

Present in the Thick and the Thin

A Christmas Eve meditation by Rev. Aaron Fulp-Eickstaedt
At Immanuel Presbyterian Church, McLean VA
December 24th, 2018

Yesterday morning about 5:30 over in the Meeting House, I was helping with the breakfast shift and saying goodbye to our hypothermia shelter guests for the week when I heard something I won't soon forget. I heard a volunteer ask a guest with whom I'd spent some time conversing over the course of the week, "How are you doing this morning?" The man, who looked to be in his 70s but was probably younger, replied with a warm, but weary and snaggle-toothed smile, "I'm present."

I'm present. I suppose that answer might have caught my attention even if I *hadn't already* been preparing a meditation for tonight based on the word Presence. It might have grabbed me even if I *didn't know* our wreath lighting liturgy, which all Advent has been devoted to different P words based on the writings of the prophets—Promise, Prepare, Praise, Peace—was going to culminate tonight with the word Present. I might have noticed it anyway. But what better week than this one, **and what better night than tonight**, to meditate on what it means to be present and that God is present, God is here, with us. Immanuel.

For many of us, Christmas Eve stands out as a time when we feel God's presence most powerfully. The familiar carols and the flickering of candles that we hold in hope against the dark, added to the fact that we share this experience with family and friends near and dear to us, all conspire to touch something deep inside our souls. The quality of the darkness and the light, the tinkling of chimes and ringing of bells, the sound of organ, harp and the choir, the wonder and beauty of a service like this is, all join forces to set us up to sense the presence of the Holy One whose coming among us in Jesus we herald this night.

The Celtic Christian tradition gives us a phrase to use for experiences like this. We call them "thin places" to acknowledge that there are times and spaces where the boundary between the human and divine feels so gossamer thin that it becomes permeable, or even disappears completely for a moment, and we become present to the gift of God's presence.

One of the things that does that for me on Christmas Eve is the power of the story we tell. Even though I've heard it hundreds and hundreds of times in my life, somehow it never gets old, this notion that the divine took on human flesh in the form of a vulnerable infant who was born into a God-forsaken place like a stable in little Bethlehem. I never tire of hearing that certain poor shepherds, for God's sake, were the first to hear the news, or that Mary, someone who would have been considered a nobody by the standards of the ancient culture in which she lived (as a pregnant, unwed, teenaged girl), would be the one chosen to bear God into the world. I never grow weary of hearing that Joseph, her intended, could move beyond a righteous indignation (that would have had him angrily end their engagement and quietly send her on her way) and into a grace-filled embrace of how God might be working in what was unfolding in their lives. Even if it took an angel to get him there. It would have for me.

Just imagine! That angels would appear with their *fear-nots* to the likes of poor ordinary people such as these... Or that stars could guide wise and learned people from other nations to worship a new born king.... It's an old and oft-told story that we heard again tonight, but its setting feels as contemporary as today. Our hope is that Divine Love came, and can still come, **right into the thick** of a troubled and politically unstable world, where a ruler like Herod felt threatened, and those shepherds would have been considered worse than second-class citizens, and Joseph and Mary and Jesus would soon be refugees fleeing a threat to their lives. It's that close.

Speaking personally, it's closer than yesterday's breakfast that the Word would become flesh and dwell among us, full of grace and truth, and maybe a warm and weary smile.

In its yearly and powerful insistence that God came and still comes **right into the thick of this world in which we live**, the story itself creates a thin place for me and you. It opens us to God's presence throughout the rest of the year, when you and me and our loved ones and the ones we struggle to love and this whole hurting world are right in the thick of life.

That's why the thin space of tonight matters, because soon enough, I guarantee you, all of us will be right back in the thick of it.

People experiencing homelessness will give us their warm and weary smiles and say, "I'm present" and we may well wonder what more we can do to be present to and for them.

Somebody's words will wound us or their actions will harm us and we'll be tempted to hold on to our anger rather than graciously and gracefully and mercifully letting it go.

Some angel, human or divine or a mixture of both, will come to us and give us a task, which will challenge us to embody the love of God in the world through the way we use our gifts to listen, serve, and be present.

We'll walk with a loved one through illness or lose their physical presence to death, or we'll finally come to terms with the fact that we need help with some addiction or other, or we'll be so discouraged about what's happening in our lives or the world around us that we may want to give up, and in those moments we'll need to be reminded of the truth that God comes, not just in the thin places, but right in the thick of things.

We'll need to cling to the hope that, though the darkness is real, the light shines in the darkness and the darkness will never overcome it. In other words, God's presence is with us.

Yesterday morning, after the last hypothermia shelter guests had left, and the cleanup was well underway, I headed over to my office to work on this meditation, and to do some more thinking about the week that has just passed, and about God's presence in our lives, and about what that presence calls us to do and be. On my way, Scott Fisher, who had been there for the early shift and had gotten into his car and was getting ready to head home, called out to me, "Hey! Your old seminary mentor Walter Brueggemann is being interviewed by Krista Tippett on *On Being*. Turn it on when you get to your office". I turned it on in time to hear Dr. Brueggemann say this, in response to a question from Krista about mercy. After talking about how mercy is the capacity that God has and gives us to "care for the neighborhood", he said:

*I think that a community or a society, finally, cannot live without the quality of mercy. The problem for us is, what will initiate that? What will break the pattern of self-preoccupation enough to notice that the others are out there and that we are attached to them?*¹

You know what the answer to that question is, don't you? Whether we're in a thin place or right in the thick of it?

Being present. God's presence and our being present to God and others, especially to those in pain and need.

So when you light your candles at the end of this service, I encourage you to say, or at least to think, I'm present. In Jesus' name.

¹ Tippett, Krista. "<https://www.stitcher.com/podcast/on-being-with-krista-tippett/e/57824682>" Stitcher.com. December 20, 2018.