

Sermon: "What Are You Hoping For?"
First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
12/24/03
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor

CHRISTMAS EXPECTATIONS

"What do you hope to get for Christmas?"

I hate it when someone asks a child that question. It plays right into the hands of the commercialism and materialism that so distorts the Christmas season. More than that, it sets up expectations that sometimes can't be met.

Do any of you still remember the Cabbage Patch Dolls or Tickle Me Elmo? Parents were literally at each other's throats in the stores because they wanted to meet their children's expectations and buy a favorite toy.

Of course, most of us know in our better moments that the season is about more than greed and gift giving. Christmas is about more than what our society usually makes of it. But, each year I think that we all need to ask ourselves a very basic question ... even if we think that we know the answer. We need to ask ourselves, "What is Christmas all about anyway?"

I know. That's too simple a question. It's about the birth of Christ. Most any child could tell us that. But, what does that mean? Why is the birth of Christ special and important to us? What spiritual expectations do we have for the Christmas season? What would make us feel satisfied and whole?

What are we hoping for this Christmas?

A family member asked us what we would like for Christmas this year, and we replied, "A little peace and quiet would be nice!" I think that's a common Christmas wish. In an age of anxiety, Christmas can be the most anxious time of the year.

The biblical message of peace on earth, good will toward men (and women) sounds a comforting note for many of us. Maybe that's what some of us are hoping for, peace of mind. Maybe that's why some of us are here tonight. Maybe we're hoping that the music of the hymns and the words of the Scripture might do something to bring a little peace and quiet into our troubled lives. Many of us would love to have a silent, holy night.

Some of us here tonight have other expectations of Christmas. We come expecting beauty. We love the sheer joy of the music, the festive atmosphere of the church building, the smiling faces. There is something almost mystical about a service like this something that goes beyond what we can put into words.

WHAT ARE YOU HOPING FOR?

What about you? What are you hoping for this Christmas?

Lately the trend has been for churches to ask that question of people ... not just in regards to the Christmas season but also in regards to the church program in general. We ask, "What are you hoping for from our church? What programs do you need? Do you like traditional or 'modern' worship services?" And so forth.

That line of questioning has been very fruitful for many churches. Meeting expectations has enabled them to grow in many ways. And there's something right about asking those questions. We in the church should be concerned about people's hopes and dreams.

But, the story of Christmas, especially the story as we find it in John's gospel, teaches us that those questions, as important as they are, should not be the only or even the primary questions for God's people.

The church should not always be in the business of fulfilling expectations no matter how noble or important those expectations may be because quite often we need something different from what we want and expect.

We will probably meet many of your expectations tonight for what constitutes a good Christmas Eve service. But, suppose what we really need tonight is not what we expect? Suppose the most important side to Christmas is not familiar but strange and unexpected?

THE UNEXPECTED GIFT

Let me use an example of something that sometimes happens this time of year. Have you ever received a gift for Christmas that was totally unexpected and even unwanted? You may have asked, "What is this thing?" as you opened it. Maybe you even thought about putting it into the "regifting" pile. But, for some reason you kept it.

And, as you used the gift, you began to realize,
"Wow. This is the greatest thing since sliced bread.
I wish I would've had one of these a long time ago."

We had no desire for this thing ... whatever it may have been ... but we discovered through the loving thoughtfulness of a friend that this was exactly what we should have been hoping for.

I think, in a much greater and more profound way this was what happened when Jesus came into the world. Jesus was not the gift that people expected. He was more than anyone expected.

The gospels are in one sense, a continual debate between the expectations people had for the Messiah and the Savior that Jesus actually turned out to be. As one commentator put it, "Jesus was the hope of the world, but he wasn't the hope for which the world was hoping!"

THE "HARD" GIFT OF LIGHT

In verse 11 of our lesson from John we read, "He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." John 1:11

Now why was that? Why couldn't Jesus' own people accept him? The people rejected Jesus because he didn't live up to their expectations for the Messiah. Jesus didn't turn out to be the military Messiah they wanted. Jesus didn't turn out to be the brilliant general who rallied the troops and threw the Romans out of the country once and for all.

On the contrary, the kingdom Jesus proclaimed was a kingdom based upon peace not peace as we know it, a temporary truce between exchanges of gunfire and a color coded system of fear. No, his kingdom of peace would not be of this world, and his gift would be different from any the world has received before or since.

The gift of Jesus would be the gift of light. Jesus, who was and is the very creative force behind the universe, this same Jesus would shine light into the darkness. The Creator himself would become one of us.

John said that the Word became flesh and dwelt among us. To put it another way, in the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we see the very face of God. We see God's glory, God's grace and God's truth. This is not an easy gift to accept. It is not the gift we were hoping for. But, it is the gift we received so long ago and the gift which keeps on giving, the revelation of God himself in the man Jesus.

HOW DO I KNOW GOD?

Whenever a person studies theology, the first question they must ask is what will I accept as truth? What will be my basis for making decisions about right and wrong? How can I know the true nature of God?

Some people use nature as their guide. In the Bible we sometimes read verses that seem to emphasize this natural revelation. For example, the Psalmist once wrote, "The heavens are telling the glory of God " Psalm 19:1

Some people use their own feelings and ideas as the ultimate guide. Nothing is "true" unless it is true for me. In fact, the very concepts of truth and God become relative to one's individual tastes and needs.

Others use the norms of society as the ultimate guide in life. There is a powerful need to conform to the expectations of those around us ... to accept the answer given by society as the "right" answer. Even in a country like ours where individualism and a rugged frontier spirit is revered, the pressure to conform to the views of the majority is considerable.

GOD WAS IN CHRIST

But, when God came into our world in Jesus Christ, we learned a new way to look at God. It was no longer possible to define God by referring to the forces of nature, our own feelings or even the standards of society.

In Jesus Christ God sent us a message, a revelation, a Word with a capital "W."
Jesus is the light of the world.

In Jesus Christ we see a glory and a grace and a truth that would be beyond our powers of comprehension and imagination. If God had not decided to reveal himself in this way, we would have never known what God was like. We would have remained in the dark about God and our true selves.

Even today God's own people can, at times, reject the light that God in Christ shines into our life. It's understandable. Darkness can sometimes be comforting. Darkness can hide a multitude of sins. Darkness can conceal the places in our lives that we would rather not explore.

The dark place may be lonely, but the dark place can also be cool and comfortable.

But, God loves us too much to leave us in the dark. Our Scripture from John tells us that we cannot love the darkness and Jesus at the same time. If we go with Jesus, we must step into the light.

Jesus gives us the hard gift of the unvarnished truth. Jesus gives us a peace that is based not upon our understandings and our hopes but upon God's revelation. Truth is not determined by consensus but by the Word of God, that is, Jesus Christ as revealed in Scripture.

LIVING THE STORY

Most of us agree with that in theory. Many of us here this evening have rehearsed the story of Jesus many times. We know the story by heart. But, it's being obedient to the implications of the story that is so hard.

It requires a much less rigid stance than most of us are willing to take.

It means that we must always keep a place open in our hearts and lives for the revelation of God's greater truth in Jesus Christ. It means that the starting point for any discussion is not what I would like or what I or anyone else thinks about the matter. The starting point is the revelation of God as embodied by Jesus Christ.

That's how discipleship is defined.

We are God's children because we have been birthed in the delivery room of obedience. As the Scripture puts it, it was those who received him and believed in his name that he gave the power to become children of God. Belief, in this case, was not just an abstract academic acceptance of what Jesus said. It was a willingness to actively follow him.

STEPPING INTO THE LIGHT

Not too long ago psychologists discovered that light is essential for our mental health. In the winter months some people become depressed from that lack of light, being afflicted by something called Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD.

The cure for that problem is amazingly simple; order a bank of specially designed lights and spend some time in the light. Stepping into the light is the cure.

And it seems to me that the same is true for what ails us spiritually. What we need to do is step into the light, the true light that enlightens everyone, the true light that is not overcome by even the deepest darkness.

It is important to note that the light we need is a special light, a light that is not seen in our traditional celebration of Christmas. It is not the light of a Christmas tree. It is not the warm glow of candlelight. It is not even a bank of lights especially designed to lift our depression.

The light we need is the light that was the one light present at creation. The light we need is the very presence of God the Father as revealed in His Son, Jesus.

The light we need is a unique light.

GLORY

We even have a special name for this light. In the church we call this light "glory." The Bible tells us that it was the glory of the Lord that shone around those first shepherds as they heard the good news.

The angels may have proclaimed good news as the glory of the Lord shone around them, but the shepherds didn't take it as good news at least not at first. The shepherds were (as the traditional King James version puts it) "sore afraid." Or, to put it in modern lingo, they were scared out of their wits.

Several weeks ago some of us were able to see the Nativity re-enacted when we went to visit Dolly Parton's "Dixie Stampede" show and dinner. It was well staged with live animals, music and a glorious angel who came floating down from the high ceiling.

As she flapped her wings in the floodlight, there was an audible groan of appreciation from the crowd. (Someone even jokingly asked me why we couldn't stage Christmas programs like that at the church! For one thing, I think live animals might present a real problem.)

Anyway, I appreciated the willingness of the folks at Dixie Stampede to unapologetically present the Christmas story. But there is one part of the story that we cannot recreate even with a state of the art sound system, special effects and seasoned actors.

And that is the part of the story described as the glory of the Lord. The glory of the Lord is a light that we cannot duplicate. It is that unique light that frightens as well as delights. When the light, the true light shines in the darkness, it can be a terrifying spectacle. It can be an unwelcome gift. It can tell us more about ourselves than we want to know.

I don't know what you are hoping for his Christmas, but I would suggest that there is one thing that we all really need. We need the Lord. We need the presence of God, the glory of God that is revealed in His Son, Jesus. We need a light that will shine in our darkness.

Most of us know the story. But, we need to live the story. We need to be confronted by glory in our lives. With the shepherds we need to come and see for ourselves this Savior who is Christ the Lord.

The light of God's glory still shines you know.
Have you seen the light? Have you heard the story?

Listen with your heart as we tell it again.