

FROM LONELINESS TO LOVE

The Light Leads Us (Part 2) | Text: Luke 1:26-31; Matt 2:9-11

The Scripture Reading

Hear with me the Word of God as it comes to us from the Gospel According to Luke: **God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ...to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said... "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you... You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus."** (Luke 1:26-31)

And then, listen to these words from Matthew's Gospel: **[The wise men] ...went on their way, and the star they had seen... went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was... On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. (Matt 2:9-11).** This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

We've entitled this month's message series, THE LIGHT LEADS US. It's meant to make you think of those radiant angels who appeared to Mary and then to Joseph and then to the shepherds, to lead them – and, by extension, all of us -- into becoming bearers of the light of the world (Mat 5:14). The statement, THE LIGHT LEADS US, is meant to remind you of that famous Christmas star that led the wise men across a vast distance to give their very best to Jesus, as you and I are still moved to do. The phrase, THE LIGHT LEADS US, is intended to call you to hope in the face of any form of darkness you may be facing these days. And, today, I want to reflect with you on one particular place where the light of Christmas is especially needed to lead us afresh.

A Light in the Darkness

I believe that when the history of the early Twenty-First Century is written, scholars will cite not COVID-19 but the scourge of LONELINESS as the greater shadow on our age. Amidst an era where blazing advances in the technology of travel and communications have given us unprecedented capacity to be connected to one another, numerous studies have documented that an unparalleled number of us feel more alone than ever. We are flooded with more correspondence than at any other time in history. Up until this year, we attended more holiday events and passed by more people than ever before. But the feeling of being genuinely *connected* – of truly being welcome, known, and loved by others – becomes more and more elusive in our time.

At Christmas, that feeling can be all the more acute. You may be conscious of loved ones no longer there. You may feel time slipping away from you. You may get caught

up in the impersonal rush of the season. And all these things can come together in a way that strangely deepens a sense of isolation. Even after the holidays are over, some of us go on feeling a vague sense of depression that is, perhaps, a veiled awareness that though our lives are more crowded than ever, many of us are still too alone.

I recall feeling that quite painfully on the weekend I turned twenty-one years old. That winter weekend, I left my college campus and journeyed back to the town where I grew up. I'd like to tell you that I went there because I was devoted to passing this milestone with my family, but that wouldn't be true. Honestly, I went because I didn't know who else to spend it with. Even then, I think, my life was moving too fast. I knew hundreds of people, but few very well. I was a master at small-talk, but rarely engaged in the kind of deep-talk through which life-long relationships are formed.

As I drove toward New York on that gray day, I felt almost pathetically alone. By the time I got home, my mood was so dark that when my dad said he'd reserved an indoor tennis court for us, I wondered how I'd find the energy to play. But play I did. A couple of hours later, I trudged back through the front door of our house, feeling pretty grungy and miserable. I recall turning the corner of the hallway into the living room, head hung low and ready for a shower, when the darkness was suddenly shattered by an explosion of color, noise and light.

I looked up and saw streamers hung from the chandelier and across the wall. I saw mounds of fabulous food laid out on tables. There was an amazing pile of gifts stacked up, with my name on them. But, what remains most indelible in my mind and heart and still brings a lump to my throat were the faces of the *people* in that room. Two dozen of my college classmates, were standing there, smiling and cheering for me. People in whom I had invested pitifully little of myself, had stretched and sacrificed and traveled a considerable distance to be present for me.

The Gift of Presence

In 1994, my wife Amy, two year-old son Rush and I gathered around the Christmas tree at our home in Southern California. As many of you will do in a few weeks, we began to unwrap a veritable mountain of presents. It was Jesus' birthday, but somehow I got some marvelous gifts that year. I got this great tie I wore for years. I received some marvelous techno-gadgets. There were shirts and socks and a couple of excellent books. But the gift I received that Christmas that has undoubtedly remained the most important to me down through the years, is THIS one that I brought along to show you this morning (as I did about twenty-one years ago). *[CAMERA CLOSE-UP as Dan holds up an oil painting of a little blond boy, standing by the ocean's edge.]*

Amy had this painting made of our son, Rush, playing on the beach near our home in San Diego. It came with a little encouragement to hang it in my office, so that no matter what I was doing in the long hours of the day or night, I would always have a reminder that there was someone out there someplace -- perhaps on some beach, or

messing up some room, or lying sleeping, or venturing across the world (as he'll do with the Army next month) – someone who, once upon a time, loved me with all of his heart... who thought to share his bucket and his smile and his day with me was the happiest thing he could do with his life.

For me, that birthday party when I was twenty-one -- and this painting now that I am sixty-one -- is a reminder of "THE GIFT OF PRESENCE." I'm talking about the incalculably rich gift we have in the people of our lives – and above all in God himself – who come to us to say (as the angel said to Mary): "**Greetings, you who are highly favored!**" (Luke 1:28). You are not alone. You are seen. You are welcomed, known, and loved, and God has a special purpose for your life.

I'm struck by the fact that the the angel's appearance to Mary and the wise men's appearance at the home of the Christ Child have this in common. Both are about the Gift of Presence. I know we usually focus on the objects that the wise men brought to the newborn King. But do you really think that receiving gold, frankincense and myrrh would have meant a whole lot to a child just a few weeks old? No. Far more precious to that baby than those packages brought to the cradle's edge were the *faces* of those wise men... eyes all dewy with compassion... cheeks crinkled up with admiration... as they huddled over that manger, staring into the face of their Lord. That those scholars of the stars had been willing to travel so far to simply BE THERE to tell Jesus that he was welcome, known and loved is the most fabulous gift they could have given.

Give the Gift to Someone

You know, it still is. I would be willing to guess that more than anything else you have done this Christmas season or in this past year, it's your presence here in this service which means the most to the heart of Jesus. When you could have been elsewhere, you chose to come to be here with Him, to seek out His face, to share with Him your heart, your life, your hopes. Keep doing that. Keep prioritizing coming to Jesus, as he has prioritized being with you and me (Mat 1:23).

As we continue on this Advent journey, let me also encourage you to extend that gift to others. Take the time and expend the energy to really BE THERE for your loved ones and maybe even for some strangers or people who are hard to love. How do you do that? Here are a few practical ideas.

FIRST, be as focused on them as you are when you watch someone unwrap the physical PRESENTS you give them at Christmas. You know how glued to them you are then – how attentive to their every expression -- looking for delight or disappointment, but glued nonetheless? Do that every day! Look DAILY upon the loved ones in your life with the sort of attention that notices the cast of the eye, the tremble of the lip, the turn of the smile that speaks of their delights or sorrows, their discouragements or hopes. Give to someone the gift of presence in these weeks ahead.

SECONDLY, you know the energy and thought you put into selecting just the right gift? Chances are you don't find those gifts by accident. Maybe you take the trouble to ask subtle questions of your loved ones: *"Honey, what is it that you need this year?"* Or perhaps you study and reflect upon their needs without even speaking: *"Is there anything missing? There must be something he or she could really use."* The important idea is that this attention you give to discerning the needs of people around December 25th IS also the gift of ***presence***. What if you stretched out that kind of curiosity and consideration for others till it fills your perspective in the days ahead.

Or, FINALLY, do you recall the energy we often give to writing the Christmas card or letter or the P.S. that says to someone, *"Hey, I may be far away, but I'm with you in spirit?"* Who do you know that is living alone right now and may especially need to be reminded that they are remembered, they are favored, and that even when you're not with them in body, they have the gift of your ***presence*** in spirit?

When You Care to Send the Very Best

For years, the folks at Hallmark Greeting Cards had a jingle that said, *"When you care to send the very best, you send a Hallmark card."* When you care enough to send the very best, you know what a wise man or woman sends? They send themselves. And so does the wisest One of all. The ultimate glory and truth of Christmas is that God came himself to be present with us. He came to share the human journey, to take our place upon the cross, and to offer us his Holy Spirit that we might never again feel alone.

And so, whether your heart is overflowing today with joy and thankfulness at all of the blessings you have received, or whether it is brimming with poignant feelings over all that has been disrupted, lost, or going wrong... Whatever you're feeling, wherever you go, whoever you are, this you can be sure of: God is "Emmanuel." He is with you. For **"I will never leave you nor forsake you" (Heb 13:5)** says the Lord, and **"I am with you always to the close of the age" (Mat 28:20)** And so He is. That ***presence*** is the treasure that travels with us... the gift that never tarnishes... the present that brings us more joy as we awake each day and discover it anew.

When the history of the next year is written, I pray that the impact of that gift on you and me will be evident in the gift we have gone on to make to others. Even if the world continues to go its hurried, impersonal, and fragmented way... even if the kingdom of thingdom becomes more the rage... even if those precious vaccines are somehow delayed and we have to rely on Zoom and Facetime far longer than we wanted... I pray that the record will show that you and I knew what mattered most and faithfully gave to one another – as it has been given to us -- *the gift of presence*. Who will you bless with that present today?

Let us pray...