

## Presence/Presents

Well here we are at Advent III. My guess is that all of the ladies have the gifts they are giving, wrapped, sent, or under the tree. The men know that the 24<sup>th</sup> is the prime Christmas present shopping day!

Do you remember the sight of very young children at Christmas? It's all about ripping wrapping paper off their presents and taking out whatever is in the box and then having so much fun playing with the empty box!

For the past many years, when my kids ask me what I would like for Christmas, my answer is always the same, "Nothing you can buy in a store." And their response is always the same, a groan and an eye roll. Sing me a song, make me a drawing, do a dance, write me a poem, spend a Saturday morning with me volunteering somewhere. I want your presence not your presents.

Is it just me or has present giving become problematic? What is it you need that you don't go out and buy?

Consider the Wisemen. I wonder if the Wisemen are responsible for all of this capitalism and the guilt and exploitation that can come with Christmas? They gave pretty good gifts didn't they? They didn't offer a night of babysitting so that Joseph and Mary could have a date night. They didn't offer an afternoon of free house cleaning, or to come in and prepare Saturday night dinner. Those would have been great gifts...any young family knows that.

Instead they brought gold, frankincense and myrrh! Who can compete with that?

The gifts which the Wisemen brought tell us a great deal about Jesus. The Wisemen brought gifts that one king would bring to another. Their gifts were symbols of the extraordinary status of this child born in lowly circumstances. They each brought an extravagant offering so that they might pay homage to the king. They brought their very best. So I do appreciate where these expectations for gifts come from...it goes back a long long way!

I was listening to a program not long ago that professed that what matters most to people is **experience, not material goods.** Think of the people to whom you are giving gifts at Christmas. Now, consider giving the gift of an experience or adventure. Buy someone a cooking course or a gym membership that the two of you can experience together. Commit to go skating with them once a week.

Would you rather receive socks and underwear, or a weekly walk in the woods with a special friend? Would you prefer to receive a new coffee maker or a weekend getaway with a special friend? Experiences, not things. We crave experience, not things.

Christmas has become so commercial, but it did not begin that way. It began as a festival of the church to remember and give thanks for the coming of the Son of God into our world and into our lives.

Picture for a moment if you will, that you are at an extravagant party in the luxurious lobby of a palatial hotel! All the guests know that a very important person is going to arrive there anytime. You and all the other guests are having a wonderful time. You have all brought beautifully wrapped gifts to exchange with each other. Eventually the honoured guest arrives, but everyone is so caught up with the merriment, that the honoured guest goes unnoticed.

I wonder if that is how Jesus might feel at Christmas? We are all familiar with the well-worn little rhyme (Slide #1) **Jesus is the Reason for the Season.** But if a stranger from another universe dropped in to our homes and our communities at Christmas, would they be aware of that? “Apparently these strange looking people are celebrating a Saviour of some sort or another! They are celebrating the birth of a child of all things! But I am not seeing or hearing anything about that!”

What does **Jesus is the Reason for the Season** look like and sound like in our homes during Advent and Christmas? Are Christmas carols playing? Is there a visible nativity scene? Is there Christian decor or mostly Santas and snowmen and reindeer?

Imagine Christmas morning. But instead of sitting in a mound of ripped off wrapping paper and open boxes, you are sitting at the top of a very high mountain and sitting beside you, is none

other than Jesus himself! You wish him Happy Birthday. He says Thank You. And then you both look down on the world below. You see so many people celebrating...eating, drinking, opening gifts, laughing, hugging, having a party. Jesus sits there very quietly. You can feel his deep sadness. He knows, even better than you....His birthday means so little to so many. There is no evidence whatsoever that this holiday has anything to do with him! All the festivities have become something else. Jesus barely gets a mention if at all.

Remember Mary and Martha? Jesus, the guest, arrives at their home. Mary is so thankful that he is there. She sits at his feet, present with Him, listening to Him. Martha rushes around in another room taking care of all sorts of things that don't really matter.

Amid all of the wrapping paper, the boxes, and the **presents**, how can you and I be **present....present** for each other, and **present** for the one who's birthday we are celebrating. And have you noticed, it's not just us who are celebrating. People the world over are trying to find a parking spot at the mall. That's how we celebrate the Birthday boy!

Last week Danielle came up and talked about the Angel tree. She talked about all the people in one particular nursing home who would not be lost in wrapping paper and boxes and merriment and too much food and drink. She talked about all the people who would be alone for Christmas. They would not be receiving any gifts. They would not be receiving visits from friends and families. No one would be celebrating Jesus' birthday with them. All alone. Many of you contributed. And that is just one nursing home of so many.

Think of the clients at places like The Mission and Shepherds of Good Hope. Will they get to experience the birthday party?

How do we celebrate Jesus' birth? Do we need to have a look at that and consider if changes need to be made.

I want to share something for your consideration that came along on facebook last week from Sheila Bonini's brother Eric (Slide #2)

As the world fights to figure this all out, I'll be holding doors for strangers, letting people cut in front of me in traffic, saying good morning, keeping babies entertained

in grocery lines, stopping to talk to someone who is lonely, tipping generously, calling you by the name on your tag, waving at police, sharing food, giving children a thumbs-up, being patient with sales clerks and smiling at passersby as often as I am provided the opportunity, buying a total stranger a cup of coffee.

Because? I will not stand idly by and live in a world where unconditional love is invisible.

Join me in showing love, judging less. Find your own way to swing the pendulum in the direction of love.

Be kind to a stranger today and everyday. It just may be a friend you have never met. Pay it forward for any kindness shown to you in the past.

Be the change!!!

Be the light!!

Start TODAY!

Jill Wilson from Urban Christian Outreach was here last week. Many of those to whom she ministers have no home. What is their Christmas going to be like? Should they be invited to the party?

You are well aware that there are private clubs that allow members only onto their property and through their doors. Is your family a private club? Is our church a private club? Who gets to come to the party? To whom can the party go?

### **Christmas Birthday Party**

There's a party and its in full swing,

There's so much food and drink,

And brightly wrapped packages are waiting in the wings.

The tree is dressed with such finesse,

Christmas music fills the air

Everyone's here in fancy dress,

It's a party with such flair.

But my memory must be failing,  
for I can't remember who  
we've gathered here to celebrate  
not Jim, nor Paul nor Sue.

I guess it doesn't matter,  
we're having quite a time  
Another Sweedish meatball  
and another glass of wine!

Amen