

The Crisis of Christmas  
Part 2: Presents or Presence  
Matthew 1:23

Video of women drawing water from a well in Africa. 1 minute.

If you weren't here last week, you are probably wondering what in the world is going on?  
What was that video all about?  
Why is there a well on our stage?  
What is this "Advent Conspiracy" thing people keep talking about?

Last week we talked about doing something radically different this year for our Christmas celebration.  
By "our" I mean me, you, your family, my family, our church family.....individually and altogether.  
By "radically different" I mean instead of just complaining about the commercialization and the materialism of Christmas, we're actually going to DO something about it.

Last week we looked at how the magi, or wise men, celebrated that first Christmas and we observed two things.

1. They worshiped Jesus. So we want to put more emphasis on worshiping the Lord. Celebrating the Christ, rather than celebrating the celebration.
2. They gave Jesus gifts. How do we do that now? How can you give a physical gift to Jesus since he is now in heaven? We looked at Matthew 25 where Jesus said, "I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink." His listeners asked, "When did we see YOU thirsty." And Jesus replied, "When you did this to the least of this brothers of mine, you did so to me."

We concluded that, according to Jesus, giving water to people in need is just the same as giving it to him. And if you are dying of thirst, there's no better gift that can be given!

Thus, our "radically different" Christmas gift is going to be to fund the drilling of water wells in Rwanda where people are dying for lack of clean drinking water.

That's why we have this well here! We're going to talk about this for the next several weeks, and then on December 21st I invite you to MEET ME AT THE WELL as we gather together to worship the Lord and to give our special gift to Him.

This morning I want to elaborate further on changing our emphasis during Christmas. I want to encourage you to think less about presents, and think more about presence.

If you didn't listen closely, you might have missed what I said.

1. Think less about PRESENTS and think more about PRESENCE.

One of the crises that happens at Christmas is that we spend so much time worrying about buying presents that sometimes we miss presence. \

I want us to focus on two aspects of presence:

- God's presence in your life.
- Your presence in the lives of others.

When the activities of our Christmas celebration cause us to overlook the details of the very first Christmas, we miss the biggest news of the event.

Matthew 1:23 "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"-which means, "God with us."

God with us! God's presence!

The Barna Research Group poll asked, "What is the most important aspect of Christmas?" - only 37% of adults in the national survey said the birth of Jesus is the most important aspect of Christmas. Barely more than one third said that the birth of Jesus is the most important aspect of Christmas.

The crisis of Christmas is that we are missing God's presence in Christmas!

Think about how much time you spend on presents. You drive to the mall through all that traffic. You look for a parking spot at the mall. You walk around the mall. You walk through several stores. You walk around the mall some more. You go into a few more stores. You finally find a present. You buy the present. You drive home. You drive back to the store because you forgot to buy wrapping paper and ribbons. You drive home again. You send your son or daughter to the store because they used up all the scotch tape. You wrap the present. Eventually you give the present to whomever it is for.

Have you put one tenth of that same amount of time or effort into focusing on God's presence in your life?

Or, couldn't you have made better use of all that time by spending it in a meaningful activity with one of your loved ones?

I promise you that a year from now, they will remember a special activity you did with them far more than they will remember any present you give the.

One of our church members, Howard Danko, hit the nail on the head in an email he sent me after hearing last Sunday's sermon. With his permission, I share it with you now:

"Bravo on the sermon. I now have the 'cover' needed to more freely admit that Christmas, as traditionally celebrated in our culture, has always provoked that little voice inside me ever since I accepted Christ many years ago. That little voice has been telling me that something is very wrong.

Have you ever had to actually wrack your brain to come up with a gift idea for a loved one? The reason that coming up with a gift idea is often so hard is that the gift recipient actually already has everything that they need and realistically just about everything they might even want. So we wander around shopping malls like zombies trying to come up with something that will provide some utility to the loved one.

I wish the rest of the world was dealing with such "problems". Instead, too many are just lugging the day's water on top of their head from the contaminated water source a mile or so away. A significant challenge each day is just finding enough nourishment to stave off the discomfort of hunger. This terrible mis-allocation of resources has to change and the Advent Conspiracy is a great place to start. Let's divert some of our excess in Christ's name to those with so little. The small sacrifice we make can make such a huge improvement in the quality of life of others.

Needless to say, we are in with the program. As the catchy Christmas song says, "let this Christmas be, Christ in me". All the other pagan Christmas rituals are just a distraction."

Thanks Howard, very well stated!

If presents distract you from presence, something is wrong!

Therefore:

## 2. Focus on God's presence in your life.

When you think about the magnitude of the reality of God's presence in your life, it ought to blow you away. It ought to knock you over. It ought to trip the circuit breaker on your Christmas display!

Think about it for a minute:  
The creator of the entire universe.

The One who ultimately determines when life begins and when life ends.  
The One who causes the sun to rise in the morning and to set in the evening.  
The Lord God Almighty has an essence of His presence inside of you!

1 Corinthians 3:16 "Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit lives in you?"

Peter Larson wrote the following, "Despite our efforts to keep him out, God intrudes. The life of Jesus is bracketed by two impossibilities: a virgin's womb and an empty tomb. Jesus entered our world through a door marked 'No Entrance' and left through a door marked 'No Exit.'"

The reason for His birth is presence. To be with us.  
Look again at Matthew 1:23 "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"-which means, "God with us."

That's why the Apostle Paul wrote in the book of Colossians:  
Colossians 1:27 "To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory."

The whole point of Christmas is "God with us."

Christ is in you! Are you in tune with His presence? Are you even aware of His presence most of the time?

Let me tell you a story:

A little boy went with his mother into a crowded department store where people were elbowing each other and weary clerks were ringing up their sales. It was a scene of noise and frustration.

In the midst of it all stood the little boy holding on to a balloon filled with helium. But in the press of the crowd the boy was bumped and he lost his hold on the string. His balloon floated away to the ceiling.

One of the clerks saw it happen. So she called up the janitor and asked him to bring a ladder and retrieve the balloon. Soon here he came, bringing a ladder out into the middle of the crowded floor. For a moment everything seemed to stop. In the midst of all the commotion and hustle and bustle...everything grew quiet. Everybody watched as the janitor climbed up the long stepladder, grabbed the string of the balloon, brought it down and handed it to the little bright-eyed boy. And everyone smiled. And everybody applauded.

Guess what happened next? They went right back to their scurrying around and impatiently bumping into each other. Everything went back to the way it was before. But for a brief moment there was once again evidence of love and care and concern in our world.

Unfortunately, that's a lot like our Christmas season.

On Christmas Eve millions and millions around the world will stop what they're doing and focus on Jesus' presence. Christmas Eve Candlelight Communion services will be filled with smiling Christians. But it's only for a moment. When the service is over it's hurry, hurry, hurry home to the present and the trees and the gatherings and the busy schedule.....and Jesus' presence fades from our awareness.

An awareness of His presence shouldn't be just a temporary thing. It should be much more than an annual celebration and even more than a weekly church service.

An awareness of His presence needs more consistency in our lives.  
Jesus used the analogy of water in a different way when He hinted at this constant presence:

John 4:10-14

10 Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God and who it is that asks you for a drink, you would have asked him and he would have given you living water."

11 "Sir," the woman said, "you have nothing to draw with and the well is deep. Where can you

get this living water?

12 Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?"

13 Jesus answered, "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again,

14 but whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

You can have God's presence in your life right now and that is a presence that goes on into eternity. Don't let Christmas PRESENTS obscure God's eternal PRESENCE.

(All this talk about water and wells is making me thirsty)

3. Focus on your presence in the lives of others.

Sometime presents get in the way of relational presence. We get so wrapped up in things that we forget people. We become so enslaved to material possessions that we simply don't have time to spend with others. Sometimes we give gifts or money instead of simply giving OURSELVES.

The Christians in the first century got it! Look at how they spent their time:

Acts 2:42 & 46

42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.

46 Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.

They made time for each other. Presence takes time. They were willing to devote their time to God AND to each other.

Are you willing to do that? It starts at home:

A. Focus on your presence in the lives of your loved ones.

Presence takes TIME. Invest your Time, through your presence, in the lives of others, especially those you love

A national survey recently reported,  
"When parents are actively involved in positive activities with their children throughout a year, those children are 46 percent less likely to use drugs, 27 percent less likely to use alcohol, and 52 percent less likely to skip school."

"Positive activities with their children...." That's called presence! Parents need to be present in the lives of their children.

Deuteronomy 11:18-21

18 Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.

19 Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.

20 Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates,

21 so that your days and the days of your children may be many in the land that the LORD swore to give your forefathers

There's no short cut to do what the Lord instructs in these verses. The only way it gets done is with a consistent presence in their lives.

The story is told of a dad who promised his two sons to take them to the circus. It was the last

day that the circus was in town and they were planning on going that day. But early that morning the phone rang; an urgent business call required the dad's presence downtown. The two boys braced themselves for the disappointment. Then they heard their father say, "No, I won't be down; it'll have to wait." When he came back to the breakfast table, his wife smiled. "The circus keeps coming back, you know," she said. "Yes, I know," replied the father, "but childhood doesn't."

Parents, the most important gift you can give your children is your presence. Toys, trinkets, things ....can never, ever take your place. The best gift you can give is the gift of your presence. That same truth applies to your spouse.

Ephesians 5:33 "However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband."

It seems to me that if you love and respect someone, you'll just want to spend time with them. Someone once said that two things reveal your priorities in life: your wallet and your calendar.

Your calendar = your time = presence.  
How much of your presence are your loved ones getting from you?

B. Focus on your presence in the lives of Jesus' loved ones.

Earlier we talked about God's presence in your life.  
Well, God is present in the lives of others as well.  
Therefore, when those others are thirsty, He is thirsty.  
When we give our presence to them, we give our presence to Jesus simultaneously.

That's what this whole water thing is all about. Loving the people Jesus loves.

video - [www.adventconspiracy.org/videos/](http://www.adventconspiracy.org/videos/) Liberia Part 1

Even though you may not be able to fly all the way over the Africa, you can still make your presence felt. I invite you to MEET ME AT THE WELL on December 21st as we receive a very, very special Christmas offering which will be used to drill fresh water drinking wells in Rwanda, Africa. My challenge for you and your family is to spend less on PRESENTS so that you can have a significant PRESENCE in Rwanda. We're about a month away from that date, so over the next four weeks we'll share with you all of the details of how we'll do that.

Meanwhile, we are encouraging you to focus less on PRESENTS and to focus more on PRESENCE. Minimize materialism and commercialism, and maximize your focus on Jesus. The angels of Heaven described Jesus' birth as "Good news of great joy!"  
Have you received that good news into your life?  
Have you receive Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior?