

Are You Giving Any Christmas Presence This Year?

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Isaiah 7:14, 9:6, Matthew 2: 9-11

⁹After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. ¹

So what are you giving for Christmas this year? Perhaps you are shopping for some people who seem to have everything. If you need ideas it is always helpful to consult the Neiman Marcus Christmas catalogue every year, as I do, where you find truly unique gifts – that is, if you can afford them. For the outdoorsman in your life, you might want to buy a \$75,000 yurt. The luxury version of the tent general associated with nomads is 18 feet in diameter and comes with designer pillows and a crystal chandelier. For the bibliophiles in your life who want to buck the ebook trend, you can purchase a \$125,000 custom built library. The lucky recipient of this gift even gets to fill the library with 250 current or vintage titles of their choice. For the ping pong player, you can purchase a limited-edition ping pong table made out of black rubber that also doubles as a contemporary work of art. It's only \$45,000. For a cool million, you could order a dancing fountain to spruce up a backyard. Not just any fountain, but one with underwater robotic nozzles that creates a watery "Dancing with the Stars"-style couple.

You know who started this crazy business of present giving don't you? Yes - those Magi of old. Let's look at Matthew 2:11 for a moment. The Magi brought amazing gifts to the Christ child. Gold, frankincense, and myrrh were royal presents – the kind that one king would give to another. They were a symbol of the extraordinary status of this child born in very humble circumstances. But there is something in this passage that we often miss. We focus on the three gifts – because they were so lavish and because we've sung about them forever in "We Three Kings." But here is the really crucial thing: *"...they bowed down and worshipped him."* In the Greek, it carries really more the sense of "prostrating themselves" – that is, they fell on the ground with their faces down as a symbol of their own self-giving. In other words, the Magi came from afar not to present him with these wonderful gifts so much as they came to offer their very selves to Christ.

And this, of course is the really key thing for us during this season – not so much to knock ourselves out in the attempt to buy people the perfect gift – but rather to "prostate ourselves" before Christ – surrendering our lives more fully to him, the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. The really big gift ought not to be that new TV or an iPad or that video game, or the \$75,000 yurt, but the gift of ourselves to the One who gave himself fully to us that first Christmas. It is not about "presents" but "presence" – spelled p-r-e-s-e-n-c-e. We are the Christmas gifts that matter. We give ourselves to Christ because he gave himself to us by coming to us as an the infant in a manger as prophesied by Isaiah:

" . . . the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin ^h will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Emmanuel."

¹ *The New International Version*. 2011 (Mt 2:9–11). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

“Emmanuel” – which means, “God with us.” The true Christmas Presence.

⁶ For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be on his shoulders.
And he will be called
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.²

What does it mean to give ourselves more fully to Jesus Christ this season? Certainly by making sure he is at the center of our celebrations, despite all our distractions. Christmas is above all a time for worship, for renewing and deepening our faith and our commitment to the Lord of all. (If we are busy this time of year, the thing we ought not ever to miss is Sunday worship.)

There is something deeply disturbing and sad about leaving Christ out of the festivities.

The preacher John Killinger would have us imagine a scene in heaven:

Peter says to Jesus, “Lord, why are You looking so glum? Just think, tomorrow is your birthday! Everybody will be celebrating. There will be cake and Christmas strudel, and all the little angels will sing carols while the candles are lit on the giant tree in the center of Heaven Square.”

“I know,” says Jesus, “it’s My birthday that’s depressing me.”

“Oh, surely not,” says Peter, “Why Lord, You don’t look a day older, though you’ve been around since the beginning of time.”

“It’s not that, Peter,” says Jesus, “it’s them – the people down there (pointing to Earth). They’ll be celebrating too. But most of them have missed the point entirely. They won’t remember that it’s My birthday. They’ll be so caught up in the festivities and merrymaking that they won’t think of Me at all. They pray less on Christmas than almost any other time. Christmas is one the loneliest days of the year for me.”

Sad, indeed! Jesus could use a little of our Christmas presence!

If Advent and Christmas is a time to give ourselves fully to Jesus Christ – being fully present to him as he comes to us, so, too, is it a time to give ourselves more fully to others.

John Killinger tells the story of a beautiful little girl in the hospital at Vanderbilt University. She came from a very wealthy family, and her family showered her with expensive gifts while she was in the hospital. There were great overstuffed toys, including a giraffe that was 6' high, dolls, a dollhouse, and games of every description.

The mother, who was well known in social circles brought something new every time she came to see the little girl. She never stayed long when she came, for she was always due at

² *The New International Version*. 2011 (Is 9:6). Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

some luncheon or party. But she never failed to bring a gift. The nurses complained about the abundance of toys that made it difficult for them to get about in the room.

One day the little girl was particularly unhappy in the midst of all her fine gifts, and held desperately to her mother as the mother sought to extricate herself and not be late to a bazaar. The mother tried to secure her interest in the new toy she had brought. "Mommy," cried the little girl, "I want You!" Surrounded by gifts, she wanted the most important thing of all, her mother's presence. What she wanted was a little love.³

Really, isn't the best thing we can give others is the gift of ourselves – not presents but our "presence" - the gift of our time and attention?

A British comedian by the name of Kate Fox penned some verses which she calls Christmas Presence. They are right to the point:

*Just for a minute,
you could stop going online, or checking your Tweets,
plucking your eyebrows or shovelling the streets,
taking work calls, planning next week's meals,
or practicing Flash dancing like Jennifer Beals,
because all they really want from you,
is nothing big or new,
it's just your Christmas presence.*

*For you to hold their gaze without looking away,
or ticking off your task list for the day,
for you to listen to their every word,
and respond so they know you've heard,
not half tuned in to Corrie or the X Factor,
or wondering if you need a chiropractor,
because all they really want from you,
is nothing big or new,
it's just your Christmas Presence.*

*There's no need to spend a grand on a motorbike,
or that fashion forward coat they won't really like,
that hi tech gadget, that shiney bling,
that First Edition, that Virtual thing,
because all they really want from you,
amid the chaos and the noise,
the family visits,
the unwrapping of toys,
all they really want from you,
is to share in your being,
your youness, your essence,
to know you're really with them,
giving your Christmas presence.⁴*

³ John Killinger, Christmas Spoken Hear, p. 55

⁴ Kate Fox website

The most important gift we have is ourselves. To be sure this gift is far more costly than any other. But this is why it is all the more precious. It's priceless! And it is a gift we can all give—rich or poor!

Think of all the people who are shut-ins this Christmas: the elderly, the hospitalized, the frail. There are so many lonely people all around us – they feel left out, forgotten, ignored.

Many folks are hurting– I think especially of those who have lost loved ones recently and who mourn even in the midst of all the general good cheer around them. Simple human companionship can make a difference.

If Christmas is about giving ourselves more fully to Christ and worshipping him, then maybe the best way to worship him is to care for the folks he loves so much. These acts of being present to others are the gifts people most need, and, if truth be known, most want. It's our presence, not presents that matter.

Will you and I be giving any Christmas presence this year?