



What Can We Expect?

A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Sean Lanigan

The Feast of the Nativity ~ December 24, 2018

Isaiah 9:2-7

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness—on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Psalm 96

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| 1 Sing to God a new song; *
sing to God all the whole earth. | 6 Oh, the majesty and magnificence of God's presence! *
Oh, the power and the splendor of God's sanctuary! |
| 2 Sing and bless God's holy Name; *
proclaim the good news of salvation from day to day. | 7 Ascribe to God, you families of the peoples, *
ascribe to God honor and power. |
| 3 Declare God's glory among the nations, *
God's wonders among all peoples. | 8 Ascribe due honor to God's holy Name; *
bring offerings and come into the courts of praise. |
| 4 For God is great and greatly to be praised, *
more to be feared than all gods. | 9 Worship the Most High in the beauty of holiness; *
may the whole earth stand in awe. |
| 5 As for all the gods of the nations, they are but idols, *
but it is God who made the heavens. | |

Hebrews 1:1-3

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds.

Luke 2:1-20

The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all, training us to renounce impiety and worldly passions, and in the present age to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity and purify for himself a people of his own who are zealous for good deeds. a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had

been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

I'm sure you're familiar with it. The book: *What to Expect When You're Expecting*. If you aren't, it's a classic book about preparing to have a baby. Now in its fifth edition, I'm guessing it's probably no longer quite on-trend with all the latest in maternal wisdom. Even more outdated, my own primary source of information about pregnancy and childbirth is the TV show *Call The Midwife*. And while some things about **expecting** do change some things really don't. And one of those is the wait. It still takes about 9 months, give or take a few weeks. And we still really want to know everything we can, about: *What to Expect When We're Expecting*.

This Advent, I spent time mulling over these words, these concepts. The ideas of expecting, of expectation.

Reflecting on these words has felt important to me, because... because we have so very many expectations about Christmas. We expect Christmas to make us feel a certain way. All the good feelings; none of the bad. We expect Christmas to make everything right, to guarantee that everyone will be merry and bright. Indeed, we expect an incredible amount from Christmas; we come to Christmas with expectations heavier and more unwieldy than Santa's sleigh. Of course, we've done Christmas so many times before, so we presume to know what we can reasonably expect from it. And also: What's worth expecting. What might be too risky to expect. What to not even bother expecting.

I, for one, had to be trained to lower my expectations, when I was a child. I wanted all the magic, all the time. A messy, imperfect Christmas wasn't emotionally feasible for me.

But Christmas...well, Christmas is more than a bit rascally...quite a bit beyond our control, whether we like it or not. And Christmas doesn't seem to appreciate all of the expectations we foist upon it. Christmas is deeply expectant, yes. Undeniably eager, earnest, hopeful. But whatever it is we're expecting of Christmas, whatever expectations have been whipping our imaginations into stiff peaks...well, Christmas might just have other plans.

So what...

...really, truly...

....what do you want for Christmas?

Maybe it's: harmonious, meaningful, poignant togetherness? Maybe it's all about people for you. The rekindling of a nostalgic sense of connectedness, embroidered upon the complexities of memory.

Or is it perhaps moreso about the presents for you? That unquenchable desire to receive the perfect gift, the gift that makes you feel fully seen, known, and loved. The impossible, and impossibly wonderful, gift.

I've always found it to be such a difficult question...the question: "what do you want for Christmas?" I don't really want to tell others what to get me. I want them to think about who I am and about what I mean to them and to find a unique gift that they think might surprise, delight, and intrigue me. Something that will communicate knowing and understanding and love.

It's a lot to ask, of course. Far too much to ask, most of the time. Too weighty a yearning for any material object to bear.

So, more often than not, gift-givers simply request your Christmas list. As if it's a ready-made document that I really should've been compiling all year long. Yet still, year after year, I never end up having one at-the-ready. I have trouble thinking of what to ask for, of how to contain my desires in a list of Amazon links. I still want hear those magical words:

"I saw this lovely and unique thing, and it made me think of you."

It made me think of you. It brings me joy to give you this gift. You are known...and loved.

Isn't this what we all want, deep down? Not the latest this-or-that. Not having a certain dollar amount spent on us. But to be known. To be known well enough to be given a special gift. A gift that surprises, delights, and intrigues. A gift that reveals us to ourselves. A gift that loves us into being.

I think, deep down, this **is** what Christmas is really up to. Christmas is trying to give us a gift that reveals to us how well we are known. A gift that shows us how deeply we are loved. A gift that has room for our deepest desires

and our highest hopes.

Christmas is trying to beckon us to the manger, where God has slipped from eternity into time. Where God has made a gift of Godself, in the warm baby-flesh of Jesus. Where God has been born into our midst, to be one of us. To be one with us.

For unto us a child is born,
unto us a son is given:
and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor,
The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace.

The Holy Child is, of course, a gift about which we might feel ambivalent. Do we really want God this close? How well do we really want God to know us? Because in Jesus, God has come quite terribly and dangerously close.

And so, perhaps we're not quite sure if we want to go to Bethlehem.

Unlike the shepherds, we might not be quite so game, if the angel of the Lord were to pay us a visit. After getting over their initial shock, however, the shepherds proved decisive, declaring: "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

Nor might we be as game as the Wise Men, who presumably had an even longer trip than the shepherds, and who didn't have the extra encouragement of an angelic appearance.

When the Wise Men arrived in Jerusalem seeking the Messiah, they asked King Herod where they might find him. Herod consulted with his priests and scribes, who recalled the words of the prophet Micah:

And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel.

And as quickly as they learned of the Messiah's whereabouts, the Wise Men were on their way again.

So maybe, then...maybe we're really most like the scribes. Soren Kierkegaard, in a commentary on this passage, observes that:

Although the scribes could explain where the Messiah should be born, they remained quite unperturbed in Jerusalem. They did not accompany the Wise Men to seek him. The [Wise Men] had only a rumor to go by. But it moved them to make that long journey. The scribes were much better informed, much better versed. They sat and studied the Scriptures, but it did not make them move.¹

It did not make them move. Because it's easier, isn't it? To stay put. We don't have to risk disappointment. The possibility that it's all a joke. That Jesus is just a regular old baby. That God hasn't really come near at all. That we're far more alone in this world than our spirits can fathom.

But still, still...

Still, just as the shepherds and Wise Men were roused, so might the news of Jesus' birth rouse us yet again.

Rouse the fragile hope that this all is really real. That God is so close that the manger reeks of divinity. That God is so close that we do not have to be afraid. That God is so close that we are, and always have been, truly known.

Not what we expected. Not anywhere in the vicinity of our expectations. In-car-nation. God made flesh. God made flesh so that flesh might become Godly. All flesh. Our flesh. Drawn into the Divine life. Known deeply and truly by God. The gift we didn't know we were seeking.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

[And] to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

Could this be the Christmas gift you most desire? It probably wasn't on your list. But isn't it, in some ways, what you've always been asking for? Always been seeking. Have always wanted.

To know yourself to be a child of God. Radically at home. Intimately connected. Deeply known. Infinitely loved.

Is there really anything else worth having?

What were you **expecting**?

Christmas is more than a bit rascally...quite a bit beyond our control.

Which is a good thing. Because we probably wouldn't have dreamed this up. Not in a million years. But it's here. ...and we're here.

So let us go now to Bethlehem. A most precious gift awaits. The gift you've been waiting for. The gift that's been waiting for you.

Amen.

ⁱ <https://www.plough.com/en/subscriptions/daily-dig/odd/january/daily-dig-for-january-1>