

I think the greatest gift you could ever give someone is their life as it is, mirrored back to them with meaning and kindness. One would think that the greatest gift would be to offer someone a complete transformation of their circumstances - more money, less heartache, less struggle, more opportunity. But no, this is not the greatest gift. It is a good gift, a worthy gift, but not quite great. The greatest gift is to hand someone their life right back to them: untarnished, unchanged, but made luminous - brightened with a sense of compassion and vision. In that exchange we experience our life as it is, including its problems and difficulties, and we feel grateful. We feel blessed, even though we have the same problems. This is truly the greatest gift.

This is a time of advent. It is waiting for the messiah. It is waiting for salvation. It is waiting to see fully who we are, and what our life is made of. It is a time of mystery. Whether one is religious or not, the term messiah holds power. Often called Emmanuel, the Messiah is yearned for in rapt anticipation. The Messiah is the one who will deliver us from evil. The Messiah will deliver us from daily suffering, and usher forth a new life for us to take part in, a new life we have been yearning for since the beginning of time. In a very true sense, it is a time of being helpless. It is a time of reaching the end of our best thinking, the end of our best efforts, the end of our best intentions. It is a time to be still and wait.

One would think this would be easy. One would think it would be far less exhausting, far less stressful to quit rushing about, to quit scheming just for a moment, and be still. But no. It is quite a task to allow ourselves to be open to advent.

Salvation is not a term we hear much about in casual conversation. It is a loaded term that makes one think of heaven and hell. Salvation may not seem to pertain to our daily living. But salvation is actually quite practical, quite real, quite concerned with our life and identity right now.

I would like to propose to you another view of the messiah. It is remarkable to me in the Christian tradition there is a story of a baby born in a manger to a modest and struggling family. I find the normalcy of Jesus' life the most remarkable: making a few friends, offering some teachings that came from his understanding. Having a congregation of 12 that really appreciated his way. Drinking, traveling, experiencing criticism, experiencing disappointment and betrayal, experiencing unearned suffering, and eventually death. This hardly sounds like what we imagine the messiah to be. It sounds like our life - your life and mine. Full of ups and downs, humble, tragic, bound with relationship.

The messiah is just like us framed with meaning and kindness. Where do we find this meaning and kindness? This is the question that leads to salvation.

When we ask ourselves or another - Who Am I?, we are sincerely asking without realizing it: How do I experience my life as it is with meaning and kindness? This is what leads to a true sense of identity.

Philip Whalen was a quirky guy. He was one of the great Beat poets during the late 1950's, who like many of that generation was quite fascinated with Zen Buddhism and spiritual practice. He spent decades dedicated to spiritual practice, becoming a priest, and eventually a teacher. He cared for AIDS patients in the San Francisco Bay area during the crisis in the early 1980's. I appreciate Philip because of his candor. He said on many occasions that he wanted nothing more than to be left alone to write and eat delicious food. He wanted to feel a sense of

peace, and reprieve from a world that was chaotic and always encroaching on his preferences. It took him years to come to the conclusion we heard this morning: that our real life is found in other people. This seems like a crazy assertion. Our real life is in other persons. This is oddly disturbing and counterintuitive to most of us. Other people have lots of problems. Other people have limitations and biases, and uncontrollable urges that do great harm. Other people are unpredictable. In short, other people are just as untrustworthy as ourselves, if not more so.

Yet here comes the unfathomable and simple truth. Our salvation is not found in our preferences. The messiah is not coming to beam us of into another life and into another place. No. The messiah is coming in this season to give us the greatest gift of all - our life as it is, full of confusion and yearning, impatient and yet waiting for something good to come. The messiah is found in our relationship to other people. We are waiting to fully experience this truth. The messiah is coming. In fact the Messiah is already here. They are sitting right next to you.

Who Am I? We are waiting to discover this. Through our relationship with other persons, our life, our *real* life is mirrored back to us: our difficulties, our frailties, our transcendence. In that exchange, we finally get a glimpse of who we are, who we've been waiting for.