

1 Thessalonians 3:9 - 4:1 ⁹ How can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy that we feel before our God because of you? ¹⁰ Night and day we pray most earnestly that we may see you face to face and restore whatever is lacking in your faith. ¹¹ Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you. ¹² And may the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, just as we abound in love for you. ¹³ And may he so strengthen your hearts in holiness that you may be blameless before our God and Father at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints.

Face to Face

I remember when my husband and I were waiting for the birth of our first child. At the time we lived in a tiny two bedroom apartment. We had converted the second bedroom to a combined office and storage room. There was a drafting table on one wall, a bookcase and shelves on another, my bicycle and sports equipment were on one side and the other was stacked with boxes full of Christmas decorations. The room was full. And it was cluttered with so much stuff! This room, with all the stuff was where the new baby would go.

We had a lot of work to do! A lot of work to get ready for the new baby!

There were so many preparations. We had to clear out all the old stuff, to make room for the baby. We made plans for what to do with every single thing in that room. We decided what was important to keep. And we decided that we just didn't need some of the things anymore. So, we sold them or gave them away. We moved others to a new place in the house so that we had room for the new baby. And, finally, after clearing out space, after making room, we had a space for the new baby!

After clearing out the room, we had space for all the new things for the baby. We made room for new furniture and new decorations. We made room in our home for a new baby. As we made our preparations, we were so excited! We couldn't wait until we could see our baby. We still had a list of things to do. I still

needed to wrap up some things at work. We still had a lot of little details to take care of, but we weren't worried. We still had a month to finish getting everything ready. We had time, we thought.

And then, the unexpected happened.

After all the planning, the baby came three weeks early!

We thought we had time. But there was still so much more to do! But as we looked at our baby, as we saw our baby face to face, all those little details weren't nearly as important as they were before. Sure, they still had to be done, but they weren't nearly as important as the baby. They weren't nearly as important as just spending time looking at our baby's face. All those things we thought needed to be done really didn't matter. All those little things, those little details paled in comparison to just being with the baby--just spending time with the baby face to face.

Today we begin our preparations for another baby.

We await the coming of the baby Jesus.

We begin the preparations for the birth of the Christ child.

Advent is the time we spend making room, preparing our hearts, our minds and our lives for the baby Jesus.

We have a month before the expected birth. We have a month before we celebrate the night the baby Jesus was born. There is a lot to do. There are preparations to be made. We still need to clean, to make room, to decorate and to get ready for that special night when the baby will be born. Space still needs to be cleared in our hearts, in our minds, in our lives.

Luckily, we don't have to worry about this baby coming three weeks early!

This baby, the Christ child has already arrived. The baby Jesus is already here. Jesus is already here with us. All we have to do is look for him. All we have to do is seek his face. All we have to do is make time, make space in our lives. We need to decide what is important. What we need to keep and what we can let go. And, then, when we have made room, when we have made the space, the unexpected happens. We see Jesus face to face. We see Jesus unexpectedly. All of a sudden, when we take the time, we see a face of light and love looking back at us in the most unexpected places. And, it is the face of Jesus.

In his book, Here and Now, Henri Nouwen, states:

“All human relationships, be they between parents and children, husbands and wives, lovers and friends, or between members of a community, are meant to be signs of God's love for humanity as a whole and each person in particular.”¹ As Christians, we are meant to be a sign of God's love in our homes, in our work, in our community. We are meant to reflect the light and love of Jesus within us to others. We are called to be a reflection of the face of Jesus. So that others can see Jesus face to face. So that others can see the face of Jesus in us.

But, we have to make room in our lives to look at one another.

We have to make time for the face to face encounters. We need to make the space in our lives, maybe even go out of our way, to see each other's face.

¹ Nouwen, Henri J.M. Here and Now: Living in the Spirit. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1994. p.176.

In the world in which we live, we have to go out of our way, to see each other. In this high tech world, it is easy for us to go through a day without seeing another person's face. We can do a lot of things without even seeing another human face. We pay for our gas at the pump, we go to automated bank tellers, we may even work at home, using e-mail, instant messaging, cell phones. We can shop at home over the internet and have the packages delivered to our front steps. We can do all these things without seeing another human face.

But, as Christians, we are called to live a different life. We are called to seek out human encounters. We are called to see each other face to face. For where two or three are gathered, there Jesus is also.² In the gathering of just two people, face to face, there is the unexpected. There is the potential of seeing the face of the baby Jesus.

Sure, we have a lot to do to prepare for the coming of the Christ child. There are a lot of details to take care of. But nothing is as important as the baby. Everything else in our busy lives pales in comparison to the light and love that is found in the face of the baby Jesus. And we never know when he will appear. We never know when we will see Jesus in the face of friend, a loved one, a stranger.

We never know when the bank teller, the operator of the convenience store, or the checker at the grocery store will see the light and love of Jesus in our face. We never know when the baby Jesus will show up unexpectedly in our lives. We never know. But, we have to make room. We have to clear a space for that chance encounter in our lives.

Sure, we have a lot to do. There are a lot of preparations to be made.

² Matthew 18:20, NRSV.

But, as we look forward to that special night,
the night when we celebrate the birth of the Christ child,
as we plan and prepare for the birth of a new baby in our lives, let us remember that Jesus is already here,
waiting for the right time, growing among us.

Now is the time to make room for the arrival, the advent of Jesus now.

Because we never know when the unexpected will happen. We never know when or where we will see
Jesus face to face. And we never know when someone will see the face of Jesus in us. And that chance
encounter, that smile, that look of love, may be the only smile that person may receive that day. That loving
face may be the only loving face they see that day.

And isn't that the best gift we can give each other this Christmas? Isn't seeing the unexpected birth of the
baby Jesus in each other the best gift we can give this Christmas?

Let us pray.

Loving and gracious God.

We thank you for the birth of your Son in our lives. We thank you for his example of love. We ask that
your love may abound and increase in those present here today. We pray that you will direct us to the ones
who need us most to strengthen their faith in others. Help us be the face of light and love in the world
around us. Strengthen and prepare us for the advent, the coming of Christ. Amen.