

Anticipation (3rd Sunday of Advent)

Have we lost our excitement as we are now in the middle of our Advent Season? Sometimes we become bored or disengaged as we contend with all the cares of daily living that we don't keep our excitement as we anticipate the arrival of Christ.

Anticipation should be a joyful feeling (or emotion). Sometimes, however, it leads to a feeling of anxiety or dread. You know the threat of "wait till your daddy gets home," may lead us to dread his arrival. We imagine the punishment that will be coming. Often, the punishment is less than what we imagined. So, there is a surprise.

There is a little joke to help illustrate this. Back in the wild West, a stranger stands at a bar in a saloon. Suddenly a cowboy runs in screaming, "Hey, everybody, Big Bad John is coming to town." Several others exclaim: "Big Bad John is the meanest, toughest, biggest outlaw in the West. Let's run for it." Everyone heads for the door except the stranger and the bartender. The bartender says, "Are you deaf, mister? Big Bad John is coming!" The stranger replies, "I don't know who he is, but he can't be all that big and bad. I'm not afraid." So, the stranger and the bartender wait. Soon the saloon doors fly off their hinges, and a mountain of a man stomps through the door. Covered with scars and sporting a scowl, he demands a drink. The bartender meekly complies. The stranger nervously thinks to himself, "Now I wish I had run away; this guy is the biggest, meanest-looking outlaw I've ever seen." The outlaw downs the drink in one gulp, slams it down on the bar, then turns and looks the stranger coldly in the eye to announce, "I don't know about you, stranger, but I'm gettin' outta here. I don't wanna be here when Big Bad John comes in!"

Here we have anticipation followed by surprise. Most jokes depend on an anticipated ending that becomes a surprise. However, this is true for most of the things we anticipate. They end a little differently than we imagined. We know that something is coming but then it is not what we expect. Children know it. That's why they love opening Christmas presents. They must look at those wrapped gifts for many days of suspense, and only on Christmas morning do they receive the surprise.

If only we adults could reclaim some of the anticipation and surprise, the excitement and wonder, of a child's Christmas . . . or of the very first Christmas. Admittedly, we know what is coming. We feel no anticipation about the coming of Christ; Christmas for some people is just another holiday, that same old time of year where we fight our way through stores, unpack our ornaments, and eat too much.

So, we must work at it if we wish to reclaim the excitement of Advent. Paradoxically, one must prepare to be surprised. Pause for a moment and consider the hope, anticipation, and surprise of that first Christmas.

Last week we looked at length into Jewish history when we looked at many of the prophecies that pointed toward Christ. From the days of Samuel, the event was predicted by the prophets and anticipated by the people. King David sang about the coming of the Messiah in the psalms; Isaiah wrote:

**For a child will be born to us, a son will be given to us;
And the government will rest on His shoulders;
And His name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Eternal Father, Prince of Peace.
There will be no end to the increase of His government or of peace,
On the throne of David and over his kingdom,**

**To establish it and to uphold it with justice and righteousness
From then on and forevermore.**

The zeal of the LORD of hosts will accomplish this. (Isaiah 9:6-7 NASB)

Jeremiah preached in the streets proclaiming:

**“Behold, *the* days are coming,” declares the LORD,
“When I will raise up for David a righteous Branch;
And He will reign as king and act wisely
And do justice and righteousness in the land.**

**“In His days Judah will be saved,
And Israel will dwell securely;
And this is His name by which He will be called,
‘The LORD our righteousness.’ (Jeremiah 23:5-6 NASB)**

Throughout the recorded history of Israel, over the hundreds of years, the Israelites had been waiting centuries for a powerful liberator, redeemer, and healer. They anticipated—they prepared for—a great sign from God.

That sign came first to Elizabeth and Zachariah. Elizabeth was to be the mother of John the Baptist, who in turn would prepare the way for Christ. She was a faithful Jew, and she anticipated the coming of a Savior. Thus, when Zachariah told her she would have a baby—despite that she had been barren for years—she didn’t doubt him. It was a surprise, and yet it had been anticipated. It was something wondrous and unexpected, and yet she was prepared. Elizabeth had anticipated something miraculous, just as the prophets had said.

We may remember that Zachariah was first told about John, he questioned the angel of God. He (Zachariah) was made mute until the birth of John. Upon the birth of John, Zachariah shares a prophecy that we find in the last part of the 1st chapter of Luke.

And his father Zacharias was filled with the Holy Spirit, and prophesied, saying:

**“Blessed *be* the Lord God of Israel,
For He has visited us and accomplished redemption for His people,
And has raised up a horn of salvation for us
In the house of David His servant—
As He spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from of old—
Salvation FROM OUR ENEMIES,
And FROM THE HAND OF ALL WHO HATE US;
To show mercy toward our fathers,
And to remember His holy covenant,
The oath which He swore to Abraham our father,
To grant us that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies,
Might serve Him without fear,
In holiness and righteousness before Him all our days.**

**“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
For you will go on BEFORE THE LORD TO PREPARE HIS WAYS;
To give to His people *the* knowledge of salvation
By the forgiveness of their sins,
Because of the tender mercy of our God,
With which the Sunrise from on high will visit us,
TO SHINE UPON THOSE WHO SIT IN DARKNESS AND THE SHADOW OF DEATH,
To guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Luke 1:67-79 NASB)**

This is true of the other characters in the Christmas story: Joseph, Mary, Simeon, the shepherds, and the magi. They all had made preparations, albeit with some angelic prodding, and thus, like Elizabeth and Zechariah, they were surprised yet prepared. The cast of the first Christmas drama had this in common: they all had anticipated the unexpected; they had hoped for the miraculous and by faith they had prepared. By the time John the Baptist cried out, "Prepare the way of the Lord," it was a family tradition!

So, when this king, liberator, healer and redeemer arrived, it was not what the Israelites had expected. Rather than a regal birth to a grand family, Christ was born to a young girl and a working-class carpenter. Rather than having a fine home in which to be housed on the night of his birth, he was placed in a feeding trough surrounded by farm animals. Rather than having kings and royalty visiting that night, shepherds came from the fields.

So, I'm asking you in this Advent season to shift your perspective. Don't view Christmas as a "ho-hum" holiday. It should never be a time that we seek to get through the next few days so we can put it behind us. As we anticipate this Christmas we should do so with eager excitement. We should never expect the "same old, same old." We need to be ready for the miraculous and the startling. We should prepare our hearts and minds for the serendipitous joy of new insights, liberation, and the fulfillment of hope. We should be prepared to be surprised.

We should move toward Christmas with wide eyes and an open heart. Christ told His disciples that we must become like little children. How do little children view the Christmas season? I fear that far too many of us face this season with dread and anxiety. Some of us view Christmas as a chore as we become so caught up in the daily pressures that the world assigns to Christmas. We have made it too commercial. We have filled our limited time with too many obligations. We rush to take care of the **things** while we lose sight of the beautiful aspect of the Advent.

We may find ourselves like the woman who had waited until the last minute to send Christmas cards. She rushed into a store and hurriedly bought a package of fifty Christmas cards without giving them a second look. In a panic to beat the post office closing, she addressed forty-nine of the fifty and signed them, never stopping to actually read the preprinted message inside. On Christmas Day, when things had quieted down, she chanced upon the leftover card and finally read the message that she had sent to forty-nine of her friends. Much to her dismay, it read: "This card is just to say, a big gift is on the way!" Suddenly she realized that forty-nine of her friends were anticipating a big gift from her—a gift that would never come!

A big gift is indeed on its way to you—the biggest and best in all human history. The gift of Christ at Christmas has come, and will come again. Anticipate that gift. Prepare for it. Don't let it get buried underneath the packages and tree trimmings. Don't walk past the eternal, oblivious in your worries of the temporal. Open your eyes. Watch for the signs. Bare and prepare your heart. The miracle is coming!