

If someone asked me to describe our congregation, I guess I'd call us seekers. Crossroads is not the sort of congregation one joins to be *seen*, to be *known* as a member of a religious country club where one's friends and neighbors envy our membership. We're not likely to set any fashion trends. We're not a Jesus clique either, speaking in tongues that never were a language.

We're here for the *fellowship*. We're here in part because church is a habit, in the best sense. For lot of us, attending church is something we grew up with, just like we grew up with the idea of sitting down to a good Sunday dinner and, in my case when a was a kid, giving my dad an enforceable reason for me taking a Saturday night bath.

But we're here for something more. You see, for most of us, likely all of us, church is *not* just a *habit*, especially during Advent. Worship is a way of rubbing up against that thing called God. Sure, I know the cliché: "I can find God anywhere" while we go fishing or biking or just lounge around in gorgeous mid-morning light of summer. True, I've tried that line more than a few times myself. (Might do it again, especially if I get rid of this.

Regardless of excuses like mine, a church like Crossroads is committed to bringing its members into the *presence* of God. Folks like y'all are seeking God's presence, seeking to *be in* God's presence!

True, that presence can come squeezing out of the good works we do. And part of that presence means taking a stand on a lot of issues: the acceptance of others; service to others; justice as a means, not just for spreading love, but for germinating love. I could go on about *service as presence* for a long time, but that's not what I want to talk about today.

You see, we're more than vehicles of God's work; we're *seekers* of God's *presence*. I never really liked the musical *Godspell*, but I like the *title*—God's *spell*. I **long** for that. I want to be in God's thrall, and I'm guessing I'm not alone. And so, thank God for Christmas! When else in the Christian calendar is it simpler & easier to feel God's presence? *Easter* is another story indeed, a much more complex story.

Back to Christmas—nothing is more miraculous than a birth! In my time I've helped birth all sorts of mammals from kitties to calves, and I've always been amazed. I've even been present at the birthing of my own flesh and blood. I wouldn't trade that for all the puppies, lambs and calves in the world. But at this time of year, *celebrating the presence of the Christ child*, rejoicing in a whole new iteration of the Holy One—That's *pretty amazing*.

It's not surprising that we extend this mystery for over a month, the advent season. It only makes sense that churches have a Christmas *Eve* service, not a *day-before-Christmas* gig, but a service in the actual *evening*. The mysterious is easier to meet in the darkness, even if we do burn a candle to represent its light.

And I do thank God that fasting is no longer part of the advent season! For most of us, self-denial becomes an end in its own right, not a means to an end. I'm glad, therefore, that we let New Year's resolutions come a bit later in the month, and we're got some time free and clear to celebrate God's presence in all our *fullest humanity*, in *celebration*—eating, gathering together, singing, and so on. (Ever wonder why that mid- and latter September—nine months after the holiday season—is the most common time that *babies* are *born* in the United States?

Back to Advent, fasting and other forms of self-denial can be a means of coming into God's presence, but humans being human, so can the celebration of *being* human, humans embraced by our God. "Because God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son . . ." John 3:16. In our tradition as Christians, how much more *present* can our God be?

Let's think about that. Let's celebrate Christmas as the coming of God, but let's also consider God's presence in other ways.

Certainly, today's lectionary provides ample room to examine God's presence. In the Old Testament Isaiah identifies the need. We humans are thirsty and hungry for God, but we don't have the coinage to satisfy those appetites. To quote: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost." Isaiah then tells us that we must *rely* on God's presence as we *rely* upon the weather.

We have little control. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, . . . You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper, and instead of briars, the myrtle will grow."

Beautiful poetry that. To make it simple, *acknowledge* God, and we'll get more than we could ask for. Note that God is not promising divine intervention in all our affairs, but with the *necessary* stuff, seekers will be rewarded *beyond* their measure.

In the Gospel reading, John makes clear how humans can nurture themselves with God. Again, *access* to God presence is expressed *concretely*. We drink of it, and we are nourished.

So, this gives us plenty of talk about regarding God's presence. Or is should, but it doesn't satisfy me completely. You see, my *awareness* of God's *presence* has been amplified by two things recently. One is a reflection by Richard Rohr that I read online a week or so back. It kept echoing in my head. The other is the most common fossil on the planet, a lump of coal, that black stuff that bad little girls and boys are supposed to find in their stockings on Christmas mornings

To quote Rohr, "We cannot *not* live in the presence of God. We are totally surrounded by God, . . ." Rohr goes on to quote St. Patrick (c. 373–c. 463), 'God beneath you, God in front of you, God behind you, God above you, God within you.' Rohr continues, "Once I can see the Mystery here, and trust the Mystery even in this piece of clay that I am, then I can also see it in you. We are eventually able to see the divine image within ourselves, in each other, and in all things. Finally, the seeing is one. How we see anything is how we will see everything."

Besides the obvious, "God is in everyone" platitude that this old hippy is fond of, Rohr's thinking amplified a realization I had the other day. I was thinking about fossil fuels. To keep it simple, let's confine our thinking to coal. That stuff we call coal was once just rotting plant life. (I'm sure there were some bugs and critters in there too, but we'll ignore them for simplicity's sake.)

This and that happened: the stuff got covered with sediment & then water and whatnot, got heated up by the earth's core, and peat formed; and *then* with thousands of pounds pressure per square foot, we got coal. Throw in millions and millions of years passing too. Some sources say at least a couple million years ago; Rich Singer says about two hundred million years. For once, Rich is on the conservative end of something.

BTW, I just skipped a bunch of stuff, but you get my point. A *whole lot of variables* came together to produce humanity's primary source of heat and energy for the past few hundred years.

As far as we know, there is no known plant life elsewhere in the galaxy, much less plants **and** all the variables that miraculously occurred to create fossil fuels.

So what? I'll tell you what. Fossil fuels fed the explosion of humans and their societies over the world. We could make huge fires, and from those fires we could make steam that could warm homes hundred of yards from the heat source.

We could convert the energy from those fossil fuel fires into electricity that could heat homes hundreds, even thousands, of miles away from the coal plant. Not only could we heat those homes, but we could provide power for lights, TV's, computers, etc.

This is pretty miraculous! This is more than pretty miraculous. This is God stuff! Every time you feel your home heater system breath some warmth on your leg—God stuff. Every time you boot up your computer—God stuff. And I haven't even mentioned cars and planes and boats and how they're powered by God stuff. (No, I'm not going to talk about cars at all, Mary, though it be known we're in the market for a good, used all-wheel vehicle.) But we won't talk about that. The point is that this wonderful world *didn't come about by chance*. Anyone who thinks that all this creation was just a matter of X many cosmic throws of this dice—I want to play cards with that person; they don't understand statistics!

What I'm getting at is obvious but important: God is everywhere, all the time. Dull humans that we are, we have seasons like Advent to remind us and Biblical scriptures to instruct us. We have spiritual leaders like Richard Rohr to drive the point home that our *shared humanity* is a *shared fellowship* with God. We have the countless miracles that make up this earth to remind us that what happens on this blue ball is important, and it's not just random. And as much as fossil fuels have given us, it's time to move on to other forms of energy, or we'll have to *move on altogether*. And there **is not** another planet that can replace this earth's bounty for giving and sustaining life, despite some of the science fiction we grew up with.

Back to gambling: I'll bet my life on that. I hope our children do not need to make the same wager.

Now there's a hole in my sermon. You may have figured it out already. Yes, it's *unquestionable* that an Almighty One makes Their presence clear. However, there's no clear evidence that this Almighty should be called *Jehovah* as we Christians do, or any other name that any *other* religion has given God—*Hashem*, *Allah*, *Shivah*, *Akal Murat*—the list can go on and on. *Countless* other faiths could point out that this beautiful earth was a result of divine design.

But that's a topic for another sermon.

Beyond my pay grade.

Let's leave it to Julia.

## Benediction

The Presence of God is with us in the bowels of this earth, in the smile of our neighbors, in the blinking eye of these Advent candles. Our task this season: open our hearts to it, celebrate it, spread it around