

The Simplest Gift
Isaiah 9:2-7: Luke 2: 1-20
Christmas Eve 2008
Rev. Dr. Charles Parker

I. Introduction

I learned this week reading the Messenger that Rev. Sandy and I have the same favorite moment in the flurry of Christmas specials: that priceless moment in “A Charlie Brown Christmas” when in utter frustration at the Christmas pageant and the Christmas tree purchasing, Charlie Brown cries out, “Isn’t there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?” And Linus, very matter-of-factly says, “Sure, Charlie Brown, I can tell you what Christmas is all about.” And he walks to the center of the stage of the pageant – holding his blanket – calls for a light and recites tonight’s passage from the Gospel of Luke.

“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. ¹⁰ And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this *shall be* a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.”

It’s so simple when he says it. All of the noise and chaos fade away as that single spot lights Linus, and he says those words that we all know, and just can’t seem to hold on to. Simple words, simple message, simple truth. Emmanuel. God with us.

Throughout this season of Advent, we have been talking about our Christian call to simplicity. We’ve been talking about it because, like Charlie Brown, caught up in the crazy consumerism of the Christmas season, it’s a message that we desperately need to hear. And we’ve been talking about it because, caught in the deepest economic crisis since the Great Depression, we need to look at how simplicity can bring healing to ourselves, healing to our nation, and healing to the world.

And so tonight, we come to our final sermon in this series, which is about God’s simplest gift: the gift of God’s own presence, made flesh in a fragile, vulnerable infant, born out of wedlock, to two homeless peasants, in a tiny, insignificant province of the vast Roman Empire. The infant would grow up in that Roman backwater, to become a charismatic leader who would heal the sick, and cast out demons, and teach with great power. But tonight all that is in the future. Right now, there are no words, no miraculous healings; all we have is a small, delicate baby.

II. Learning from Infants

What is it about infants that draw us to them? My wife Jeannine used to watch our nephew Jacob while he slept, and say, “Maybe we should have one of our own.” To which I would reply, “Does it concern you that you only say that when he’s asleep?” But children have that effect on us. Why? And what can we learn from this God, who chooses to encounter us tonight as an infant?

The first thing that we learn is that there is nothing so powerful as presence. And children are consummately present. They are not planning, not analyzing, not multi-tasking; they are just present. The high point of many of my days is when one of my two children comes into the library where I’m working and crawls into my lap and just sits. Joshua will probably pop his thumb into his mouth and snuggle in. Julia will probably start reflecting on her day. Nothing happens, we don’t need to do anything; we’re just present.

We forget as adults sometimes what an incredible gift that is and how desperately we all crave it. Children understand that and model it, but we get less good at it as we get older. We’re more comfortable when there’s an agenda, when we know what the timeframe is. Even when we’re physically present, our minds are often elsewhere rolling over work problems or going through the items on our “To Do” list.

And we all know instinctively when that’s happened to someone that we’re talking with, right? It may be the briefest flick of an eye looking beyond us, or a slightly off-the-mark response. As an adult, it takes effort and practice to be fully present to another person, and to let them know that we’re fully present.

Because our lives are so busy, and because truly being present is so hard, we often try to compensate by giving things. This is true particularly during the Christmas season, and particularly true with our children. We overwhelm them with material goods. We over-program them with endless activities. We overindulge them with easy entertainment. And we all know on some instinctual level, that what they want is us – us to be fully present with them.

Presence is not about stuff; it’s not even about words. As adults, we often also make that mistake. We get uncomfortable when we fall into those moments of silence. And, interestingly, at points when simple presence is most valued – at the bedside of a sick person, or in the face of death or with someone who has experienced loss – we so often find ourselves compelled to speak. In most cases, what is called for is just sitting, holding a hand, offering a listening ear. Quaker author Richard Foster notes that, “One way to nurture simplicity is through the discipline of silence.”

So what would it mean to give the gift of your presence to someone this Christmas, or during the coming year? Taking a child in your life to the zoo. Setting up lunch with an old friend. Sharing dinner with the folks in our shelter. What would it look like to give the gift of spending some time with someone you loved? It would look a lot like the way God chooses to love us.

III. Conclusion

When it was produced in 1965, CBS was unhappy with “A Charlie Brown Christmas.” In addition to being worried that the wonderful Vince Guaraldi score was too sophisticated and being uncomfortable with not having a “laugh track” to let the audience know when something was funny, the network was skittish about the show’s overtly religious message, and particularly Linus’ reading from the Gospel of Luke. They pushed Charles Schultz to drop the scene; which he refused, saying, “if we don’t tell the true meaning of Christmas, who will?”

The true meaning of Christmas is about a God whose way of showing his love is not to talk at us, or to give us stuff, but a God who chooses to take the form of a vulnerable, precious infant to simply be with us: without pretense or power, without judgment or agenda. The simplest gift of all. God with us. Emmanuel.

Amen.