

“Are You Waiting For Christmas This Year?”

Preached at The Royal Poinciana Chapel on 12/3/1995

Text: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined.”

Isaiah 9:2

Well, my friends, are you waiting for Christmas this year? Eight hundred years before Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the King, the Prophets set up a watch, waiting for Him to come. Eight centuries . . . that is like 1100 A.D. until now, a long, long time. . . . Oh, did they need a Messiah. Something was wrong with their world. The good people were losing ground. No matter how hard they tried, no matter what they did, and no matter what they said, whether there was controversy, confrontation, compromise, pleading or encouraging, people kept on doing what they wanted to do. Isaiah knew, and Micah did, too. Jeremiah and all the others . . . knew what was wrong.

The problem was that the sin and selfishness of man was contrasted against the perfection of God. As long as sin ruled in the world and in their mortal bodies, nothing new would ever come. As holy as they were, and they were holy men indeed, they learned the frustration that there was nothing on earth they could do about it. No one else could help. It would take a Saviour, Christ the Lord, to turn it all around.

It always has been this way, that way, I mean . . . hasn't it, and that is our situation too, today. We keep trying to make a world the better place; at least most of us do most of the time. Yet, two thousand years after the first Christmas, look around . . . it still is not working. We too, as Isaiah said, need a Prophet with the power . . . a Saviour who is Christ the Lord, to switch directions again. When he set up the original watch, Isaiah said the day will come when God will send His man. Then, the people who walked in darkness will see a great light; those who dwelt in the land of the Shadow of Death, on them will the light shine. The boots of the trampling warriors will be finally stopped, and peace will come to earth . . . "For unto us a child is born . . . unto us a son will be given, and the government should be upon His shoulders, and His name would be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace."

He will come. He came once. He will come again. In Chapter 11 Isaiah added that even if the whole tree of David is cut down, a little sprig will grow out of the side ("a shoot"). The spirit of the Lord would rest upon Him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and of might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. When that day comes, the wolf will lie down with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid. The calf and the lion will walk alone together, holding paws and hoofs, I guess, and a little child will lead them. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.

You might say it this way: The Prophet Isaiah gave up on the people of his day. Or at least, he seems to be saying that God had given up on them. The world would have to wait until

that new day would come. "Eight hundred years, Lord?" That is a long, long time. . . . I won't even be here . . . and neither will you . . . eight hundred years. . . . Why can't you do it tomorrow morning?

Really, when you think about it, the watch and the wait were in place far longer than that. It began at the Beginning, whenever that was, in the Garden of Eden, wherever that was. God intended the earth to be a place of beauty and harmony, a Paradise on this planet . . . that was what he intended. Then came the sin of Adam . . . the sin of Eve . . . the sins of all of us.

The author of Genesis was looking around the Garden . . . sometimes the world is like a Paradise. Louis Armstrong used to sing "What A Wonderful World," he could persuade me with the glory of his song.

When you look around, as the author of Genesis did, what do you see? You see Paradise as he knew it, but then you see the people East of Eden, with their noses pressed against the screen, unable to return, the flaming Cherubim guarding against their way back. . . . You see, the author of Genesis was fed up . . . worried over the moral-spiritual situation of the day. Why can't it be easier? Why is it so confused and complicated, such an enigma. . . . I will tell you what he says. The reason is the sin of man, which caused it then, and causes it now. He, too, said it would be a long, long time. . . . It is a long road home to Christmas.

After Eden, and Noah, came the day when God reached down and tapped young Abraham on the shoulder. Then came Isaac, and Jacob, and Joseph. God was waiting all the while. The people languished in Egypt, and then came Moses. . . . "Oh boy, we have a Saviour now to lead us to the Promised Land!" And you know what happened when they got there: they forgot the God who brought them there. I mean, sometimes it takes a long, long time. the patience of the Lord is what we have to depend upon.

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The Bible assures us that the day will come when the Messiah will be born, and more, that he can be born in you. Turn the page now to the story of our lives for a moment. Are you waiting for Christmas this year? If not, what else will you be waiting for? Sometimes it takes a long, long time.

I grew up in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. I was a Pittsburgh Pirate fan all through the early fifties and we had a team then, the O'Brien twins, and Stanislas Rojeck, and Tiny Bonham, and Rip Sewell. Ended up in last place every year. That was when I first heard the expression: "Wait till next year!" And they used to say that in Philadelphia in the early part of the century, when for thirty years the Athletics were in last place, except for one year, I think, and then the Bums said in Brooklyn: "Wait till next year!" They have been saying it in Chicago since 1946, the Cubby fans at least: "Wait till next year!" You know what I mean?

In Pittsburgh, we even tried to hurry the time along as we put up the Greenberg Gardens when Hank came, and we made left field a little shorter, so Ralph Kiner and Hank could pop home runs right into it. But we forgot the other team had the same boundaries, and they knocked their home runs in, and the Pirates lost again. We were kids then, and we kept saying: "Wait till next year!" It was hopeful; the first time I heard it. Oh boy, just wait! The, it

became a shout of derision. . . . Wait another year, my foot, everybody knows what it is to wait. The Dolphins know all about it, too.

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So, are you waiting for Christmas? For Christ to come, I mean, this year, waiting for something new and great and mighty . . . not next year . . . this one! There are two kinds of people I know who wait. Some of them wait because they have to . . . there is no other choice. Let me give you two examples:

A friend of mine whom I know and love and work with was in Hungary at the time when much like in Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Russia, the guards could do anything they wanted. It was jungle rule all throughout the land. Many escaped, the Freedom Fighters, thank God for them -- some are here today, who went through that horrible time when, if a guard decided you were done, done you were. It took a long time for this friend to finally tell me -- you have to trust someone before you share this kind of thing, but she will not mind me sharing it with you.

She told me that one day, without warning, her brother disappeared, a young man, 22 years old. And when he disappeared, they had an inkling of the worst that probably happened, but no one really knew for sure. (Are you listening?) So, she said: "We began to pray and wait. And we took turns standing by the window, looking out, in hopes that one day he would appear around the corner and come home. And every time we heard footsteps on the lawn, or someone rang the bell, every time we saw someone who looked even a tiny bit like him, our hopes rose and we thought sure, around that bend, brother would show up any time now. . . ."

Did you get it? That absolute intensity, every nerve and sinew, every thought and hope waited for the possibility that he would one day come. That story does not have a happy ending, but I want you to take the intensity of what you would feel if you were there . . . that anxiety, that searching, that waiting, and apply it to Advent with the same powerful active expectation, standing at the window every moment of the season, hoping that around that corner Jesus Christ will come to you.

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Think about the times you had to wait, like for a job offer that didn't come. It is hard to be unemployed, out of money. Like waiting for a sweetheart to propose. That is old-fashioned, but I know plenty of women and men waiting for the other to say "Yes," begging almost sometimes. It is hard to wait for a loved one to come to his senses, a child maybe. That is what it said in the Bible about the Prodigal Son. He spent all his money like a drunken sailor, and he "came to his senses." Can you remember a time when you had to wait? Like little Mary waiting for the birth of her child. We romanticize the trip to Bethlehem, but think of it from her point of view. Joseph went home to be taxed because he was with the House of David. And you paid your taxes in Bethlehem . . . but he took Mary with him, being great with child. I often wonder if she tried to rebel. I mean, eight months with child and riding 70 miles on the back of a donkey. She had a long wait. Like waiting for the Dolphins to win the Super Bowl.

Are you waiting for Christmas this year? I remember when we were small at home my dad and mother trimmed the tree and decorated the house all after we went to bed. We waited so long for Christmas to come, I think we believed in Santa Claus until we were 20 . . . or 10 anyway.

Some people, as I said, wait because they are forced to . . . waiting for someone you love to call you, and the phone does not ring; waiting for the x-rays to return, for the mail to arrive; or old folks in homes waiting just for someone to visit, for sons and brothers, daughters and husbands.

Parents have to wait for children to grow up, but children have to wait sometimes for parents to grow up, too. Some wait for a closing on property at this bad season in the land. Others wait for prison terms to be over; many wait just to get well again. Some simply wait out the end, because there is no choice . . . and there is so much more. but, some people wait, because they have to. Right?

But watch it . . . others wait because they choose to. Some people I know are waiting, as it were, all the time. It is sort of like a joke, only it is not very funny, if you are close to them. It is laughable, but it is not very funny, if you are the one who is waiting for them to change. I touch no person I know here, it is a composite of a thousand people I have known throughout the years, but if the shoe fits, wear it.

Some of God's children just bounce around, making promises and excuses with equal regularity. Their lives are anchored to the wind, and I do not mean the wind of the spirit -- I mean the wind that blows up and down the street. They flap about with every breeze, anchored to nothing, no destination in sight, except what seems to look good at the moment, and more excuses they make, and more promises. . . . "Someday my ship will come in, Honey, and we will be fine . . . someday."

Come off it, Charlie! You are not going to be fine, and your ship is not coming in. You need a radical reversal, a quick turnaround. You need to head for Bethlehem, as fast as you can get there, or you will hear the same old refrain as the days turn into decades, sung in a much lower key: "Where is the life I have lost in the living? (T. S. Eliot) Where did it go?" One of my favorite little poems:

"He was going to be all that a mortal should be	-- To-morrow.
No one would be kinder or braver than he	-- To-morrow.
A friend who was troubled and weary he knew, Who'd be glad of a lift, and who needed it, too; On him he would call and see what he could do	-- To-morrow.
Each morning he stacked up the letters he'd write	-- To-morrow.
And thought of the folks he would fill with delight	-- To-morrow.

It was too bad, indeed, he was busy to-day,
And hadn't a minute to stop on his way;
More time he would have to give others, he'd say

-- To-morrow.

The greatest of Christians this man would have been

-- To-morrow.

The world would have known him had he ever seen

-- To-morrow.

But the fact is, he died, and he faded from view,
And all that he left when living was through
Was a mountain of things he intended to do

-- To-morrow."

Come off it, Sally, Tom, and Bill! . . . Do not delay Christmas, and the gift you need this year.

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Let's end with some words from Luke. Zechariah and Elizabeth had been waiting too. They were growing older, and they still had not been blessed with a child. Then, one day, out of the blue, God decided it was time. The angel came and said, "Elizabeth, you are going to have a baby. . . . Zechariah, you will be a father." Zechariah did not believe him, so God struck him dumb, and told him to call the baby John.

These verses of Luke 1:67-79 have a magnificent part of the liturgy, particularly of the Latin liturgy of the Church, the Benedictus, a marvelous song, blessing God for all His favor. But I want you to think of it more personally.

I want you to think of it if you ever had a child, or know anyone who does, as a song that a father would sing to his son. That is exactly what it is, particularly when we get to Verses 76-79. Zechariah is telling his son what he wants him to be. He had waited, and in God's time the son came. Now, what would you say to your son or daughter, or what would you have had your parents say to you the day that you were born?

The first thing he said was, "You, my son, will be called the Prophet of the Most High. You will go before the Lord to prepare His way." The number one duty, son and daughter, parents, the number one duty is to prepare the way of the Lord, and to be ready when He comes. "I don't care how much money he makes," one father said, "I would rather he be in church each Sunday morning. I'd rather he find the power of Christ within his soul."

Secondly, Zechariah said, "go give knowledge to the people, John, when you are grown. Tell them salvation will come in the forgiveness of their sins." Now, wait a minute. Isn't that what the author of Genesis said, and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Micah? Sure. . . . There is our number one problem, staring us back in the face -- until we find in Christ the forgiveness of our sins, offered as a gift . . . this Christmas. Otherwise, we will walk in darkness forever.

Lastly, Zechariah told his son: "The dawn on high will come when Jesus Christ is born. The dawn will finally break. The long night of our waiting is finally over, John. You arrived

punctually on time. Use your life reflecting His -- give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow."

Then, whatever happens, even the worst (Remember what happened . . . the worst came to Zechariah's only son), you will be a blessing to your mother and me. If you remain true to what God wants of you: to prepare the way for Jesus Christ, you will be a joy to us and a help to all the world." The Bible adds: "The child grew and became strong in spirit" . . . and he did what Zechariah asked. He waited for the Christ, and found Him.

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We are done, but let me ask you one more time: Are you waiting for Christmas this year? But just a minute . . . maybe that is not quite the right question. Maybe I should have called the sermon, "Are You Waiting For Christ To Come To You This Christmas?" For if you are not, what are you waiting for? If you miss it this Christmas, I guarantee you, you will be in darkness all the days of your life. Glory be to God on High, who in Jesus Christ gives us the light we need. For now and evermore. Amen.