

The Gift of Presence

Christmas Eve – December 24, 2005

Sermon Background Study

Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she 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.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

*Five thousand of us will come together today at St. Andrew to celebrate the birth of the Christ-child, our Lord Jesus. We will enjoy the presence of one another as we give thanks for God's presence with us all.
Emmanuel, “God is with us!”*

We have a lot of choices when it comes to communicating with others, connecting with them. We can write a note – with paper and pen. We can pick up a phone and call them. At least then, we can hear each other's voices. We might drop them an e-mail. Instant messaging has its own virtues and failings. But none of these are as fulfilling, satisfying, useful, and rewarding as f2f – face-to-face. To put it another way, nothing beats presence.

God's f2f

God has tried various ways of communicating with his people so that we would actually listen to him. First, God gave us his word in writing, first etched on stone tablets. On

Angels

One can walk through any mall this time of year and see countless depictions of angels. Some are chubby little “cherubs.” Some are mere wisps with diaphanous wings. Some “angels” in the mall even have blond hair and are dressed in their underwear! But, who or what are the angels we find in the Bible?

Here's the question: Will my wife, Patti, one day have wings of her own and join the company of God's angels? In a word – no. Patti is plenty angelic but she is human. Angels are angels and humans are human.

In the Bible, angels are spiritual beings created by God. They are created by God, but they are not human. They are, well, angels.

The word “angel” is based on the Greek word, *angelos*, which means messenger. Often, the work of angels is to be God's messengers bearing news of one sort or another. The angel named Gabriel brought the news of her miraculous conception to Mary. An angel brought the news of Jesus' birth to the shepherds in the hills and a vast company of angels proclaimed the birth from the heavens. Angels have their God-given work to do, just as you and I have our God-given work to do.

The Bible also tells us about spiritual beings who have chosen to defy God. The Bible often refers to them as “demons” and the lead dog in the pack is named Satan. Satan, acting of his own free will, has chosen against God rather than for God. He stands against God's angels such as Gabriel and Michael.

I am often asked whether I believe in the actual existence of angels and demons – good angels and fallen angels, as it were. I've come to believe that it is cheating to claim belief in good angels yet deny the existence of fallen angels, of spiritual beings who are working against God's purposes. And yes, I believe in angels.

a mountain in the Sinai Wilderness, God gave Moses the written Law. It was simple enough at its heart – love God and love neighbor. However, we made a mess of that so God tried the spoken word. God raised up many prophets who spoke for God, calling us back to God and to God’s ways, urging us to love God and to love our neighbor, to renounce evil and embrace mercy. But even God’s spoken words fell on deaf ears. We, the people of God, were determined to go our way rather than God’s way. Finally, God resorted to f2f – face-to-face. God would be present with us in way that God had not been with us before. In person, flesh, touch-me-feel-me – all that. By speaking to us face-to-face, by living with us, God is able to connect with us and we with him in ways that boggle the heart. I am reminded of one of my favorite Christmas stories:

Hearing a loud thump, the startled man rose from his chair to check it out. Outside, the early winter blizzard blew hard across the Nebraska landscape. He heard a second thump, then a third, and yet another. The man wasn’t halfway down the hallway when he realized what was happening. A late-departing flock of birds had gotten caught in the early storm. To escape the cold and snow, the birds were throwing themselves at the farm house windows. Being a kind man, he donned a heavy coat and began to make his way outside. When he reached the barn, he threw open the doors so the birds could roost there until the storm passed. Yet, despite the lights in the barn, the birds continued to throw themselves at the house. A little desperate now, the man ran outside the barn waving his arms so he could guide them inside. Of course, the birds that saw him flew away in fear. Then he had what seemed a pretty good idea. He grabbed a bag of seed from the barn and spread a trail leading to the doors. Sadly, in their terror the birds ignored the seed. By now, the man was distraught, even frantic. Running outside one last time he realized that hundreds of birds were dying and he was powerless to stop it. Falling to his knees, he cried aloud, “If I were only a bird, they would follow me. I could lead them to safety.”

The Index Cards in the Pews

We will be reading through the entire Bible in 2006. A copy of the reading plan and some tips are included in today’s bulletin. We hope you will take them home and join us on the 12-month journey.

There are also some index cards in the pews. We’d very much appreciate it if you’d take a minute to write a question or two about the Bible on an index card. It might be a question about how we got the Bible or about a Bible story or about a person in the Bible. It could be about anything so long as it is related to the Bible. There is no need to sign your name.

During the coming months, we’ll address some of the questions in the background studies and in the sermons. I will also be posting responses to questions at englescott.blogspot.com. I will also use the questions in a book I’m working on. If this first round of questions goes well, we will collect questions mid-way through our reading plan and again after we’ve finished reading the entire Bible.

You are also welcome to e-mail me questions at sengle@standrewcccl.org. This will be a real help to us as we strive to make *Thru the Bible* as helpful and enriching as we can.

Please drop your card in the baskets at the doors of the sanctuary as you leave the service.

The man could not become a bird, but God, creator of the universe, humbled himself and took on our own mortal humanity, born to a young Galilean woman.

Practicing God’s presence

The living Jesus is our f2f with God. Want to know what God is like? His character? His caring? Look to Jesus. Jesus is the full and complete revelation of God in a way that written or spoken words could never be. To repeat, there is nothing like face-to-face. This is the miracle of Christmas.

But for all that, many of us sometimes feel like God is far away, anywhere but present with us. Last week, I mentioned brother Lawrence. He was a 17th-century Carmelite lay-brother. We might think that feeling God’s presence would be easy for those leading the monastic life, but it was not so for brother Lawrence. He had to learn the essential ingredient in the Christian life, living always in the presence of God. When he did, brother Lawrence found that his faith was living and active, that he was filled with hope and confidence, and that his heart was on fire with love for God.

But how? How would we too live each day in the presence of God? Brother Lawrence urged that we try to converse with God in little, unscripted ways while we work. We can go days and hardly ever think of God much less talk with him. Brother Lawrence also suggested that we stop often, if even for just a few moments, to praise God. Finally, brother Lawrence stressed living a virtuous life, confessing our own sins. As Paul put it, we need to focus on whatever in our lives is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, and admirable (Phil. 4:8), for such are the things of God. Much of the world seeks to coarsen our souls and pull us away from God. Nonetheless, following brother Lawrence’s simple suggestions will help us to gratefully accept and enjoy the Christmas gift of presence.

Daily Bible Readings

(more on God's communications methods)

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Romans 1:18-23 God's creation communicates a great deal to us about God if we would only see it.</p>	<p>Day 2 Exodus 34 God makes new stone tables. The Ten Commandments can be found in Exodus 20.</p>
<p>Day 3 Jeremiah 18 Jeremiah brings to the people God's word about a potter's house.</p>	<p>Day 4 Hebrews 1:1-4 God speaks to us now in the person of Jesus, who is the "exact representation" of God's being.</p>
<p>Day 5 Colossians 1:15-20 Jesus is the "image of the invisible." Like the writer of Hebrews, Paul is trying to find words that say, "When we see Jesus, we see God - fully and completely and exactly."</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

December Book Recommendation

Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible (NRSV)

St. Andrew will be reading and preaching *Thru the Bible* next year. Many of us will be using the new *Renovaré Spiritual Formation Bible (NRSV)* put together by Richard Foster, Eugene Peterson, Dallas Willard, and others. The *Renovaré* team has tried to combine the best of a study Bible and a devotional Bible in a single volume. The introductory materials and the book introductions are particularly helpful.

We have gotten copies of this Bible at a much reduced price. What a gift idea for Christmas!
Copies are available at the St. Andrew Bookstore: *Inspiration*

Winter Bible Academy Starts January 9! Class information and registration is on-line at www.standrewccl.org and www.standrewumc.org

Classes include *The Practice of Meditation* (Tuesday evenings with Rev. Kathryn Self), *Introducing the Old Testament* (Monday evenings with Scott Engle), *Confronting the Controversies* (Thursday lunch with Rev. Dough Meyer), *The God Who Saves: Exodus and New Exodus* (available at two times: Monday mornings and Tuesday evenings, with Scott Engle), and *1 Corinthians: By the Grace of God* (Thursday mornings with Frankey Commer)

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

This business of the incarnation calls for us to think BIG. We need to let it blow our minds. Jesus was and is God . . . even as a squirming, burping, messy, very human baby. Jesus is not all of God, but he is still fully and completely God. That is about as good as our language can come at describing Jesus' divinity and the mystery of the Trinity.

You might make two lists. On the first, list some thoughts about what it means to you that Jesus is God. Why do Christians cling so firmly to this claim? Why does Jesus' divinity really matter? Would it be enough for him to have been a wise teacher or prophet? On the second list, outline some thoughts on what it means to you that Jesus is fully human. Why does this matter? Christians have always defended our belief in the virgin birth, not because it is about Jesus' divinity but because his birth affirms his humanity. What would we lose if we were to deny Jesus' humanity?

Finally, it is about time that when we consider New Years' resolutions. What will yours be? Consider resolving to live 2006 in God's presence, every hour of every day. What are some practical steps you could take to live out this resolution? What effect do you think this would have on your life? On the lives of those you love? What might such a resolution cause you to give up in the new year? Or to take up? What might happen at St. Andrew if we all resolved (1) to read through the entire Bible this year and (2) strive to live each day in the presence of God?