

WHAT DO YOU WANT FOR CHRISTMAS?

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LUKE 21:25-36

²⁵ “There will be signs in the sun, moon and stars. On the earth, nations will be in anguish and perplexity at the roaring and tossing of the sea. ²⁶ People will faint from terror, apprehensive of what is coming on the world, for the heavenly bodies will be shaken. ²⁷ At that time they will see the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory. ²⁸ When these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”²⁹ He told them this parable: “Look at the fig tree and all the trees. ³⁰ When they sprout leaves, you can see for yourselves and know that summer is near. ³¹ Even so, when you see these things happening, you know that the kingdom of God is near. ³² “Truly I tell you, this generation will certainly not pass away until all these things have happened. ³³ Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away.³⁴ “Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day will close on you suddenly like a trap. ³⁵ For it will come on all those who live on the face of the whole earth. ³⁶ Be always on the watch, and pray that you may be able to escape all that is about to happen, and that you may be able to stand before the Son of Man.”

Welcome to the first Sunday of Advent. It is the time of the year when children and adults begin to anticipate Christmas. But the question for this morning is, “What do we hope for out of Christmas?” The question is often phrased, “What do you want for Christmas?”

When we gather for thanksgiving at my home, BEFORE WE LEAVE the question will be asked, WHAT DO YOU WANT FOR CHRISTMAS?

But the questions we ask in church is what is it supposed to do for us? And what are we supposed to do because of it?

If we were to pause for a few moments this morning to let our minds envision that perfect Christmas what would it look like? I have a suspicion that many of us would embrace the Hallmark Card vision of the day. (YOU REMEMBER LAST SUNDAY WE TALKED ABOUT WHAT WE ENVISIONED TO BE A GOOD THANKSGIVING. Most of the time this vision goes back to a particular time and what that experience was like when in our minds it seemed like all we could have expected.

Despite the fact that we do not have a strong track record of having a white Christmas, still the popular song plays in the background of many minds in the Midwest because of the song, “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas.” So many people have hope for one. If it could happen the last of November surely snow could be here on the 24th of December. The idea of the perfect Christmas, for most of us, goes to a time when we remember when all was perfect. In our vision of Christmas, everyone is there who is supposed to be there, the decorations are all placed where they have always been placed, the tree is trimmed and is placed in the same corner of the room it has always been with ornaments that have been used forever and everyone knows where each one came from and who got them. Just the right presents are under the tree—just what we really want. Christmas Eve arrives with all the kids in a great mood and we are off to church for candlelight services and the congregation is packed—not a seat to be found—(Yep, even pastors can have their own idea of the

perfect Christmas) and just before midnight the entire congregation, with glowing faces, sing *“Silent Night, Holy Night”* just before we walk out into the parking lot to be greeted with gently falling snow and the church bells proclaiming the Messiah’s birth and greetings of *“peace on earth, goodwill toward all people.”*

And, if you would ask most of our children what they long for when they celebrate Christmas very few of the things that are a part of the original story would be found high on their list. They are more acquainted with the longing expressed in the story *“T’was the Night Before Christmas”* than they are with the longings of a people in despair for a *“messiah”*—the One promised that would deliver Israel. Since the story about the *“Night Before Christmas”* has been around for some time we adults also buy into the Hallmark Christmas where the house is depicted as covered with fresh fallen snow and a clear *“silent night”* as the background. In that house *“the stockings are all hung by the chimney with care, in hopes that St. Nicholas soon will be there. The children are all nestled snug in their beds, while visions of sugar plums dance in their heads.”*

If this is how Christmas will be for you, this sermon is not for you because you will not hear the good news contained in the real story of Christmas.

We have concluded that Christmas is for children. And it is! However, Christmas is also for all the rest of us. And my suspicion is that the Christmas we long for this year does not exist and will never exist for many people. We have to remember that Christmas is something that happens around the world. The coming of the Christ is the Good News that was meant to be heard and appreciated by all people.

You are probably aware that this is a time of year when many suffer from depression. Part of the reason this happens is because we have tried to experience a Christmas that does not exist. People constantly ask us, *“Are you in the Christmas Spirit yet?”* And as long as we have set the bar so high for what we are supposed to feel at Christmas time, many people feel left out of the story altogether. You see, we have failed to recall that Christmas comes in the worst of times to remind us of the best of what God can offer for those times.

In Luke 21:25-36: Jesus speaks of *“signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on earth distress”* when the earth shall be radically changed, a time when *“your redemption is drawing near.”* Is that the image that captures our longing for Christmas this December 25th? Those were the words of Christ when He tried to give meaning to His first coming and the final coming of the kingdom of God that shall have no end.

The particular danger which faces us as Christmas approaches, is unlikely to be contempt for the sacred season, but, nevertheless, our familiarity with it may easily produce in us a kind of indifference. The true wonder and mystery may leave us unmoved; familiarity may easily blind us to the shining fact that lies at the heart of Christmastide. We are all aware of the commercialization of Christmas: we can hardly help being involved in the frantic business of buying and sending gifts and cards. We shall without doubt enjoy the carols, the decorations, the feasting, the presents, the parties, and the general atmosphere of goodwill that almost magically permeates the days of Christmas. But we may not always see clearly that so much decoration and celebration has been heaped upon the festival that the historic fact upon which all rejoicing is founded has been almost smothered out of existence.

What we are in fact celebrating is the awe-inspiring humility of God, and no amount of familiarity with the trappings of Christmas should ever blind us to its quiet but explosive significance. We Christians believe that so great is God’s love and concern for humanity that God became a man. Amid the sparkle and color and music of

the day's celebration, we do well to remember that God's insertion of Himself into human history was achieved with an almost frightening quietness and humility. There was no advertisement, no publicity, no special privilege; in fact, the entry of God into his own world was almost heartbreakingly humble. In sober fact, there is little romance or beauty in the thought of a young woman looking desperately for a place where she could give birth to her first baby. I do not think for a moment that Mary complained, but it is a bitter commentary on the world that no one would give up a bed for a pregnant woman – and that the Son of God must be born in a stable.

Artists and poets throughout the centuries have romanticized this unbelievable beginning. Yet, I believe that at least once a year we should look at the historic fact, and not at any pretty picture. At the time of this astonishing event, only a handful of people knew what had happened. And, as far as we know, no one spoke openly about it for thirty years. Even when the baby was grown to be a man, only a few recognized him for who he truly was. Two or three years of teaching and preaching, and healing people, and his work was finished. He was betrayed and judiciously murdered, deserted at the end by his friends. By normal human standards, this is a tragic little tale of failure, the rather squalid story of a young man from a humble home, put to death by the envy and malice of the professional men of religion. All this happened in the obscure, occupied province of the vast Roman Empire.

It is 1500 years ago that this apparently invincible Empire utterly collapsed, and all that is left of it is ruins. Yet, the little baby, born in such pitiful humility and cut down as a young man in his prime, commands the allegiance of millions of people all over the world. Although they have never seen him, he has become friend and companion to innumerable people. This undeniable fact is, by any measurement, the most astonishing phenomenon in human history. It is a solid rock of evidence that no agnostic can ever explain away.

That is why, behind all our fun and games at Christmastime, we should not try to escape a sense of awe, almost a sense of fright, at what God has done. We must never allow anything to blind us to the true significance of what happened at Bethlehem so long ago. Nothing can alter the fact that we live on a visited planet.

So, this Christmas what we are called to celebrate is no beautiful myth, no lovely piece of traditional folklore, but a solemn fact. God has been here once historically, but, as millions will testify, he will come again with the same silence and the same devastating humility into any human heart ready to receive him.

Into the hearts of those whose homes will not be filled with all the right people—arrangements changed because of death, divorce, estrangement over family arguments. Into the world of those of us who live with a feeling of overwhelmed-ness because of the world situation—wars, starvation, terrorism, battered women and children. Into our world the Christ child came—into not so much a Hallmark world, but a world that cries for comfort—to announce a new day of hope. And in the words of the writer of the Advent workbook used by many of us a few years ago. *“With all of this work of God going on in the world, we had better keep ourselves up on our tippy-toes, ready to see where God is working. Just as a construction worker needs to be watchful while among the dangers of a construction zone, we need to be alert and watchful. Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighted down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day catch you unexpectedly, like a trap....Be alert at all times.*

We cannot afford to have our minds preoccupied with lesser things while God is working God's wonders. If we are discerning of God's work, we will know when it is time to pick up a hammer, stand with

God, and join God in building something God is making. We will also know when to step back and get away from something that God is tearing down.”

Into this real world, where God is still at work trying to redeem and make whole, I invite you to celebrate Christmas knowing that even if your world is not perfect, God is not through with us yet.

You will also recall that it was in Luke’s gospel that we hear of the disciples on their way to Emmaus lamenting their Christmas remembrances. They said, *“We had hoped that he was the one to redeem Israel.”* They had their own ideas of Christmas and what it meant. But then it is told by Luke that, *“When he was at table with them, he took bread, blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him....”*

“Good news! Messiah’s coming and he’s going to set right what’s wrong with the world! He is going to do justice where injustice has been done!”

When Jesus was born, according to St. Luke, the powerful people, powerful political people, up at the palace missed it. The *“heavenly messengers”* from God, came to none of them. Rather, the heavens split open, songs filled the air, and an angelic army appeared to poor shepherds out in the fields working the night shift.

And the angels sang, *“Glory to God in the highest and peace on earth to those with whom God is well pleased.”*

I would hope that our God will give us the grace to be prepared for the interruption of His grace among us, give us the courage to receive Him when He intrudes into our lives, and give us the wisdom to follow Him into the future that only He can give.

Life consists of a series of interruptions. One day we are doing just fine, then there’s the telephone call from the doctor after our yearly physical, there is that odd pain in the chest, or you turn on the evening news and some new disaster has just occurred and your world is rocked.

And what do we do at such moments? Most of us reach out or dig down for resources to deal with the crisis in an attempt to get life *“back to normal,”* in order to achieve balance.

Fred Craddock tells of a person who, in a time of crisis, reached down but had no resources upon which to draw. He wrote, I went to see a lady in our church who was facing surgery. I went to see her in the hospital. She had never been in the hospital before, and the surgery was major. I walked in there and immediately saw that she was a nervous wreck. She started crying. She wanted me to pray with her, which I did. By her bed was a stack of books and magazines: True Love, Mirror, Hollywood Today, stuff about Elizabeth Taylor and folk. She just had a stack of them there, and she was a wreck. It occurred to me, there’s not a calorie in that whole stack to help her through her experience. She had no place to dip down into a reservoir and come up with something—a word, a phrase, a thought, an idea, a memory, a person. Just empty.”

He concluded: *“How marvelous is the life of the person who, like a wise homemaker, when the berries and fruits and vegetables are ripe, puts them away in jars and cans in the cellar. Then when the ground is cold, icy, and barren and nothing seems alive, she goes down into the cellar, comes up, and it’s May and June at her family’s table. How blessed is that person.”*

Let us prepare ourselves to have the resources provided when we are faced with trails of life—the resources provided by the Messiah who brings hope and life to all who will received him, this day and every day.

