

“The Absentee God of Christmas”

Matthew 1:18-25

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Were you to take those many sermons on the birth of Christ which we hear from our pulpits at Advent time, or those highly imaginative productions about his Nativity we see on television, or even those cute Christmas Eve pageants performed by the children each year, and honestly compare them to what the SCRIPTURES THEMSELVES report, you can't help but notice that there's a huge discrepancy between them, that it's almost like we're discussing two very DIFFERENT accounts. Instead of a scene of great peace with smiling cattle and singing angels, adoring shepherds and worshipful wisemen such as we find on the covers of our Christmas cards and service bulletins, a careful reading of the accounts by Matthew and Luke reveal that the events surrounding our Lord's birth were anything BUT peaceful and serene. In fact, the picture they provide for us is SO disturbing that you have to wonder if the one whom Jesus called his Heavenly Father was EVEN PRESENT there at that scene all those years ago.

What the scriptures tell us is that the news of Mary's unexpected pregnancy left her fearful and confused, and almost led Joseph to divorce her. Though little more than a child HERSELF, when she went into labor, the desperate couple had no safe or clean place for the birth to even occur. Because people loved their partying and comfortable rooms too much to share any of its space with a young couple in the midst of a terrible emergency, they had to bring God's son into the world alone and in the rear of a dirty and smelly old garage. When Herod learns that ANOTHER king has been born, he deploys troops throughout the region to slaughter HUNDREDS of infants in an effort to prevent any FUTURE rivals for his throne. The CONSEQUENCE of bringing Jesus into the world was that all of Judea was transformed into a giant “killing field”- ALL CAUSED BY THE BIRTH OF A SINGLE BABE! Thus, where Joseph and Mary would at least enjoy the privilege of watching THEIR son grow into adulthood, so many OTHER parents WOULD NOT, and the hopes and dreams they had for THEM- these would DIE AS WELL. Warned in a dream to flee, the Holy Family are forced to find sanctuary in Egypt where they remain until they learn that Herod has died and his son has succeeded him. Then in another dream, they're told it was now safe to return home, to head back to Nazareth where they would settle down for good. But there is yet one FINAL indignity they had to endure. At their son's presentation at the Temple in Jerusalem, an old man named Simeon prophecies that he would one day die and his death would result in Mary's OWN heart being broken in two. THIS, folks, is the ACTUAL Christmas story, the one we read in our Bibles. It is an account filled with loneliness and fear and rejection, with incredible intrigue and terrifying tragedy that certainly rings as MORE REAL than the cute and benign stories we all grew up with and enjoy telling ourselves- a HALLMARK version of Christ's birth. Believe me, it's not exactly the kind of play you'd want your OWN son or daughter to perform in for the annual Christmas pageant, IS it? Trying to find God's helpful presence in this tableau can be as futile as trying to find WALDO in one of those children's magazines.

And yet, it's not REALLY as absurd as it might seem. For a lot of people, God has ALREADY been absent from the Christmas story and for an AWFULLY LONG TIME. Instead of the love and the joy, the peace and hope we lift up on each of our Advent Sundays, their

spirits are more likely to be overwhelmed with feelings of sadness and despair, with loneliness, fear and disappointment throughout the season. Unless you're completely insensitive, it's hard not to notice how so little joy or peace there is in the lives of so many this time of year.

And WHY should this be? Perhaps because some of us have lost friends or family members we've deeply loved and their absence has left a giant hole in our hearts. There will be moms and dads, sons and daughters gone from the family table again this year and no amount of songs concerning Santa or Frosty or Rudolph, no number of Christmas movies on the Lifetime or Hallmark Channel will compensate for their absence. I'm STILL thinking of the families of the men, women and children killed or who lost all their possessions from last week's devastating tornadoes. For those lucky enough to have survived, their journey to Bethlehem this Christmas will be a bitter one. With help from FEMA, the Red Cross, and some private charities, they are left to contemplate how to begin life over again with nothing but the few clothes on their backs. Meanwhile, the covid pandemic is resurging with a vengeance and it's now being predicted that the current variant of the disease is far more deadly and more easily transmissible than the PREVIOUS one was. As one health professional exclaimed, "Get ready for a viral apocalypse!"

I'm STILL feeling the loss of a dear friend of over 35 years- Dan Defassio, the pastor of Good Shepherd Lutheran church in Sun City, Arizona where the first retirement community in the nation dedicated to leisure and recreation was established in 1960. One year ago at this time, as Dan was preparing for Christmas services with his congregation, he came down with a terrible cold that quickly worsened into what he and his wife Susie suspected might be pneumonia. When it became too hard to breathe, he was rushed to the hospital where it was determined Dan was ACTUALLY suffering from covid. His commitment to the church was such that throughout the previous nine months, while most other houses of worship remained closed due to the pandemic, he kept his OPEN, offering not one but TWO services every weekend- one on Saturday nights and another on Sunday mornings. Now, for the first time in forty years, he would be ABSENT from the pulpit, celebrating Christmas alone in an ICU unit instead, isolated from EVERYONE, INCLUDING his wife and family. Over the next few weeks, his condition deteriorated to the point he had to be intubated, that is, placed on a breathing apparatus that would help him do what his body no longer could. Once one goes on a ventilator, the odds are less than one in four that you ever survive- Dan didn't. He was only 63 and he left behind a loving wife of 41 years, four devoted children and two grandchildren. He wouldn't even get to meet his second grandchild who had been born just two months earlier. As Susie painfully shared with me, for the first time in her life she found herself just going through the motions, not much caring whether Jesus was present in that manger or not.

Mary Jo Eisen of Crown Point, Indiana ALSO knows the feeling. A year ago at this time, Ish--her husband of over 60 years--woke up feeling lousy, and no matter what MaryJo--a former nurse--prescribed, nothing seemed to help. Finally, she knew it was serious enough that he'd have to go to the hospital where it didn't take long for the doctors to determine that, like Dan, HE was suffering from covid. Within a couple of days, Ish was transferred to the ICU where his condition continued to deteriorate. It was three o'clock in the morning when the phone rang next to my bed, causing me to awaken from my peaceful dreams. When the phone rings real late at night or that early in the morning, you KNOW that it's NEVER good news on the other end of the line. It was Mary Jo calling from the hospital informing me that Ish was in the ICU with covid and that the news was not encouraging. She apologized for calling so early but there wasn't much time left and Ish wanted to speak to his dear friend and former pastor. Holding the

phone up to his mouth, his voice was weak but he said he just had to hear my voice one more time. Choking up as I talked, I spoke slowly but loudly to make sure he could hear and understand every one of my words. After a minute, I said, "Ish, I'm now going to have a short prayer with you. I then offered up a few brief words, concluding by telling him that I loved him and that Jesus was at that moment holding his hand very tightly in his own. His ordeal ended the following day when he closed his eyes for the final time and Christ at last took him home.

Ish was ANOTHER dear friend. I first met him and Mary Jo several years ago when I was ministering in Indiana. At the conclusion of our regular Sunday morning service where I had preached on "Ishmael," Abraham's first son, I was greeting persons in the back of the sanctuary. This couple I had never seen before came up and shook my hand, and when I enquired who they were, he said HIS name was Ishmael and his wife's was MaryJo. I thought he was kidding and I replied, "No, really, what IS your name?" Again, he replied, "Ish, Ishmael Eisen" and he produced his drivers license to prove it to me. I asked how he happened to stop by my church that morning, if he had heard I was preaching on a Biblical figure who shared the same name as his own and he told me that he and Mary Jo just happened to be driving by that morning when they felt the sudden urge to take in the morning service. He expressed how surprised he was when he learned I was preaching on someone named "Ishmael," convinced that it was no accident, that it had to be one of those "God things."

Well, from that day on, he and Mary Jo were in attendance every Sunday. In time, they both joined the church and soon Ish even became one of my best elders. He and I became fast friends; we golfed together every Friday and our families shared meals and holidays at each other's home. When I spoke to Mary Jo a couple of weeks ago, she told me how the absence of Ish--whom she had gone to school with and was even her first boyfriend--has left a huge hole in her life. She still attends church but as she said, "Dave, it's just not the same and Christmas won't be the same either" even though she'll be surrounded by members of her family. This year, all is NOT calm or as bright as the old carol promises us.

But that's not ALL. Some of us have to contend with major health issues--either of a physical, mental, or emotional nature--for which there is little treatment or no likelihood of a cure; where all we can hope for is that each day becomes a bit more manageable than the day before. How do you sing "joy to the world" when you have to suffer with THAT each day. For others, Christmas will be spent in a hospital bed or a nursing home or perhaps even a drug or alcohol unit- away from home and the familiar embrace of family and friends when it's most needed. It's hard to be thankful under such circumstances as that, ISN'T it. There are persons who still bear the scars of abuse, whether from their childhood or from later relationships, the effects of which continue to eat at their psyche and never seem to go away. There are any NUMBER of reasons why this is hardly a time of celebration for persons and regardless of how hard they pray or the number of church services they attend, Christmas seems like an empty ritual and if God isn't ENTIRELY absent from them, he certainly feels MIGHTY DISTANT.

Of course, when I speak of God being "absent," what I'm REALLY referring to is how God seems to be so SILENT to us in times of great crisis or need. Consider Mother Teresa- one of the greatest Christian saints of the 20th century. Her service to the poorest of the poor in India was as close an imitation of Christ as ANYBODY'S. However, after her death, it was revealed through her correspondence that for years, she had undergone a severe and intense "dark night of the soul" that persisted throughout most of her ministry. Her letters reveal that for the last fifty

years of her life, she felt no presence of God WHATSOEVER- neither in her heart or in the Eucharist. That sense of the absence of God seems to have started about the same time she began tending to the poor and dying in Calcutta and it almost never abated. Although outwardly cheery and optimistic, inwardly she experienced what she described as intense “dryness,” “darkness,” “loneliness,” and “torture.” She compared the experience to hell and at one point said it had driven her to doubt the very existence of heaven and even GOD.

This dryness within her soul had not come from any sin or failure on her part- it was simply the “dark night” which some of US know all too well. She came to realize that her incessant hunger and crying out for God could not have occurred if God had not ALREADY been in her heart. She came to see that her doubts and spiritual suffering not only allowed her to share more intimately in Christ’s redemptive suffering but was also a way in which she could identify more deeply with the sufferings of others in the world- with those who were hungry and naked and homeless and crippled and blind, with those who were unloved and uncared for in society. In time, she came to view the darkness she felt as an integral part of her call to ministry.

Fortunately, Mother Teresa had a wise spiritual counselor who comforted her with three important words of instruction. The FIRST was that there was no human remedy for this darkness, that it was just part of the human condition- something which EVERYONE goes through at one point in their lives and AS SUCH, she shouldn’t feel responsible for it. ANOTHER was that “feeling” the presence of Christ was not the only or even the PRIMARY evidence of his presence. After all, Jesus himself said that by their FRUITS—not their FEELINGS—you would know them. And THIRD, that the pain she was going through could ultimately prove to be redemptive, that she could not only grow from her suffering but would be able to enter into the pain of others and help them bear it even as she learned to bear her own. Even Jesus himself experienced the absence of God for did he not cry out from his cross, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” And as his suffering was redemptive for US, so Mother Teresa could suffer redemptively by holding on to God in the midst of HER darkness.

The bottom line is that we mustn’t DENY sadness when it comes to us, neither must we rush off to the nearest bottle of pills or alcohol to insulate ourselves from its bitter effects. Instead, God would have us learn to ACCEPT it as a natural part of life, to take it up into our hearts and then creatively use it. The grieving process does not have to devastate us but, on the contrary, it can be quite beneficial. By God’s grace, it has been shown to open and expand our sympathies as well as allow us to become more sensitive to the sorrows and sufferings of others. Recently, a study was published in *The Journal of Social, Psychological and Personality Science* which showed that “individuals who had dealt with more adversity in the past reported an elevated capacity for savoring.” In other words, those who had previously experienced pain were more likely to appreciate life’s small pleasures. What’s more, because they had endured life’s stabs and cuts, their hearts are more easily touched and their wills moved to action BY the adversity of others. The fact is that if we did not know the pain of sorrow, none of us could ever know the joy that comes with love.

The silence or hiddenness or absence of God (whichever way you want to describe it) is the greatest test of our faith. Yet it can be the occasion for real SPIRITUAL GROWTH in our lives, ESPECIALLY at this time of the year. You see, God comes to us (and “Advent” means just that- “coming”) by being BOTH PRESENT AND ABSENT to us at the same time. We expect God to come in strength but he confounds us by coming to us in weakness; we expect him

to be a general riding a great horse leading a mighty army behind him but instead, he comes in the form of a crying baby with poop in his diapers; we expect him to assume his throne in Herod's great palace and a golden crown placed upon his head but he fools us AGAIN by being lifted up upon a cross with a wreath of thorns pressed into his brow. He came for everybody, all right, but in a way that only few would recognize him. As Martin Luther wrote of this paradox:

God is amazing. The Babe is in a manger, not worthy of a cradle or a diaper, and yet he is called Saviour and Lord. The angels sing about him, and the shepherds hear and come and honor him whom no maid serves as he lies with an ox and an ass. If I had come to Bethlehem and seen it, I would have said: "This does not make sense. Can this be the Messiah? This is sheer nonsense." I would not have let myself be found inside the stable.

Friends, God is not the author of sickness, death or tragedy in the world- his creation is broken and so it does not work the way God originally intended it to. However, if we look to God and cast our cares upon him, he promises to provide us with all the resources we need to overcome such suffering and tragedy and even THRIVE in the midst of it. The scriptures clearly attest that God DOES understand the pain that lies deep within every heart because he experienced it HIMSELF- he experienced it when his OWN SON had to endure such suffering on our behalf. You see, not only was Christ rejected by the world at his CRUCIFIXION, but in this morning's nativity scene, we see how the world rejected him MUCH EARLIER, at his BIRTH. When the Bible says there was no room for him at the inn, it meant so much more than there were no more rooms to let at the local Motel 6. What it DID mean is that there was no room for him in this WORLD and that there were cosmic forces ALREADY unleashed that would do everything within its power to destroy him, to keep him from accomplishing his objective for us. Hence, this world hated him before he had drawn his first breath while Jesus LOVED this world and never CEASED loving it, even when we eventually killed him BECAUSE of that love. Yet he was determined that NOTHING would keep him from entering our world and saving us from ourselves- regardless of all the "no vacancies" signs and all the hatred and rejection we could throw at him.

THAT for me is what the Bethlehem story is all about. It is proof that God really DOES love us, that he DOES understand what it is we feel or what we are currently going through. God UNDERSTANDS our rejection. He UNDERSTANDS our loneliness. He UNDERSTANDS our fear. He UNDERSTANDS our sorrow. He UNDERSTANDS our temptation. He UNDERSTANDS our abandonment. He UNDERSTANDS our hunger. He UNDERSTANDS our poverty. He UNDERSTANDS our persecution. He UNDERSTANDS our pain. He even understands DEATH ITSELF! In short, God understands US! In his seeming absence in the events concerning the birth of his Son Jesus, he is INDEED present- PRESENT IN ALL HIS GLORY, but in a manner that the natural eye or the rational mind cannot comprehend but one which a person possessing the EYES OF FAITH can see ALL-TOO CLEARLY. Let us pray...

Heavenly Father, and our Father you are, thank you for watching over each of us this past year and for once again preserving our feet, for keeping us all safely on solid ground. As we look to this NEW year, we know that in spite of the stresses and pressures that yet await us, we will have your presence and guidance to sustain us every step along our journey. No one understands us as you do and for that we can face the future with uncompromising faith and confidence and courage. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.