

December 12, 2010
Rev. Dr. Steven H. Koski
Simply Christmas
“Less Presents, More Presence”
Luke 1.39-45

Writer and speaker Leo Buscaglia held a contest asking people to write in and share stories of children expressing love. Leo’s favorite story was a young boy who was playing in his backyard when he saw his neighbor, whose wife recently died, crying in his own backyard. The young boy went over and sat in his neighbor’s lap.

His mom was watching this scene from her kitchen window. When the young boy came back home, his mom asked him what they talked about. He said, “Nothing. We didn’t say anything. I just didn’t want him to be alone so I helped him cry.”

An Irish proverb says it is in the shelter of one another that we live. Somehow life’s pain and suffering, life’s burdens and challenges, life’s fears and uncertainty seem more bearable if we know we’re not alone.

As I think of the Christmas story this time of year and as I try to cope with the mess and fear of my own life, I find it helpful to remember what a mess it all was back then. And it was in the midst of that mess, Christ was born.

Think about how frightened Mary must have been...probably about 14 years-old...pregnant with no explanation to offer that any one would believe...the source of ridicule and town gossip...a frightening and very uncertain road ahead.

I want us to use our imagination and imagine with me this 14 year-old young girl visited by Gabriel, an angel, a messenger from God,

who tells her that she has been chosen to be an instrument of God's mercy and love and grace...that she is to best and give birth to the Christ child.

Whoa! I think I would be running in the other direction as fast as my feet would carry me!

Somehow Mary finds it within herself to speak what some have called the most courageous and important words ever spoken, "YES. Here am I, a servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word."

"Yes?!" How did Mary, this young girl, find the courage to say YES? I think I would have told Gabriel you must have mistaken me for some one else...you know, some one a little more worthy...some one a lot braver than I am.

Using my imagination, I wonder what happened immediately after Gabriel left. Having received Mary's courageous YES, Gabriel turns and takes his angelic leave of Mary. A shimmering rush of wind, and he is gone. The light returns to normal. The objects in the room resume their familiar shapes. And Mary – young Mary, unmarried Mary, pregnant Mary – looks around. Finds herself quite alone.

I can imagine her placing her head in her two hands and thinks, "It seemed like a good idea at the time, was this a dream? What was I thinking...how will I possibly find the courage to make this journey?"

What's interesting is that the writer Luke tells us that after the angel Gabriel's departure, Mary goes 'with great haste' to visit Elizabeth. Scholars suggest Elizabeth was either Mary's cousin or Aunt. She was experiencing an unusual pregnancy of her own, like Sarah in the Hebrew Bible blessed with an impossible child in her older years.

This visit has been depicted by artists throughout the centuries. Again using my imagination, I can imagine Elizabeth greeting Mary by reaching out to her, placing her hands on Mary's belly, welcoming her, and blessing her.

Mary reaches out to Elizabeth and places her hand on Elizabeth's belly that is swollen with a miracle child she has carried for six months now. The child, Elizabeth says, leaps for joy in her womb. I can imagine these two women reaching out to one another and holding on to one another for dear life.

Luke says that Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and recognizes the One whom Mary carries. She places her hand upon this fragile young girl who bears the Christ and blesses her.

Can you imagine how young frightened Mary whose life was turned upside down must have felt? There would be a difficult journey ahead of her to say the least. I wonder if she got some of her courage to make that journey through the presence of love that Elizabeth graced her with.

Elizabeth welcomed and offered Mary hospitality without any kind of judgment. Can you imagine how life-giving that must have been for Mary? In fact, rather than judging her and her condition, she delights in Mary presence and praises her for trusting God's impossible promises.

I can only imagine in this time of fear and uncertainty, Mary found refuge in Elizabeth. I also imagine that the older Elizabeth must have found something of a refuge in Mary as well.

There are few things more powerful in life than finding ourselves in a difficult situation and encountering some one who not only doesn't judge but accepts us unconditionally and who also knows something of what it is to be in that place. It's extraordinarily life –

giving to meet some one with whom we don't have to pretend...some one willing to meet us and be with us right where we are.

Both pregnant in strange and wondrous circumstances, Mary and Elizabeth each find perhaps the only other person who could possibly understand what's happening to them. With one another, they find not just understanding (though that would be gift enough), not just hospitality (though that would be mercy enough); in one another, they find shelter, refuge. The space between them becomes a sacred space...becomes a sanctuary.

In just a few moments in Luke's telling of this story, Mary raises her voice in that ancient song we call the Magnificat. In the sanctuary of welcome and unconditional love she finds in Elizabeth, Mary gets beyond her fears and is freed to sing of the hope God is bringing forth within her.

Mary and Elizabeth found sanctuary in the presence of one another. Where are you finding sanctuary in the stress of this season? Where are you being a sanctuary to others?

Are you Mary, needing the presence of another to help you find the courage to make an impossible journey you need to make – literal or otherwise? Are you Elizabeth, extending hospitality to another and finding there a shelter you needed for yourself?

Are you longing for a sacred space in the stress all around you that hasn't yet appeared?

Our Advent theme is Simply Christmas...what are those simple things that might help us experience the profound gift of this season?

Maybe one of the ways we can prepare to recognize and receive the gift of God's presence within and around us is to be intentional in the days ahead at being really present to one another.

Elizabeth recognized and affirmed that Mary was bearing within her Christ. She blessed Mary. Can you imagine how Mary felt?...loved, affirmed, worthy, valued. What would happen to our relationships this holiday season if we recognized every single person bears within them Christ and we offered one another the same welcome and unconditional love Elizabeth offered Mary?

What would happen if the meeting space between us became a holy place...a sanctuary...a refuge that helps us move beyond our fears to make the journeys we are each called to make?

Phil Gulley wrote a little book called "Christmas in harmony" where there's a story of the pastor, Sam Gardner, and his wife preparing Christmas cards to send to every one in church, and it seems virtually everyone in town.

Sam was to sign the inside of the card while his wife addressed the envelopes. Just as she finished addressing the very last one, she picked up one of the cards to read what Sam had written on the inside. She expected to see, "Merry Christmas", "Happy Holidays" "Thinking of You" signed "Sam, Barbara, Levi and Addison." You know the usual.

Instead, she opened the card and it read, "We love you."

"We love you?!" she exclaimed! "Why did you write that? Don't you think that's a little over the top? Who all did you tell we loved them?"

"Well, um, let me see, pretty much every single card." His wife was stunned and questioned why he couldn't have been a bit more

traditional. She said usually they open the card, read it, smile, are glad we thought of them and then they pitch it in the trash. Now you had to go and tell them we loved them. It'll confuse them.”
“What do you mean, confuse them?” Sam asked.

She sighed, “Telling some one you love them changes everything.” She’s right. Love changes everything, and that’s precisely the message God was sending in the birth of Jesus.

Preparing our hearts to receive the gift of the Christ child is like opening a Christmas card from God, and inside are written the words, “I love you more than you can imagine.” God sent a present into the world to show it...the gift of God’s presence in the person of Jesus. The gospel stories indicate that the child who became a man gave very few material things to people.

What Jesus gave was the gift of himself – the gift of his presence, his heart, his time, his unconditional love, his acceptance, his forgiveness and ultimately, his very life.

During this time of year, our culture shouts, “Buy this perfect gift and make some one happy. Buy this and prove your love.”

Maybe the best spiritual practice this Advent . . . the best way to prepare to receive the gift of God’s presence in the birth of the Christ child is to take time and be intentional in offering the gift of our presence to others. The best presents don’t cost a dime.

Kahlil Gibran wrote, “You give little when you give material things. The greatest gift is the gift of yourself.” What if we spent less time worrying about finding the perfect present and more time simply being present to one another?

Do you remember Sam the Pastor who signed his Christmas card, “We love you.”

In that same book, Sam tells about his grandfather who was a hard man to know. He spent most of his time in his workshop in the barn behind the house. Every year on Christmas afternoon Sam's mother would send Sam and his brother out to Grandpa's workshop to thank him for the gift of \$10 which they had each received.

Sam's grandfather would acknowledge the thank you with a nod and return to his puttering without looking up.

Sam's grandpa died the Christmas of Sam's first year in college and it fell to Sam and his father to clean out the workshop. Sam was sorting through a box marked "lawnmower parts" when he recognized his father was crying.

Sam had never seen his father cry before, and wasn't exactly sure what to do, so he went over to his dad, stood beside him, and placed his hand on his shoulder. Sam's dad said, "All these years, all I wanted was for him to tell me he loved me and that he was proud of me, and he never did. And now he never can. It was the only thing from him I wanted."

Sam's father turned to him, hugged him and said, "I don't ever want you to feel that way. I love you son. I'm here for you. I'm proud of you. Damn proud of you and have been since the day you were born."

Sam said he doesn't really remember what gifts he received that Christmas because those words and his father's touch and presence were the best gifts he could possibly have received . . . it was exactly the gift he needed that first year of college as he embarked on a new journey.

Maybe the best way to open our hearts to experience in a new way the gift of God's presence is to offer the gift of our presence...the sanctuary of our love to someone else.

Mary was in a scary and uncertain place and she needed Elizabeth. Elizabeth offered a sanctuary of welcome and blessing helping find the courage to make the difficult journey to Bethlehem.

Maybe you're the one today who, like Mary, needs to reach out and ask for help.

Maybe you are called to be Elizabeth. There is some one who needs the gift of your presence...the sanctuary of your love. Maybe you're both Mary and Elizabeth.

Sam's wife was right. Love changes everything and best of all, it changes you!

With thanks to Jan Richardson (janrichardson.com) for the inspiration regarding the relationship between Mary and Elizabeth.