

**SERMON: "The Gift of Christmas: Presence."**

Rev. Geoffrey M. Ross Sat., Dec 24, 2011, 5:00 pm. St. James Presbyterian Church

What was the best Christmas present that you ever received? Think about it, what was it? Was it something you got when you were a kid – something that you always wanted but never dreamt that you would? Was it something you received from your children – something they made themselves, something that only a mother/father could love? Now, let me ask you; was this present something big – or small; and, was it something that lasted longer than most of the presents that you get? I ask this question because tomorrow you will be doing what people everywhere will be doing: ripping through the wrapping paper on your presents hoping that this present – that the gift you have in your hands, big or small – will be the best present you've ever got.

The two readings we just heard document what happened that first Christmas Eve – and the story they tell is really quite simple: but, given the angels' message to Joseph, it's clear that the meaning of what is happening is anything but. As Paul would later write in his Letter to the Philippians – in what had become one of the early Church's creedal statements – the truth of what happened in that stable through what was a meagre, rather mundane birth of a child was that the Son of God – Jesus – chose to cross the universe, to give up everything He enjoyed so that He could become one with us – flesh and bone and blood – so that He, out of His love for us, might save us from our sins. (Phil 2:6-8) Paul knew of the promises of the prophets that spoke of a coming 'servant' and 'child' who would lead the People of Israel, so did Matthew which is why his account tells us first that the child is now expected, and that the child to be born would be God's Son – who would be called Emmanuel (God with-us). Luke knew of these promises – which is why his account has the visit of the angel to Mary – and faithfully records Jesus' birth in fulfillment of those promises by telling us that Mary "*gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*" And, with that, the greatest gift ever was given to a waiting world.

All Advent long we have been learning that the People of Israel had grown weary of waiting for God's messiah – of waiting for God's Good News of their salvation to arrive: of waiting for God to fulfill His promises to deliver them from their despair and disappointment. And, this Advent, we have been acknowledging that we're waiting too. But the Good News of the Gospel – the true meaning of Christmas is – then and today, that into the darkness and dis-ease of our world, God showed up; it is that God came – that God, in Jesus, chose to be present, to be-with us, wherever we are. And, friends, the wonder of Christmas is that it happened at all. Through God's love and grace we received the greatest gift imaginable – God's Son who chose to enter into our world when things were at their worst so that He could be-with us.

Our reaction to the gift of Christ's presence should be to give Jesus a gift in return: after all isn't it what you do on someone's birthday? The tradition of gift-giving on birthdays and at Christmas is not a bad one, but as a people of faith we are called to do more than

just buy presents; we're called upon to respond to Christ's presence – His becoming one with us in the form of a baby to wear our flesh, breathe our air, and walk our sod – by doing what He did by giving of ourselves in faith, in all that we say and do. The best gift you or I ever received wasn't something we found under the tree, it was something that Jesus gave to us for free: so, it makes sense that the best gift we can give to Jesus isn't something we can buy in a store; the best gift we can give is more personal – ourselves.

But being with us came at a cost. As our readings foreshadow, the story of God's coming into our world – of Him becoming one with us to do what only an incarnated God could do – includes the shadow of the cross: just as Jesus' birth was foretold, His birth also prepares us for His death. This is why, on Christmas Eve as we turn from the manger to the Table we celebrate the gift of Christ's presence: because without His birth – the incarnation – the saving work of Christ's death and resurrection that happens on Easter could never take place. So, as we prepare to partake in Communion – which celebrates the spiritual made physical – let us celebrate the gift of Christ's presence and give thanks to God for what Jesus has done for us: that at Christmas God showed up in the form of a baby – to give you the greatest present ever.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts move us to respond to the true gift of Christmas – the presence of Emmanuel, God with us. Amen