

**LUKE 2:1-14**  
***“Being with One’s Beloved”***  
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Do you remember a time you went to great lengths to be with someone you loved? When you worked very hard at spending time with your love that seemed foolish or crazy to others?

While in seminary in Louisville, KY I accompanied a classmate home for the weekend because she lived in Northern VA and I could see my boyfriend who was working in Washington, D.C. We left Friday afternoon at 4 PM after classes and drove 11 1/2 hours to Va. I got to spend time with my boyfriend Saturday afternoon and evening, Sunday morning and afternoon until 4 PM when we left to drive back to Louisville. The return trip took much longer because of fog and torrential rain on the West VA turnpike. Instead of getting back around 4 AM we arrived on campus at 10:30 AM, a mere 30 minutes before I needed to be at work. I barely had time to take a shower. I showed up for work very tired, having spent the last 20 and ½ hours in a car, having slept just a couple of hours. What did I tell my friends about the trip? It was worth every minute because I got to spend time with my boyfriend!

Most likely all of us have gone to great lengths to spend time with those we love whether it be a girlfriend/boyfriend, our children, grandchildren (I’ve heard your stories) or dear friends. When we have the opportunity to be with those we love we do so even when it looks like a lot of trouble for just a little time with our loved one. We go to great lengths to spend time with those we love.

That is precisely what today’s scripture passage is about. It tells the story of the great lengths God has gone to in order to be with us. Listen to God’s story. Read Luke 2:1-14.

The story of Jesus’ birth describes the great lengths God went to so that Emmanuel, which means “God-with-us” could in fact be with us. The Christmas story demonstrates God’s great desire to be a part of the human condition, our losses, our disappointments, our joys and successes, our fractured relationships and the ones that bring us life, to be with us through the deaths and difficulties we have experienced, the addictions, the things that deeply trouble us. The Christmas story demonstrates God does not want to let us alone but wants to reach out and be with us.

I want to restate the Christmas story by sharing another true story. This second story also mentions a baby and is told by the baby’s mother. It also speaks of God’s passion for us all. Here is the mother’s story.

It was Christmas day. Our family had spent Christmas Eve in San Francisco with my husband’s family, but in order to be back at work on Monday, we found ourselves driving the 400 miles back home to Los Angeles on Christmas Day.

We stopped for lunch at a restaurant that was nearly empty. We were the only family and ours were the only children. Erik, my one year old squealed with

glee, “Hithere, hithere” the two words he always thought were one. “Hithere” and he smacked his fat baby hands—whack, whack, whack---on the metal high chair. His face was full of excitement, his eyes wide open, gums bared in a toothless grin. He wriggled and giggled with excitement and then I saw the source of his merriment. My eyes could not take it all in at once.

A tattered rag of a coat, obviously decades old, dirty, greasy and worn; baggy pants on a spindly body, toes that poked out of would-be shoes, a shirt that had ring-around-the-collar all over; and the face of an old bum with gums as bare as Erik’s.

“Hi there, baby. Hi, big boy. I see ya, Buster.”

My husband and I exchanged a look that was a cross between, “What do we do?” and “Poor devil.”

Our meal came and the banging and noise continued. Now the old bum was shouting across the room, “Do you know patty-cake? Atta boy. Do you know peek-a-boo? Hey look! He knows peek-a-boo!”

Erik continued to laugh and answer “Hithere.” Every call was answered and no one thought it was cute. The old guy was a drunk and a disturbance. I was embarrassed. My husband was humiliated. Even our six year old asked, “why is that old man talking so loud?”

My husband and daughter went to pay the check, imploring me to get Erik and meet them in the parking lot. “Lord, just let me get out of here before he speaks to me or Erik,” and I bolted for the door. It was soon obvious that both the Lord and Erik had other plans.

As I drew closer to the door the old bum met me there. I tried to side-step him and any air that he might be breathing. As I did so, Erik, all the while with his eyes riveted to his new friend, leaned over my arm, reaching with both arms in a baby’s pick-me up position. In a split-second of balancing my baby and turning to counter his weight, I came eye-to-eye with the old man.

Erik was lunging for him, arms spread wide. The bum’s eyes both asked and implored, “Would you let me hold your baby?” There was no need to answer since Erik propelled himself from my arms to the man. Suddenly an old man and a very young baby completed embraced each other.

Erik laid his head upon the man’s ragged shoulder. The man’s eyes closed and I saw tears hover beneath the lashes. His aged hands, full of grease and pain and hard labor, gently, so gently, cradled my baby’s bottom and stroked his back. I stood awestruck. The old man rocked and cradled Erik in his arms for a moment, then his eyes opened focusing squarely on mine. He said in a firm voice, “You take care of this baby.” Somehow I managed a weak, “I will” from a throat that contained a stone.

He pried Erik from his chest, unwillingly, longingly, as though he was in pain. I held my arms open to receive my baby, and again the gentleman addressed me, “God bless you, M’am. You’ve given me my Christmas gift.” I said nothing more than a muttered “thanks.”

With Erik in my arms, I ran for the car. My husband wondered why I was crying and holding Erik so tightly and saying, “My God, forgive me. Forgive me.”

The meaning of Christmas is Erik. Erik is God. Erik is God's arms--two arms determined to break into our lives. Arms full of zeal and passion for us tattered bums with our tattered lives and hurts and relationships and our tattered sins. Erik, resembling God, is a fierce little baby who makes no distinctions but would embrace the least likely. Erik demonstrates God's fierce desire to be with us. And God desires not only to be with us but to spend time with us.

This Sunday I begin a sermon series on prayer. It is helpful to be reminded what prayer is before we talk about different types of prayer or different ways to pray over the next several Sundays. Prayer is being with God, spending time with God, making connection with the One who stands at the center of all life and joy. Certainly other things result from prayer, but prayer is, first and foremost, simply being with God.

Today's scripture passage reminds us how fiercely God loves us and what astounding lengths God has gone to in order to "be with us." God wants to spend time with us. God desires to be an integral part of our lives, to share in all of our life – the good, the not-so-good and the ugly. Prayer is fellowship and meeting God. It is coming into the presence of the One who loves us all the time, being in the presence of the One who has loved us even more than our parents ever did even in the best of time and waiting in that presence, simply being there in that presence.

That's all. Simply coming and waiting and being there. You don't have to talk because God can be with you in silence. You don't have to first "clean up your act" because God accepts you as you are. All you have to do is feel God's love for you and when you feel it respond in any way your heart wants to respond. It is really that simple.

We sometimes forget that we do not pray in order to get something God was going to give us anyway. We pray in order to be with God and feel God's love for us and to give our love to God. That is what prayer is: being with and feeling God's love and giving God love in return.

I invite you this week to spend time simply being with God. To spend time with God not expecting an answer to your prayers, not waiting for direction about a matter in your life, not expecting anything other than simply "being" with the One who divinely loves you and has gone to great lengths to be with you. Spend time simply being with God. That is all. Amen.