

## The Gift of Christmas Presence

Luke 1:26-38

December 20, 2020

4th Sunday in Advent

It is the season for buying presents and wrapping them with brightly colored ribbons and bows, and gently placing them under the tree, though this year, more people are counting on mailing their packages to relatives and loved ones. According to Amazon, it is already too late to guarantee delivery by Christmas! It's going to be a different kind of Christmas due to covid.

But today, I would like to focus on a different kind of gift – it is the gift of Christmas Presence – P R E S E N C E. According to some, this is the season for the presence of Christmas visitors, those of a spiritual nature. If it weren't for covid, family members and friends would grace our homes and our hearts with gifts and wishes of good cheer at this time of year.

But in addition to them, the Bible tells us that there are angelic visitors in our midst, and they seem to be most prevalent at Christmas. And not only the angels, I am also thinking about the spiritual presence of our loved ones and family members who have passed on, and now experience Christmas in the Kingdom.

At least for me, their spirits are always with us, but we probably don't notice them. It is a spiritual truth that has made a deep impression on me over the years. The veil between heaven and earth seems particularly thin at this time of year, meaning heaven comes down and caresses the earth. Heaven and earth intermingle, like a slow dance to a beautiful tune.

Particularly now, there are spiritual lessons to be learned that we should cherish all year long. Who can forget a favorite aunt or uncle, grandparent, spouse or child? Do you sense their presence? What we have in our Christmas eyes and hearts around this time of year are images of those who are missing . . . those whom we have loved.

Every one of you could share memories of family members and loved ones that is sure to bring a lump in your throat and a tear to your eye. But the very fact that God's own Son comes to earth to dwell among us is God's way of saying that the gap between heaven and earth has been bridged. Perhaps it is the Christmas angels who come to tell us as much.

The angel Gabriel came to Mary and proclaimed, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But Mary was perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have

found favor with God. The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you . . . and nothing will be impossible with God." Then the angel departed from her as quickly as he came.

Furthermore, it was not only Mary to whom the angels spoke. There was Elizabeth, Zechariah, Joseph and the shepherds. Almost everybody was directed by some angelic Christmas presence. These were not isolated events. No one quite knows the schedule of these angelic visitors -- how or when they might appear, but that their presence makes an impact, there can be no doubt. Without their Christmas presence, where would we be? How would Mary and Joseph have gotten the word?

Angels come in all shapes and sizes. Perhaps some of them used to inhabit human bodies. Why should our loved ones not have some of those same angelic qualities? The Bible tells us that we were created just a little lower than the angels. The Greek word for angels is "angelos," and it means "messenger." Angels are God's messengers to us at Christmas. They help us understand that the past and the present come together as one -- as God's timeless truth-- just as it did for Joseph and Mary.

You never know when you are going to encounter an angel. Like Mary, our job at Christmas and every day is to look and listen for the angelic messengers of good news. Have you encountered an angel lately -- a "messenger" of the Lord? If you have sought some guidance from deep inside yourself, you probably have. If this season does not make one believe that heaven came down to earth in an extraordinary way, then what ever will? Believing is seeing in its own way.

As for our loved ones, I feel their presence, too. I can't prove it, but I'd bet my life on it. The love we feel for our loved ones and they for us never ends. We never lose those we love. They are always with God, and they are always with us. If heaven and earth touch, surely our loved ones cannot be far away.

A former parishioner once told me how her deceased husband came to her one night with an angelic presence, and told her not to worry, that he was fine and all was well. She had a sense of peace and never worried after her experience with Don's angelic presence. Mary Anne is so close to God, I never doubted her story. She is a person of truth and integrity.

God has also given me a holy hunch in prayerful moments. Sometimes it seems like my mother or father or grandparent whisper in my ear, and point me in the right direction. I have been amazed over the years how many people have said they have a similar experience. One role I have cherished as a pastor over the years is to hear peoples' deepest convictions that are the bedrock of their faith. It is a sacred trust.

You too may feel an inexplicable presence that tells you that you are not alone. Others have told me they experience the same thing. I cannot prove it, but I cannot doubt the deep conviction God has instilled in me during times of prayer.

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I'm struck by the observation of John Shea in his book, Starlight: Beholding the Christmas Miracle All Year Long as he reflects on the matter of Christmas presence. I take it off the shelf and read it every year at Christmas.

Shea writes: *"At Christmas the missing return. I am not sure why . . . but this unseen spiritual presence seems to be particularly strong at Christmas as spirits bump into the earthbound. Maybe it is the migrant pattern of the spirit world. They winter on earth."*

*"Or perhaps it is us, our openness, our perceptions, our willingness to entertain more and more of reality. Perhaps at Christmas we pause long enough to allow them entry into our harried hearts."* Shea continues, *"I once read about a man who was sitting quietly in his chair on Christmas Eve, remembering all the people who had once celebrated Christmas with him, but who now were gone. His young son, around seven, entered the room and asked him, 'Daddy, why are you crying?'" "Oh," said the father, "I must have something in my eye."*

What we have in our Christmas eyes are images of the physically missing. These images are sharp, vivid, living—conveying a strong sense of presence – and not just merely a memory. Shea writes, "We do not need the framed photos on the mantle to remind us. True believers know our loved ones are never far away – particularly at Christmas."

Could this be part of the Christmas message? Could this be the angels' clarion call -- that Christmas tells us what we should have known all along – that heaven and earth are really one?

You may recall the Old Testament story of Jacob's ladder (Genesis 28:10-22). One night Jacob had a dream. Esau was furious with Jacob for stealing his birthright. Jacob was afraid and fled. On his way to his relative's house at Haran, Jacob lay down for the night. As he was sleeping, he had a vision of a ladder or stairway between heaven and earth. God's angels were on it, ascending and descending. When Jacob awoke, he believed that God was present in that place with the promise that God would always be with him.

I think there is a ladder like that between heaven and earth, especially at Christmas. If the angels go back and forth on that ladder, can our loved ones be far behind?

Would an all-powerful and loving God create us if there were not a plan to dwell together eternally? It's like the angels reach out and touch us, and maybe our loved ones do as well – especially at Christmas – when heaven and earth embrace.

It just may be that the angel Gabriel is not yet done with this 'ole world, and this year he may be speaking to you just as he spoke to Mary: "Greetings! The Lord is with you," and maybe others are, too.

Maybe Paul was on to something when he writes to the Romans, "the revelation of the mystery is now being disclosed." (Romans 16:26) Didn't Jesus come to bridge this gulf between heaven and earth? Doesn't he come to bring us good news – the very same sentiments the angel conveyed to Mary? Maybe he brings other angelic visitors with him to be at our side.

Perhaps that tear in our eye is indicative of what is and always has been as Christmas past dissolves into Christmas present. As John O'Donohue suspects, perhaps one of the great mysteries that will be revealed one day is that the past and present are categories that have been concocted by humans, but in spiritual terms, there is only the Eternal Now, as the theologian Paul Tillich likes to say.

Christmas is a time that reminds us like no other that heaven really does come down to earth, and with it comes all the promises of God's kingdom. This Christmas, the angel is more than an ornament on the top of your tree – they are messengers of Christmas, and they are not alone. Pay attention, for the angels, and all of those you have ever loved are closer than you think. Amen

#### Luke 1:26-38

1:26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,  
1:27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

1:28 And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

1:29 But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

1:30 The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

1:31 And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.

1:32 He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.

1:33 He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

1:34 Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

1:35 The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.

1:36 And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren.

1:37 For nothing will be impossible with God."

1:38 Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.