

THE CHRISTMAS EXPERIENCE – AT JUST THE RIGHT TIME

Mark 1:1-8, Galatians 4:4-5

November 27, 2022

The season of Advent gives the church the opportunity to begin again as we start a new church year. Once more the story of God's grace is awaiting our discovery during the coming church year as we read God's Word, pray, fast, worship, and hear the truth of God's Word preached from our pulpits. And then, once more we have the opportunity to shake off the failures, hardships, and disappointments of the past year and get a clean page on which to continue to write or re-write the story of our walk with Christ Jesus, our Lord and Saviour. Once more we get to listen and respond in faith to the God who comes to us humbly, lowly, intimately, and personally in the birth of helpless baby to a virgin named Mary and her husband Joseph, in a little out-of-the-way place called Bethlehem. And then, as we are one year closer to the return of Christ, our task is to also prepare for His second coming, like John the Baptist prepared the people for Jesus' first coming, so that we will not miss life's greatest gift, being with Christ for all of eternity. During the season of Advent, we celebrate that Jesus Christ has come, is present with us right now, and will come again in final victory, when all darkness, pain, and evil will be no more!

As we begin another Advent season – and as excitement builds as we move towards celebrating the birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ, I want us to think about this question: *“What will my Christmas experience be like this year?”* Each year brings new experiences plus new challenges, depending on what has happened over the last 12 months. So, the way we approach the Christmas season differs year-after-year – some years we come with great expectations, and other years possibly with anxiety and dread. What was your life like a year ago today? What has changed? What has remained the same? Will there be sadness because someone is missing from your Christmas celebrations this year? Or will there be joy because of a new addition, another chair or high-chair set around the table? Year-after-year, we celebrate the same event, on the same day, with the same Jesus; however, the circumstances and situations constantly change with time!

This Advent season I would like to try and weave together the events that took place 2000 years ago with the events that are taking place in our lives today. Back 2000 years ago, God's people, Israel, were waiting for the coming of their Messiah to deliver them from the oppression of the Romans. Today, like the Jews 2000 years ago, we are also waiting, but this time not waiting for Christ's first coming,

but His return to deliver us from all of this oppression and darkness that is so prevalent in the world today. This time we are not waiting for a deliverer, the Messiah to come as the suffering servant, but as the victorious King, as the Prince of Peace, to usher in the everlasting kingdom of God! And, then as now, waiting is always difficult!

Most things change over time – however, one thing has never changed since the beginning of time, and that’s God: from the day of Creation, to that very first Christmas, to Christmas 2022, and to the end of time; God remains the same, yesterday, today, and tomorrow. God doesn’t change, and He has put His plan in place, since the beginning of time, and His plan is that all of His promises will be fulfilled, according to His perfect timing. That is the promise that was given and fulfilled at that first Christmas – **Galatians 4:4-5**, ***“But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.”*** From the fall in Genesis 3, to the promises given to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that God will bless His people Israel to be a blessing; from the promise given to King David that his reign would last forever; from all of the prophetic messages given to the Old Testament prophets, to the 400 years of silence between Malachi and Matthew, mankind was waiting on God to send the promised Messiah!

There are about three hundred promises made about the first coming of the Messiah throughout the Old Testament – and God kept every one of those promises. God sending His Son to this earth was not an impulse decision, not an idea He had one day; God had planned this event from the beginning of time. God had the date already circled on His calendar when time first began. And then since the day Jesus was born, God has coordinated all the circumstances so that the Good News of the Gospel message about Jesus would spread throughout the entire world, until every people group on this earth would hear the Jesus story – then and only then would Jesus’ return for His bride, the church. According to Google, of the 24,000 people groups in the world today, about 25% of them are still not reached with the Gospel. Estimates say that over one billion people in the world today have little or no knowledge of Jesus, little or no knowledge of the Gospel, and little to no chance of hearing the Gospel of Jesus before they die. So, there’s still work to be done to go out and make disciples!

I titled today’s message *“At Just the Right Time,”* because from the beginning of time, God had put everything into place so that His plan would be carried out by

Jesus and His followers after Him at the most appropriate time in history. And God's plan to reach every people group in the world with the Gospel message was initiated 2000 years ago at Christ's birth. So, when was Jesus born? There has been a great deal of speculations as to the exact date of Christ's birth, and according to the best historians, the date God had circled on His calendar for the birth of the Messiah is determined to be **September 29, 2 BC** the day celebrated by the Jews as the Feast of Trumpets, also known as the Jewish New Year (on the Jewish calendar = Tishri 1 in the year 3760). No one knows the exact date, but the world celebrates the birth of Christ on December 25th for various reasons.

What is more important than the exact date of Christ's birth – is that it was the right time, it was “*the fullness of time*” – politically, culturally, morally, and spiritually. God has put everything in place for the Son of God to leave Heaven and enter our time and space. It was a time of great anticipation among the Jewish people, for a deliverer, as their nation was now under the tyranny and oppression of the ruthless Romans. While it was true that the Jews were being treated harshly by the Romans, it was God's plan that the Roman Empire would be at the height of their power and influence over the known world at the time of Christ's birth and ministry, because they had a significant part to play.

For the first time in history, the Mediterranean world civilization was unified under one super-power. They had constructed the famous Roman roads that would allow messengers to travel safely with news and new ideas far-and-wide, as Paul and the first missionaries would do. Ships, too, had come of age – Egypt, Italy, Syria, Spain, and many other nations shared the water “*highway*” that the Mediterranean Sea had become, making travel easier and quicker to distance ports. Here was yet another means for the message of Christ to spread far-and-wide by ship. Paul often travelled by ship to distant ports around the Mediterranean Sea. There was also the Pax Romana – the “*Roman peace*” that endured for just over 200 years – from 27BC until AD180, which not only meant safe travel throughout the Roman Empire, but that the Romans were permissive about other religions. As long as there wasn't any rebellion or trouble, and the Jews paid their taxes to Rome they could practice their faith freely with very little interference from Rome. Stability, peace, and relative tolerance opened the world to the spread of a new idea; roads and shipping lanes made it happen quickly and efficiently, which paved the way for the Gospel to spread rapidly during the first century!

But there was another key factor: *language* – due to the conquests of Alexander the Great years earlier, the Greek language and Greek culture were widely adopted throughout the entire Mediterranean area. As a result, the shared language of Greek, made it possible for Paul and others to write letters and travel to many countries, telling people the good news of the gospel without cumbersome translation. But, most of all, it was the right time spiritually, the average citizen of Rome was spiritually empty and tired of the same old dead religion, tired of worshipping powerless gods of wood and stone. The Gentiles were open to hear about the one true God, and churches were planted in these ungodly pagan cities throughout the Roman Empire!

As God’s people waited for that first Christmas – we as well often find ourselves in God’s waiting room, waiting for God to come through for us in our various life circumstances. Waiting for healing or recovery from a debilitating medical condition or surgery; waiting for a clear cancer diagnosis; waiting for the final breath of a loved one who is dying in hospice; waiting for a new start after a failed marriage; waiting for a prodigal son/daughter to return home; waiting for a family member to come to the Lord; waiting for you fill in the blank can be painful and difficult. And it can be especially difficult to see God’s hand when you are right in the middle of your “*winter*” season of life. That’s what it was like for the Jewish people, they were expecting, and longing for the Messiah to arrive, for God to fulfill His promises to them – and then, boom, Jesus was born, but most of them missed it.

It’s hard for us to believe how they could have missed it, when their expectations were so high, when they were so desperate for God to show up. How could they have missed the signs of Christ’s coming, except for a few shepherds watching their sheep at night and a caravan of Wisemen from the distant East? However, a helpless baby in a manger born to poor peasants didn’t seem like a great solution to meet the desperate needs of the people at that time. They needed another great deliverer like Moses, or another great king like King David, not a helpless baby. A baby in a manger didn’t seem like a great place to start for the Saviour of the world, but God’s plan was better than the world’s ideas of greatness. Even though it didn’t seem like the solution the people were anticipating and looking for, Jesus ended up being far better than anything God’s people could have imagined. God sent the right solution at the right time, and He continues to do the same for us that gives us hope and builds our faith!

So, as we re-tell the drama of the Christmas story once again this Advent season – we are reminded once again that we can trust the timing of God’s promises. As Paul reminds us in **Romans 8:28**, *“And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”* However, even though we often claim this verse in our time of need, waiting and trusting in God is never easy, but that is what we are called to do as Christ followers. So, even when it seems that waiting takes longer than we had hoped, and even when God’s timing isn’t what we always want or expect, and even when God’s answers don’t make any sense. We must trust that God works for good for those who love Him, and who have been called according to His purpose!

Using a young virgin teenager named Mary, plus an engaged man named Joseph who feels betrayed, plus having to travel a great distance because of an untimely Roman census at nine months of pregnancy, plus having a baby in a smelly unsanitary stable because there was no room in the inn – didn’t seem like a great start for the Saviour of the world. However, God’s plans are very different from our plans, and His ways are different from the ways of this world. That’s why as His followers, we are called to set the example for others, especially for unbelievers, on how to wait patiently on God, and how to trust in Him when life doesn’t make sense or falls apart. When God doesn’t meet our expectations of timing, it’s easy to get discouraged or frustrated – thinking He won’t keep His promises at all. But God’s timing, His plans, and His methods are always better than ours, and that’s been proven to me over-and-over again!

While waiting isn’t easy, it’s often how God builds character, moulding us into the people He wants us to become as we learn to trust in His promises, His plans and His timing. **Proverbs 3:5-6**, *“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.”* As well, **James 1:2-4**, *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”* We are called to be thankful and joyful as we wait upon God to answer our prayers or fulfill our dreams!

So, I want us to begin today, on this first Sunday of Advent – to start preparing our heart for our Christmas 2022 experience, whether we come with great expectations or anxiety and dread. What I want us to think about this morning is that when

Jesus' ministry on this earth ended and He returned to Heaven, on the surface, very little had changed. After three plus years of miracles, healings, casting out demons, raising people from the dead, and numerous lessons taught on the kingdom of God, Jesus only had a very small group of about 120 devoted followers that met in the Upper Room that day when the church was birth on the day of Pentecost. The great majority of the Jews in the nation were still waiting for their Messiah, with life continuing on as per normal. God had promised His people, Israel, a land, but when Jesus ascended back to His heavenly Father, the land was still occupied by Rome. The people expected the promised Messiah to deliver them from Roman rule and restore their land to the glory days of King David and King Solomon; He didn't do that. Then, a few years later, in 70AD, Roman General Titus burned and leveled to the ground the second temple, and in the slaughter that followed throughout the city, Jewish historian Josephus claimed that just over one million Jews were killed, and those that survived were scattered far-and-wide without a homeland until May 14, 1948 when the state of Israel was established.

Jesus had come and after spending about 34 years on this earth has now returned to Heaven to sit at the right hand of the Father and the majority of the Jews were still waiting for God to keep His promises. Even today the Jews are still waiting, wondering about God's promise to King David: ***"Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever"*** (2 Samuel 7:16). And wondering about what Isaiah the prophet said about the promised Messiah, ***"The government will be on his shoulders...of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end"*** (Isaiah 9:6-7). And God's promise to another prophet Zechariah, ***"He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea"*** (Zechariah 9:10). Jesus has come and gone, and nothing seemed to have changed. As well the early Christians expected Jesus to return within their lifetime, during the first century, and when Jesus didn't return and His followers started to die off, they thought they better start writing things down, and thankfully, that's why we have the Gospels and the New Testament letters. These writings tell us that the early Christians remained optimistic that God was ushering in the kingdom of God, and one day Jesus will return and sit on the throne and rule as King, and there would be everlasting peace and His government would never end. And we still wait in anticipation and hope today as we once again celebrate another Christmas season and begin another church year,

the art of waiting on God is the calling on every believer, and how we wait is for Christ's glorious return is important!

The Apostle Paul said this of the time we are still awaiting, ***“At the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father”*** (Philippians 2:10-11). The last living Apostle John, in exile on the island of Patmos, also looked forward to a time when, ***“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away”*** (Revelation 21:4). And then, the Apostle Peter was also looking in anticipation and longing for the day of the Lord's return, ***“looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness dwells”*** (2 Peter 3:13). In His teaching on prayer Jesus taught us to pray these words with faith as we await His return, ***“Thy kingdom come! Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven!”*** (Matthew 6:10) And still today, God's people continue to wait in anticipation and hope for His glorious return!

As we look at the Bible – it seems that God's promises come in two installments. What we celebrate today as Christmas is the first installment. God kept His promise, as Paul writes to the Galatians, ***“When the time had fully come, God sent His Son”*** (Galatians 4:4). In the first installment, God sent His Son as our Saviour to live a sinless life and give His life on the cross as a ransom, as payment for our sins. And then three days later Jesus rose from the dead, the first to rise from the dead; thereby, defeating death, and giving those who put their trust and faith in Jesus the gift of salvation, and the promise of resurrection, new restored bodies and an eternal home in heaven. But 2000 years have passed, and we are still waiting for the second installment when Jesus will fulfill the rest of God's promises to us and reign forever as king-of-kings and lord-of-lords. Therefore, if God has given us this down payment called Christmas, so that our faith should never falter as we are anticipating and expecting another arrival of Jesus. So, just as God sent His Son *“in the fullness of time”* at that very first Christmas, He'll do it again a second time as well in the same manner at His return – *“in the fullness of time.”*

Just as God had the date of Jesus birth circled on His calendar from the beginning of time; God also has the date of Jesus second coming circled on His calendar as well. However, along with the saints from the past 2000 years, we also wonder and ask, *“Will Jesus really come back as He promised in my lifetime?”* *“Will God*

keep His promises?” The Christmas story answers that question with a resounding, **YES!** Peter also addressed this question, warning us in the last day scoffers will come and say, **“Where is this ‘coming’ He promised?”** (2 Peter 3:4) And when these scoffers come, we need not despair and lose hope, but remember, **“With the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years is like one day. The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. Instead, he is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone come to repentance”** (2 Peter 3:8-9).

As we continue to wait – another important question to ask is this: **“How do we prepare for Christ’s Return?”** To prepare the people for Christ’s first coming, the beginning of Mark’s Gospel – **Mark 1:1-8** tells us that God sent a messenger, John the Baptist, to make sure the people weren’t caught off guard. I believe that God still sends messengers ahead of Christ’s second coming today, to prepare the way for Christ’s return so that people won’t be caught off guard, and I believe those messengers today are you and I, the body of Christ, the members of His church, who are to stand out in the crowd, pointing others to Christ, to **“the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world,”** but hopefully not look as strange and peculiar as John did: **“John wore clothing made of camel hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.”**

Even if we don’t look like John the Baptist, our message is still the same – **“John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins,”** (Mark 1:4). Like John the Baptist, forgiveness and repentance is the message that the church must proclaim to this world filled with jealousy, greed, and hate, and we can only do that as we set the example for others as we pray, **“Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive others.”** We model forgiveness and reconciliation to others! We set the example for others to follow! But then we also must tell others that God is a God of justice, and therefore, must judge sin. God’s justice must bring wrath and people don’t like to hear about God’s wrath, they would much rather hear about God’s love, grace, and mercy especially during the Christmas season. The truth is that a God of love must also be a God of justice, so He is currently being very patient with us, giving ample time for people to come to their senses, and accept Jesus as their Lord and Saviour before Christ returns!

Thankfully God continues to wait for us to choose Him during another Christmas season, but how many more Christmas seasons do we have? The true meaning of

Christmas is not what it has turned into over the years. The true meaning of Christmas for the church is that Jesus came once as a suffering servant to bring salvation to this world, and He will return as judge to bring justice! So, as we wait, we have been called to be His messenger as it is written by Isaiah the prophet and restated in **Mark 1:2-3**: ***“I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way – a voice of one calling in the wilderness, prepare the way for the Lord, make straight a path for him.”*** Like John the Baptist, God is sending His messenger to our family members, to our neighbours, to the people we work with, and to everyone we come in contact with who are going through life blindly, with a false confidence that Jesus is not returning to punish sin, is not returning to bring justice, and is not returning soon, but like His first coming, God wants everyone prepared for His second coming and not miss out!

Waiting for God to keep His promises is never easy. It always takes longer than we'd hoped, but one thing we experience in the Christmas story is that God keeps His promises. As God caught almost everyone by surprise at His first visit, may He not catch us by surprise at this second visit. Be ready and waiting, and be a John the Baptist, preparing the way for those around you who don't Jesus as their Lord and Saviour. The angel told Joseph in a dream, ***“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins”*** (Matthew 1:21). The gift of Christ, the gift of salvation is the best Christmas present that anyone can receive. May you be the bearer of that good news to those around you this Christmas!