

Christmas Eve: The Messiah Will Return

A Sermon by Pr. David Johnson

We've come through Matthew's account of the Christmas story, right up to the point where the Magi have to leave, returning to their homeland by stealth. The joy of the Christ-child's arrival will soon be overshadowed by the threat of great evil, and this blessed scene ends abruptly in fear. Herod realizes the Magi's deception, and the order is given for the storm of bloodshed that would soon envelop the entire Bethlehem region. The message is clear, the shedding of innocent blood would accompany much of the Messiah's life; both in His life and in His death.

Most weren't ready to hear that though. Births and childhood are meant for celebration, not sorrow. Death isn't for the young, but for the aged, the failing; those who've exhausted their allotted years. But Mary and Joseph knew, as Mary was warned, that pain would be a constant companion of the joy of rearing the Messiah. To borrow from the movie *Shadowlands*, "The pain then is part of the happiness now...that's the deal." You can't separate the cradle from the cross, and the events of that dark night in Bethlehem were no different.

But just as suffering would be a constant companion for the Messiah, so also would be the need for patience in the waiting. Similarly, while we've been walking through the Christmas story in Matthew, we've also been witnessing the rise of John the Baptist during our Advent Sunday worship services. We've been drawn to the manger on Thursday evenings, and heard John cry out, "Follow the Lamb" on Sundays. How are we supposed to do both?

In the movie I just mentioned, *Shadowlands*, C.S. Lewis is said to admit, "Give me blizzards and frozen pipes, but not this "nothing" time. Not this waiting room of the world." Waiting, when you are surrounded by "hints" and the "almost there" of life can be so draining. Oh, how Mary must have wondered, "When will the joy of life with Jesus suddenly be engulfed by the sorrow of loss?" As each year passed, you can imagine her question, "Will this be the year?"

The process of waiting can impact various people in vastly differing ways. One will wrestle with the prolonged uncertainty and become impatient and lash out. Others find each new day to be filled with new opportunities to over-think; to be overly-critical. These are the people who stress beyond the point of preparation to the point of crazed perfection.

That was the concern of my parents, towards my grandparents many years ago. When I was young, we would make our annual visit to Grandma and Grandpa Johnson's house after each Christmas. But as my grandparents aged, my parents grew increasingly concerned about the stress that was being caused by their anticipation of our visits. My parents decided that we were just going to show up and then adapt to whatever we encountered when we arrived.

Of course, I understood about Mom and Dad's concern...for Grandma, especially. But I couldn't help thinking, "What if she isn't ready? What if she hadn't baked her famous goodies, or put all those wonderful comforters on the beds?" I know that wasn't very sacrificial of me, but it was my motivation, looking forward to wonderful memories of a Christmas visit.

But the truth is that she was always ready. And although she didn't know exactly when we were coming, she was always prepared because she knew it would happen eventually. She could relax in the knowledge that she was always prepared.

Some time ago, then AFLC Vice-President Pastor Michael Brandt wrote an email to AFLC pastors addressing this concern. One paragraph he included stated, "Waiting is an essential part of God's plan. Ever since His redemptive promise (Genesis 3:15) in the Garden of Eden, He's called us to wait on Him. Waiting is a reminder that we are not in control...God is. Waiting is

a means to an end...God's perfect will. Waiting is a ministry...God's ministry in us and through us. Waiting is a privilege...the One we are waiting for is worth the wait. Waiting is a necessary good...for God's glory and our good!

Several weeks ago, as I began these messages for Advent, we discussed the reality of Jesus second coming, as well as His first. Each Advent Sunday was focused on John the Baptist and his call to prepare the people for Jesus' coming. We admitted that we are living in what could very well be the last days. In fact, as we consider Jesus' description of the time before His return, the world has been living in those days for quite a while: wars, natural disasters, spiritual hypocrisy and deception, persecution, martyrdom, apostasy, natural disasters, etc. All the signs are present, and the challenge is to be ever vigilant and consistently alert. (See Matt. 23:34ff through ch.25)

In each of these parables, Jesus reinforces the factual circumstances leading to His return. Jesus' prophetic warnings of His imminent coming are meant as a type of alarm, as on an alarm clock. ***It allows us to remain occupied with other things, rather than staring at the hands moving around the face of a clock.*** The prophetic messages scattered throughout the Scriptures are intended to warn, yes; instruct, absolutely. But more than anything, they are intended to challenge and motivate.

God had foretold the Messiah's coming through dozens of prophecies and over hundreds of years. It should have come as no surprise to anyone that this little child would be born in Bethlehem. And that this baby would one day die for the sins of the whole world. But sadly, only a few had eyes and hearts to receive this wondrous news.

Joy Lewis' point to C.S. Lewis was that knowing death would come sooner than later didn't steal from life, it could, and should, enhance it; adding urgency to each moment. My grandmother didn't sit, waiting for Dad's phone call before she prepared for our coming. She knew we would be there eventually, she made sure she was always ready (even having goodies baked and waiting in the freezer). Grandma knew that special guests were coming. And because of that constant preparation, everyone who came to their home always got the same special treatment.

In the end, our preparation for Christ's return hinges not on our preparation for His second coming, but on how prepared we are to meet the needs of those we encounter each day (Matt. 25). For if that is done, then we will be ready for Him. If we are truly ready for His second coming, then our preparations for this Christmas remembrance of His first incarnation should be uneventful and uncomplicated. So are you ready?