the author of this book and said "We learned about the birth of our granddaughter when we read about it in the newspaper. Our children never said a word to us about it." The code word today is *quality time*. Parents need to spend some quality time with their children. Truth be known, most children would just settle for a little *quantity time*. Whether it's quality or not, they just want to be with their parents.

There was a story in the paper of a woman who took an extra job during December so she could have extra money to buy gifts for her children. One of her kids, a teen-age boy said, "Mom, we want less of Christmas and more of you. You don't have to get an extra job." He understood something, but he misunderstood something also. He didn't understand what Christmas means.

Notice in your responsive reading this morning we read these words: "May we not dismiss or turn away from this gift even when we do not fully understand it." Is that a part of the problem? Have we forgotten to understand what it is that really matters? This can happen with husbands and wives. I have known husbands and wives who had matching recliners so they could watch television together. They shared the same breakfast table. They shared the same

bed. But they weren't *with* each other. They didn't understand. Before it sounds as if I am preaching,

I don't believe Christmas is a time for chiding nor chastening. This is a time for listening for the singing of the angels. It is a time for poetry more than preaching.

Some of you might recognize the name Norman McClain. Norman McClain wrote a book a few years ago that was turned into a movie. The movie was much more popular than the book. The book and the movie were titled "A River Runs Through It." It was one of those "two sons" stories. In his book, Norman McClain wrote about his brother and his father, who was a Presbyterian minister. If you remember the story, the older brother was very serious and responsible. The younger brother was footloose and fancy free—much like the story in Luke. The younger brother started accumulating gambling debts, so much so that he wasn't able to repay the debts. And, as happens in those cases, the guys came to collect the debts and when he could not pay, they beat him to death. Norman McClain said that for the rest of his father's life, in every sermon that he preached, spoken or unspoken, there was something about the son who had been lost. One of the last sermons that his father preached included these words. Hear them carefully.

"Each one of us will, at one time in our lives, look upon a loved one who is in need and ask the same question. We are willing to help, Lord, but what, if anything, is needed? For it is true that we can seldom help those closest to us. Either we don't know what part of ourselves to give, or more often than not the part we have to give is not wanted. And so it is those we live with and should know elude us, but we can still love them. We can love completely without complete understanding."

No one here understands completely what happened in that stable in Bethlehem. But we can believe and trust completely without complete understanding. Amen