

“Christmas Eve: Presents, or Presence?” The Rev. Keenan Kelsey
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Text: The Christmas Story from Luke

THE MIDDLE OF LAST WEEK I set my work aside. I found myself pacing, snacking, fretting about all the things I needed to accomplish. So I stopped making my lists; I let my unreturned phone calls go. I built a fire in the fireplace and lay down underneath my Christmas tree.

I learned this from my grandson Miles.

I periodically have Miles overnight. Two years ago, when he was five, he decided he did not want to sleep on his appointed bed, nor did he want to sleep in my room. So we made a nest for him in front of the fireplace, which also happened to be right beside the Christmas tree.

He was happy as a clam – Actually, when I went down to check on him, sleeping soundly, looking so innocent and trusting, I thought, he is happy as an angel. Imagine a child you love curled up in front of a fire, underneath the decorated tree. I felt like the Mr. Grinch when his heart grew several times larger!

This has become routine now. Miles demands several overnights each season, underneath the tree, in front of a fire. So in the midst of a busy anxiety ridden evening, when nothing seemed to be coming out right, when I began to doubt myself and all I do, when this time of year was closing in on me, I decided to have a try.

The fire was warm; my dry wood made cracking pops. The tree smelled like a forest, the pine scent pungent around me. And the lights were beautiful, reflecting off ornaments which themselves each have a story or an event attached....

I felt a Presence. Somehow my angst and apprehension began to dissipate. I remembered the phrase “bondage of self” and I realized that my ego had been taking over. I was trying to be responsible for everything and everyone in my life, as though I had the only power. God with me. A presence. Under that tree I remembered that I am not alone in this. God is in the season and, in fact, in all parts of my life. God appears in my world when I move aside and allow that Holy One to step in. In my drowsiness, I once again felt what God with us might mean.

Can you hear what I heard? An expectant silence, a hushed anticipation, as if the very galaxy were holding its breath. The night can be a living thing, and in the night, in the darkness, the miraculous came down to the earth mundane.

In my increasing awareness of a Presence, a sense of God with me, I became aware of being cared for, held in a way I do not often allow myself. I felt peace, and confidence. All will be well, all manner of things will be well.

I remembered a story my aunt once told me about her home town. As in many small towns, one of the busiest places in the run-up to Christmas was the local bike shop. One winter, a young boy wandered in, maybe 7 or 8, dirty-faced, poorly dressed, scrawny. At first the staff was worried about his shoplifting something; it soon became clear that the child was harmless enough. He would just come in, look closely, one at a time at all the new bikes that were being brought in for the Christmas sales, and then he would move toward the work area, stand out of the way in the corner of the room, and watch the men work.

He began to come in several times a week, and as Christmas approached, he was there almost daily, spending most of his time watching the repair part of the shop.

And then, only days before Christmas, after a large group of customers had just left, the young child made a beeline over to where two men were working. He laid a large rusty old bolt on the counter in front of them. "Excuse me," he said politely, "would you be able to put a new bike on this bolt?"

The men laughed. Only a child would think of putting a bike on a bolt instead of a bolt on a bike. The men's laughter, even though it was not intended to be mean, hurt the boy's feelings. He didn't understand, but he knew something he had said must have been wrong. He backed away and left the shop. The men ran outside after him. But the kid had disappeared.

More than a few weeks later, well into the new year, the boy returned. This time, however, if anything, he was even more reluctant to make eye contact with anyone at the store. He looked carefully at every new bike on display. But this time he kept his head down whenever anyone else came near.

Then he went to the repair area where he had given the men the bolt. His head was down, as if he were embarrassed, or had done something wrong, and he kept fingering the hole in his pants.

One of the men repairing bikes called to him: "Hey kid!" He looked up. "You forgot your bolt." And with that one of the staff wheeled out and presented the boy a bicycle. It was made entirely out of scrap parts that the store workers had salvaged on their own time.

In my reverie, under the tree, I smiled. A bike on a bolt! That could only happen at Christmas. But it made me wonder... would I have thought of that? What was the process that brought the repairmen to the conclusion that they could make a bike for this child? Wouldn't it have been easier to forget that young waif? Or to pool money and buy him an unsold bike?

I think there must have been something about his trusting expectation and innocent belief that inspired the workmen. I thought about my grandson's trust and I realized that in the very act of putting down my troubles and lying by the tree, I also had become more trusting, more open. All those presents that I had been obsessing about, all those

checklists, were less important. I could invite God into the process, this God who had come and still comes to us in Jesus. God the newborn was being born anew in me.

If you have no Christmas in your heart, you will never find Christmas under a tree. It is not the gifts, the presents of Christmas that will last. It is the Presence of God with us in a remarkable and very real way. The young boy's bike has long since fallen apart. But the story and the love live on.

Eleanor Powell an American film actress and dancer, once said, "What we are is God's gift to us. What we become is our gift to God." God's gift to us, this night, is Jesus, someone who comes to be with us, comes to live for us, comes to offer healing and mercy and teach forgiveness and generosity and integrity.

On this night God chooses to be with us so that we might be with one another. May God's love shape our relationships. May God's wisdom guide our decisions. May God's glory touch our ordinary lives. And may God's gift this night live in us and through us, that what we experience in each other is the very Presence of Christ.