

Presence!

Four Gifts of Christmas:

Luke 1:67-79

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Bethany Church

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Diane and I would hear a scream, a cry or a yell. One of those sounds alerted us that one of our children had a nightmare. Over the years, I tried different responses. Response #1 never helped much. I would keep lying on my bed and yell, "It's a dream. It's not real." I don't think that ever worked, but one can always hope. Every other response required Diane, me or both of us to get up and go be with our child. We could explain the dream. We could pray with our children and we did, but the response most requested was to stay with the child. Our children either wanted to stay with us, or have one of us stay with them. For small children, the presence of us parents changes everything. We parents are their providers and protectors. Often, they will return to a peaceful sleep as soon as they know are with them.

I know that adults also suffer nightmares. Sometimes, it's flashbacks. Sometimes, it's worry over health. Sometimes, it's hurt or fears over a troubled relationship, or uncertainty about a decision or dread of mounting circumstances. Sleep is fitful. It does not come so quickly because we adults do not as quickly recognize our provider and protector.

Sleep is not the only time we want someone with us. I remember facing some bullies after school. When you enter a courtroom, don't you want an advocate? Don't you want someone with you who knows what to do? If you are exploring wilderness, don't you want a guide? If you are in an airplane, don't you want a pilot... who is not wearing a parachute?

Even though your mind may be eased by paying a lawyer, guide or pilot for their limited skills of provision and protection, you cannot hire almighty God to protect you on an airplane, in a car or on a trail. You cannot hire God to counsel you in your marriage.

In the Bible, Moses held a conversation about this very thing with God. Israel had rejected God while Moses was on Mount Sinai. They had worshiped a golden calf and indulged in pagan revelry. They had been promised a new land, so this is what God told Moses:

Go up to the land flowing with milk and honey. But I will not go with you, because you are a stiff-necked people and I might destroy you on the way.
(Exodus 33:3, NIV)

The people mourned, and after a period of heart-felt repentance, God responded:

My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest. (Exodus 33:14, NIV)

God's presence meant provision and protection and was witnessed in a cloud by day and fire by night. With God present, there was no reason for fear. With God present, there'd be challenges, but also victory. With God present, no enemy could prevail. The Psalmist wrote:

The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me? (Psalm 118:6, NIV)

The Apostle Paul put it this way:

If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31, NIV)

The great joy of Christmas that the angels announced is not merely that in the Christ child we were given promise and purpose. No, in the birth of Christ, God became present for the people of the 1st century, not in a cloud, like he was for Moses, but in a child. In the 21st Century, God is now present, not in a cloud, not in one child, but in many. Instead of abandoning us because of sin, God has come to us; and God has come inside us. God is present with us because there is atonement for your and my sin that allows God to come along with us in his holiness and not destroy us. This atonement permits God to bless us rather than judge us.

Listen to the words of Zechariah at the birth of his son, John:

Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people. He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David. (Luke 1:68-69, NIV)

The Holy Spirit, speaking through Zechariah, the priest and father of John the Baptist, declared that God's presence and redemption had come. God had raised up a horn of salvation, not a trumpet to gather troops, but an addition to an animal, an instrument, to overcome its enemies.

God had brought into being a horn. The work of this horn would be:

salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham: to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days. (Luke 1:71-75, NIV)

This horn was to affect Zechariah's generation and ours. This horn was to rescue Israel and those who seek shelter in the God of Israel from their enemies so they can know and serve the Creator of heaven and earth. How can this horn enable you and I to serve God without fear, in holiness and righteous before him, all our days? What unfolded in a stable so long ago is a very personal gift to you and me. To be sure, Jesus is a gift to all humanity, but he is also a gift to you and me personally. He is a horn of salvation to us. He is this addition to our life that changes our relationship to everything that is hostile to God. He is the presence of the holy and mighty God among us. He is the food of God to live a holy life. He is the power of God to overcome that which defeats, discourages and destroys. He is the presence of God to enlighten, encourage and empower. The Apostle Paul affirmed:

It is because of (God) that you are in Christ Jesus, who has become for us wisdom from God—that is, our righteousness, holiness and redemption. Therefore, as it is written: "Let him who boasts boast in the Lord." (1 Corinthians 1:30-31, NIV)

Christ Jesus coming and living in Spirit is this horn of salvation that changes our thinking and living. Is there a horn of salvation that is affecting you? Remember, this is God's Christmas gift to you. Is there a horn of salvation that is stronger than what tempts and tests you? Is there a horn of salvation that is changing your attitude, your habits and affecting your relationships? Is this horn helping you beat what destroys both you and those you love?

If you are like me, you might see and experience the horn and you might also taste the power of the enemy. You believe, but you still have areas of your life that are messy or enslaved by the enemy. What do you do? How can this gift of Christmas work for you?

God did not just send the Christ. He sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for people to welcome the Christ. Zechariah looked at baby John and declared:

You, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death... (Luke 1:76-79, NIV)

The way to receive the presence of God is not just in worship as the shepherds and magi did in Christ's infancy. The way to receive and live in God's presence is in repentance and forgiveness. Only as we come in our brokenness do we know God's mercy. Only as we come daily in acknowledged brokenness do we receive wisdom. Only as we surrender each of our opinions to the Lord do we learn righteousness. Only as we, moment by moment, trust Jesus with our lives do we experience fully God's redeeming presence.

Let all this seasons decorations lead you to God's gift. Unwrap it. Realize that the horn of salvation is raised among us. Believe in the word of prophecy and the message of angels. Israel doubted the cloud and the child when it got tough. Let's act and live in faith!

In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength. (Isaiah 30:15, NIV)