

# Christmas Presence: God With Us

December 4, 2022 A.M.  
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Searcy, Arkansas  
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## Scripture Reading

“Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,  
and they shall call his name Immanuel”  
(which means, God with us). (Matthew 1:23 ESV)

## ***THE TROUBLE WITH BEING “WITH”***

“Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, but today is a gift. That’s why it is called the present.” You may recognize that quote from the classic “Kung Fu Panda.” Actually, that quote (or something like it) is credited to Bil Keane and to Eleanor Roosevelt.

But have you ever noticed how hard it is to stay in the present? My friend Randy tells of the time he met with a student for coffee. Every time either one of them began to talk, Charlie would look down at his phone to receive a text, or to send one. If Charlie was talking, he’d continue but he would sound “spaced out”; if Randy was talking, Charlie would add the usual “un hunh” with a nod while typing away, never fully engaged in the conversation. So Randy reached down under the table and texted Charlie. “I guess this is the only way to get a hold of your attention. What shall we text about?”

The problem isn’t just our inability to stay focused. It’s even deeper than that. We are hard wired to avoid the present. Mukesh Gupta wrote a book called *Thrive: Mindsets and Skillsets needed to succeed in a world dominated by smart machines*. Gupta says that our survival instinct makes us live in the past and in the future.<sup>1</sup> We have to reflect on the past because those who don’t learn from history are doomed to repeat it, and by thinking about what happened yesterday we have a better chance of surviving tomorrow.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://rmukeshgupta.com/the-difficulty-of-being-in-the-present-moment-and-strategies-to-overcome-it/>

We need to think about the future because preparation is the mother of skill. That meeting with your boss in the morning, that hard talk you’ve been needing to have with your daughter—it can’t be done on the fly, and if we don’t handle it right, it could have consequences that last for years. So, you see, we are hard wired to live in yesterday and tomorrow.

Which makes the present so rare. Maybe that’s why it’s a gift. Woody Allen once said “80% of success in life is showing up.”<sup>2</sup> Because most people don’t.

### ***THE POWER OF PRESENCE***

Presence. It’s that thing we talk about and remember years after the funeral.

“I don’t know which flowers were bought by whom, and I can’t remember what the preacher said in his eulogy, but I will always remember that you were *there*.”

It’s the thing we hope for when we get the call with the worst news of our life.

“She’s not gonna make it. After she breathes her last breath, I’ll be there at the hospital, by her side, all alone—except for my best friend who left his office in Dallas, canceled his weeks’ worth of appointments, and drove down just to be *with me*.”

I know some of you already have your Christmas plans. You’ll be driving a long way to see friends and family. And for others, those stationed overseas, those tied to a commitment at work, you’ll be singing the old classic “I’ll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams.” We would call that Plan B. We will zoom if we have to. We will be there in spirit if we must. But Plan A is to be really, truly, physically present.

Technology has given us some incredible things. I’m grateful that Grace can facetime Grandma; that we can send mail electronically that will get to you in a matter of milliseconds rather than days. But no matter what commodity we consume, some things just can’t substitute for real presence. No matter what devices we employ, some things you just can’t phone in. Bodies sharing life together is what presence truly means. That’s always Plan A.

### ***PLAN A: GOD IN A GARDEN***

And for God...that was always Plan A. He grew a garden. A beautiful garden. He loved his garden and enjoyed it. But there was something even more special awaiting. He made the animals—oh, he made some great ones. God showed his wonderful creativity

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.creativelive.com/blog/the-importance-of-showing-up/>

in making rabbit tails and giraffe necks. But there was still something even more special awaiting. God made people—people, in his very image. “Image-bearers” he calls us. People who would remind the rest of creation what God is like. He made us different. Wonderfully different. He made us male and female. He made us outgoing and reserved. But he gave us all something the same—something to identify us to the rest of the world and to house all that we are. He gave us *bodies*. Bodies with feet that walk, and hands that touch. Bodies with noses that smell, and ears that hear. Bodies that grow and take up space. Bodies are what keeps us from talking about people like “ideas” or “spirits” that can be many places at once or overarching but never really “there” there. No, a body means you can point and say, “there is Nathan.” Right there.

Bodies make us present. Where your body is, is where you are. If you ever want to know if you are fully present, start by asking “where am I standing?”

The Bible says God walked in the garden in the cool of the day (Gen 3:8). There’s not a throw-away line in Scripture. Don’t let your philosophical thinking caps ruin the power of the language here. Enter the story world for just a moment. You don’t use the word “walking” unless you mean to say that God was stretching his legs on a morning stroll. You don’t mention the “cool” of the day unless you want us to picture God delighting in the breeze that runs across his cheek. I say all that to remind you that in the Garden, God was actually “with” Adam and Eve. He was present. The language of Scripture is meant to tell you that we, in our bodies, standing and sweating, were meant to experience the actual presence of God. We were meant to walk together. God was meant to be “with” us. That’s the way it was supposed to be. That was always plan A.

But you know what happened. Sin entered into the story. People began to imagine what it would be like to make decisions without God; to bear on our shoulders responsibility for the world without God...and it led to this sad conclusion: When Adam and Eve heard the sound of God walking in the cool of the day, they hid from the *presence* of the Lord (Genesis 3:8). It becomes our calling card. When Cain chose sin over faith, he too had to leave, and the text says he went away “from the presence of the Lord” (Gen 4:16). When Jonah heard the call to go to Nineveh, he turned and ran the other way; and the text says, “But Jonah rose to flee from the presence of the Lord” (Jonah 1:3).

Sin corrupted Plan A. Because of sin, the fruits of which we embody *in* our bodies, we couldn’t be *with* God. Not in the full sense. But God was determined to be “with” his people, “if only in our dreams.” So, we see God enacting Plan B.

### ***PLAN B: GOD IN A BOX***

Moses begged and pleaded for guidance and for companionship. He begged for God not to leave them orphans on the journey. Never you fear, said the Lord; “My presence will go with you” (Ex 33:14). And the way you will know I’m with you is by a cloud. A cloud will lead you during the day. And then I’ll make you build an Ark of the Covenant. Inside you will house the tablets of stone containing the very words of God, and manna that sustained you,--bread that gave you life. When you eat the shewbread, you’ll call it Lev the bread of “Presence” (Ex 39:36). And on the lid, I want you to build golden angels whose touching wings will form the mercy seat. The wings would “overshadow” the mercy seat, and The Spirit of God would “come upon” it. The cloud would descend and hover over the mercy seat. That’s where I will meet you (Ex 25:22).

The ark sat in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle. To have the ark in your midst was to have God in your midst.

So, when it came time to build the Temple,

“David ordered all the leaders of Israel to help his son Solomon. He said to them, “Is not the Lord your God **with** you? And has he not granted you rest on every side? For he has given the inhabitants of the land into my hands, and the land is subject to the Lord and to his people. Now devote your heart and soul to seeking the Lord your God. Begin to build the sanctuary of the Lord God, so that you may bring the ark of the covenant of the Lord and the sacred articles belonging to God into the temple that will be built for the Name of the Lord.” (1 Chron 22:17-19)

The Temple sat in the heart of the city, the holy of holies in the heart of the Temple. And there in the center of the center of the center, sat the ark of the covenant. In the heart of the Temple, in the belly of the beast, so to speak. You could say “in the womb” of Israel.

### ***A RETURN TO PLAN A: GOD IN A WOMB***

Zephaniah did say that. Speaking to a people war-torn and wearied, he reminds them that the ark is still there, and the promise is still true: the promise looking forward to a day to end all days. And he says:

“Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion...Rejoice and exult with all your heart...The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst; you shall never again fear evil.” (Zephaniah 3:14-15 ESV).

That is good news for the present. God, as represented by the ark, is with you—oh not like it was. Not like Plan A. But in Plan B form God is with you, and that is reason to rejoice.

But wait. Nothing is too hard for the Lord. And like my mother, God won't settle for a Christmas card when having the boys around the table is in sight. So, God announces the hope for a return to Plan A.

Why should you sing aloud, O daughter of Zion? Why should you rejoice with all your heart? Is it just because a messenger of God is coming? Or is it something more? Its something more. In his day, Zechariah assures them the Ark is still secure and God's representatives are doing there thing. But

“On that day (the day still coming, the day of the Lord which we anticipate) it shall be said to Jerusalem, ‘Fear not...The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty one who will save...’ (Zephaniah 3:16-17 ESV)

You know words are powerful things. Poetry does with words what melodies do with notes; it uses them in profound and provocative ways you wouldn't have seen before. The Hebrew word is *qereb*, which is used in a general sense to mean “with” or “within”; “among” or “in the midst of.” But it has a literal meaning, too. When you want to get to the center of the center of the center....when you want to get to the heart, to the belly of it all...this word will do.

### ***QEREB-“WITHIN”***

When the Israelites were told to wash the ram or whatever they would bring for a peace offering, they washed the skin, and the head, and the legs, and then the *qereb* (the entrails or the inward parts) (Lev 4:11; cf. Ex 29; Lev 1; 3). And not just for animals, but for people. Psalm 109:18 says “Let it come into his bowels like water, and like oil into his bones” and the word translated “bowels” is *qereb*. Jeremiah says my heart is within me (Jer 23:9) and God, wanting to change my heart, will one day put his law there—there in our inward parts; that's *qereb* (Jer 31:33). When Zechariah wanted to say God formed the spirit of man that is inside me, he used our word *qereb* (Zech 12:1). When Elijah pleaded with God to put the soul of a dead child back inside him, he used the word *qereb* (1 Kings 17:21-22).

Yes, a word that generically means “in” or “within” but that could literally point to bowels, innerds, or inward parts, was a fitting word because of the spiritual relationship between these two concepts. You cut and wash what is inside the animal to show that

you want to be inside the congregation (Lev 20). You prepare and sacrifice the inward parts to show that you want God deep inside your heart and soul as well. The literal only visualizes the deeper and far more often spiritual sense of the word.

You know where I’m going with this. What other word comes to mind when you we speak of bowels, belly, and inward parts? When Rebekah lay on the ground giving birth to twins, the Bible says the children struggled together “within” her—they fought together within her womb, and there’s our word *qereb* (Gen 25:22).

You know when Sarah was told she was going to have a child, she laughed “within” herself—*qereb* (Gen 18:12). And then God placed a child *within* herself. The children of Rebekah struggled within her womb—“within her” says Genesis 25:22. And here we have Zephaniah using the same language to give hope to the future.

Oh, and in the ancient Jewish world, you would refer to a married woman by reference to her husband: “the wife of Uriah” for example. It was unmarried women, young unmarried women, virgin women, who you would refer to as “the daughter of” someone.

If I went for the most literal reading, looking back in the light of what we know now, I see in Zephaniah this message:

“Fear not, O Virgin daughter...sing aloud. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad. You shall fear no evil. For the Lord your God is in your womb, The mighty one who will save his people.”<sup>3</sup>

Could it be? Infertile Sarah laughs within herself as she stands in the presence of the Lord, but gives birth miraculously to the promised only begotten son. Infertile Hannah, troubled in spirit, prays words that can’t be uttered, speaking only in her heart, but gives way to a miraculous birth of Samuel, who spends his days “in the presence of the Lord” and “grows in wisdom and in favor with God and man.” And Israel—Oh Israel, housing in its belly the very presence of God...from you shall come Plan A.

### ***THE ANNOUNCEMENT TO MARY***

600 years later, on a quiet, starry night, a certain Mary opens her mouth and sings. She’s a virgin, a daughter in the lineage of David. And she sings. And why does she sing?

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<sup>3</sup> For the original connection of “womb” with *qereb* in Zephaniah, I am indebted to Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus: The Infancy Narratives*, trans. Philip J. Whitmore (New York: Image, 2012), pp.27-28. He cites Rene Laurentin, *Structure et Theologie de Luc I-II* (Paris: Gabalda, 1964), p.70f.

Because in Luke chapter 1, Mary is visited by an Angel. “Fear Not” says Gabriel to Mary, the Virgin daughter of Zion. “You will conceive and give birth to a son...He will be great...the Holy one to be born will be called the Son of God” (Luke 1:30-32, 35). Just as the Ark of the Covenant held the two tablets—the very words of God, and manna from the wilderness—bread wafers that gave them life; just as the wings of the golden angels “overshadowed” the mercy seat where God met man (Ex 25:20; 37:9; 1 Kings 8:7; Heb 9:5) this angel proclaims that the Spirit of God will overshadow Mary and place within her the Word of God and the Bread of life. And she sings. A song of jubilant rejoicing. “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior. In her song, Mary calls God “the mighty one” (Luke 1:49) who comes to “save” (Luke 1:47). The baby growing within her “came to save his people from their sin” (Matt 1:21).

### ***LIVING PLAN A: CHRIST IN YOU***

And Jesus walked with us. The Word became flesh...and he walked with us. He walked beside the Sea of Galilee (Mt 4:18; 15:29), as he called his disciple. He on the water (Mt 14:25-29; Mk 6:48-49; Jn 6:19) as he rescued his disciples from the storm. He walked in the Temple courts (Mk 11:27) as he challenged his opponents to change their ways. He walked with the lame who could now walk again and he told them “walk with me.” And he wants to walk with you. But you know what? The garden is never far away and neither is the temptation. Just as Adam and Eve no longer wished to walk with God, John 6 says that when Jesus made clear what discipleship involves, “many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him” (Jn 6:66).

Can you see him? Can you see him there first in Mary’s womb, then there in the manger? Can you see God in a box? Can you see God in flesh? Can you see his little hands that will one day hold the hand of a leper, and later bear the marks of a nail. Can you see his little toes just aching for the chance to grow strong so his feet can hit the ground, first to run to sinners, then to run to the cross?

He came. He came in body. He came to walk. To be present. He came for you.

Listen to Peter preach it in Acts 3 and verse 20. “What God foretold by the mouth of all the prophets...[was] that times of refreshing [would] come from the presence of the Lord, and that he [would] send the Christ appointed *for you*, Jesus.”

And the Apostle Paul tells us that just as God dwelled in Israel, and God came to dwell in Mary...even so, God can now dwell in you. Because the resurrection and ascension of that same little baby means that the Spirit of God now overshadows you in your baptism and comes to dwell in you. And as Paul puts it: “Christ in you is the hope of glory!”

He's Immanuel. He is! He's with us. Not just in the Bethlehem. But in Searcy. In your very pew. And he wants to be IN you. This is the moment of decision. Will you let him in? Is there room for him in the inn?

*O holy Child of Bethlehem,  
descend to us, we pray;  
cast out our sin and enter in,  
be born in us today.  
We hear the Christmas angels  
the great glad tidings tell;  
O come to us, abide with us,  
our Lord Emmanuel!”*

*--Philip Brooks*