

NBC Devotional
November 29, 2023
“Christmas Presence”

Several months ago, in our weekly chapel, we had the District Superintendent of the Philadelphia District, Rev. Kerry Willis, with us. Philadelphia is a difficult area of the country to evangelize and plant churches. There are 500- and 1000-square-mile areas in the East where there are very few churches at all. You might find one small, isolated congregation in each town – I’m not talking about Nazarene churches; I’m speaking of any active Christian body. Driving through that area, one would be hard-pressed to find a Christian presence. There are more tattoo shops than churches. Many old church buildings – if they still exist – have been “converted” to town theaters or playhouses for theater groups. I’ve seen several.



Together

You would be hard-pressed to find a Christian presence in the small towns in that part of the country. Brother Kerry Willis has made the motto or theme of the Philadelphia District, “Presence matters most.” He’s encouraging his churches and his people to be present in their communities – to be physically active and visible as they minister to their neighbors and lead people to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. It won’t work to just stay in our church buildings and wait and hope that people will come to us. They’ll NEVER come. Jesus said to the world, “Come unto Me...” but He told the Church to “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to everyone.” “Presence matters most.” We need to be the Salt and Light IN the world. We need to be PRESENT in our communities and in the lives of our neighbors and unsaved friends. “Presence matters most.”

But Brother Kerry was also talking about GOD’s presence. “Jesus, Your presence matters most to me.” Our churches, our families, our marriages and in our own personal lives, we need to sense the presence of God. His presence matters most. We need to wait on Him, seek His face, seek His presence. By prayer, by spending time in His Word with Him. We need to allow Him to speak to us. His presence matters most.

In November, here in the United States, we all celebrated Thanksgiving. I heard folks say, “How was your Thanksgiving?” We all shared what we did during the 4-day Thanksgiving weekend. Almost every time, the response had to do with one particular focus.

Sooner than we can imagine, the days will be completed, and we will celebrate Christmas. I’m pretty sure that we all will begin hearing the question, as we ask our friends and colleagues, “What are you going to do for Christmas?” What will the answers be? Almost every time, the response will have to do with one particular focus: we’re getting into a car and driving to _____; we’re getting on an airplane to fly to _____;

Or we're staying home, but we're going to have 15 people travel to visit us. The focus isn't on HOW we get to the place to celebrate Christmas – the mode of transportation – even if the journey takes many hours or days, right? ... "Let me tell you about my car" or ... "Let me tell what type of planes I'm flying on: it's a two-year-old Boeing 737-900 for the first leg, and a five-year-old Boeing 737-700 for the second."

"What are you going to do for Christmas?" or "how will you travel?" isn't really the focus at all. The real question is "WHO are you going to be with for Christmas?" The real focus of our Thanksgivings and Christmases are the people with whom we celebrate them. And it's not about the activities that you're going to do with those people that is the focus, either. "We're just going to BE TOGETHER." "We're just going to "chill!" The best part of Thanksgiving or Christmas holidays is having the family together. THEIR PRESENCE MATTERS MOST. I'm not trying to be funny here – you might've heard me wrong: Christmas isn't about presents (gifts) but about the fact of our loved ones being physically present with us.

Our first love should be God – we desire HIS presence. If He doesn't make it to our house this Christmas, nothing else matters. HIS PRESENCE MATTERS MOST.

Ps. 23:4 Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil, for You are with me;

Exodus 33:13-17 Now if I have found favor in Your sight, please show me Your ways, so that I may better know You and find favor in Your sight. Consider, too, that this nation is Your people." God said, "My presence will go with you, and I will give you rest." And he said to Him, "If Your presence will not go, do not bring us up from here. For how shall it be known that I have found favor in Your sight, I and Your people, unless You go with us? In this way, we shall be distinct, I and Your people, from every people on the face of the earth." The Lord said to Moses, "I will also do this thing that you have asked, for you have found favor in My sight, and I know you by name."

Mt. 28:19-20 Go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to follow all that I commanded you; and behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age."

John 14:1-3 "Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many rooms; if that were not so, I would have told you, because I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I am coming again and will take you to Myself, so that where I am, there you also will be.

God IS present with us, but we need to take the time and effort to acknowledge Him. We ask Him to come, even though He's already here with us, but we don't stop long enough to sense His presence.

His presence matters most. The Christmas presence that we need the most is God HIMSELF.

We had a tradition of having the music from Handel's Messiah on in the background throughout the month of December, and at least once a year, the family had to all sit down and listen to it. This usually happened closer to Christmas – sometimes on Christmas Eve night itself – and there would be no lights on but the Christmas tree's lights. I grew up knowing by heart every aria and chorus from Handel's Messiah – and since every word is from Scripture, my dad would regularly announce, as if he were a radio announcer, "Music by George Fredrick Handel; words, by the LORD!"

We always felt the presence of God in a special way during those times. God with us. Emmanuel.

We have multiple manger scenes, but one of these is the most special, and THIS ONE is plastic. We have an almost 70-year-old family tradition of using this manger many times each year – telling the story of Jesus' birth to any and all children in the house. Using this manger, we tell the story many times – sometimes, several times a day – and the rule is that the children HAVE to help us tell the story! Usually, a child's first job is bringing into the scene the three wise men, with their camels, of course! My mom used to have a manger just like this, and she kept it low enough that the kids were able to see it and touch it whenever they wanted. Each time we repeat the story, the children take part more and more. Usually, it's not long before THEY are telling the story, and we are merely helping them. And you GUESSED it! What was always the favorite thing to do each day? My parents loved it when, by the time we got to Christmas Eve, we'd see the kids telling the story to each other, without our help!! There they were: a 5-year-old telling the story and the 3-year-old and 2-year-old participating or giving full commentaries! The children were telling the whole story with all the details and with some added dialogue. And the most precious moment, of course, was when the Baby Jesus was put into the manger. We all had to be very quiet to NOT wake up the Baby! It was as if that tiny plastic baby was a real live delicate baby – the family always made sure that the Baby Jesus was the focus of the entire experience.

On the other hand, almost every year, one of the kids would take the Baby Jesus out of the cradle – He was usually found on THEIR bed, right in the middle of their pillow or right next to their teddy bear. THIS was NOT a sin – it was a HIGH COMPLIMENT. This meant that THEY wanted the PRESENCE of Jesus with them! God with us. Emmanuel.

God's presence matters most this Advent and Christmas season. God's presence matters most in our lives. Let's make this a priority. Whether it's music or a manger or a candle or daily, personal, quiet times in His presence, let's seek the Lord. "He's the reason for the season." "You can't have Christmas w/o Christ." Whatever! Make God's presence a priority for you and your family this Christmas.

"Oh, come to us. Abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel." His presence matters most.

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