

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
December 25, 2016

What Do You Expect?

Isaiah 62:1-12

I don't know what your expectations were for this day, but I do know that sometimes Christmas Day can seem anticlimactic, especially compared to Christmas Eve when we gather to worship and to rejoice in our Savior's birth. Or at least by the time we reach late morning on Christmas Day, it can start to feel like the energy and excitement have peaked, and we begin transitioning into a more relaxed afternoon full of food and reunion with relatives. Then, as night comes and the day draws to a close, we'll be in a better position to reflect on what we hoped this day would be, and how it actually turned out.

During my Christmas shopping, I came across a Clark Griswold tree ornament. Some of you remember Clark's hopes and heartaches in National Lampoon's *Christmas Vacation*. Chevy Chase plays the part of the dad who wants to give his family the best Christmas ever. He dreams of getting the perfect Christmas tree, but when he and his family forget to bring any tools to cut it down, they're forced to uproot it. He blankets the house with twinkle lights, which initially don't work because he has accidentally wired them through the garage light switch. When they do come on, it causes a city-wide power outage. Soon Clark is shocked to learn that his wife's cousin and her dense but bighearted husband Eddie have arrived unannounced with their children and their pet Rotweiler. Near the end of the movie, instead of getting the Christmas bonus he was planning to use to help pay for a swimming pool, Clark receives a free year's membership for the Jelly of the Month Club. He launches into a tirade that leads to cousin Eddie kidnapping Clark's boss. Clearly not the ideal Christmas that Clark dreamed of.

The tree ornament I spotted shows Clark standing there with a hapless look on his face, holding the dried out turkey carcass that left everyone disappointed. If you push the button on the ornament, you hear Clark's senile Aunt Bethany who, when asked to say the blessing, says, "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands." Then everyone joins in, "One nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." To which Clarks says, "Amen!"

Christmas hopes and Christmas dreams are one thing, but Christmas realities are another. Speaking of Christmas dreams, just down the row from the Clark Griswold ornament was the Wizard of Oz Emerald City ornament. As the product description on the Hallmark website summarizes it: "Behold the 'brightness and glory' of Emerald City at the end of the famous Yellow Brick Road, which Dorothy and friends faithfully followed." When you push the button, the city illuminates and sparkles, as the song "We're Off to See the Wizard" plays in the background. Compared to the Clark Griswold ornament, this item focuses more on shiny dreams than on dashed hopes.

In today's Scripture passage, God's people are occupying the strange territory between shiny dreams and seemingly dashed hopes. They have no yellow brick road, only a poorly maintained path through harsh wilderness, cluttered with rocks that impede smooth travel. At the end of this route stands not a glistening city, but a city in ruins. It's the holy city of Jerusalem. Its walls lay broken and breached. Its temple has been wrecked and looted. Its royal palace stands empty, in desperate need of repair. True, some initial restoration

has been done by the first round of Judeans returning from Babylonian exile. But now years have passed, and it's obvious that the work of rebuilding will be much harder and slower than expected. Earlier in Isaiah, God had promised renewal, restoration, and transformation, on a grand scale. But the current state of affairs looks anything but grand. Stirring visions, heightened hopes, and dreams of salvation are one thing. But conditions on the ground, where the redeemed still roam around in the rubble, are another. So it's going to take more than brick and mortar to reconstruct Zion. The people's emotional and psychological infrastructure needs major repair too.

In view of the huge gap between God's dreams and his people's realities, can they continue to trust the prophetic promises? Should they hold onto the visions of salvation given through God's messenger, or should they just give up and toss God's declarations of deliverance onto the growing pile of urban debris?

The prophet tells the people not to become so riveted on the wreckage that they lose sight of the city walls. That's where watchmen will be posted. Their job is to pray for the city unceasingly, to pester God day and night, until the restoration of Jerusalem is complete. These soldiers who keep watch have the sacred duty of reminding God of his promises and holding him to his word. Shift after shift, around the clock, they'll remember and recite what God has sworn to do.

The promises of God remain the foundation of our lives, and the basis for our hope, at Christmas and year round. In today's text, the prophet says, "The Lord has made proclamation to the ends of the earth: 'Say to the daughter of Zion, "See, your Savior comes! See, his reward is with him, and his recompense accompanies him"'" (v.11). See this infant resting in a feeding trough. See God's unfailing love for this lost world. See his faithfulness to his word. See his will to rescue us, forgive us, and restore us. See his determination to judge and to save. See his commitment to set things right in his broken creation and to establish his reign. See, your Savior comes!

For us, that's both past tense and future tense. Our hope is solidly grounded in the reality that God, in Christ, has come, and will come again. And as we live in this period between God's first advent and his final advent, we too, as God's people, need to have our hopes stirred and our expectations heightened.

I think some of that happens during Christmas, just because of the nature of the season. For many of us, expectations rise. Our imaginations get stirred. We start to envision how things could be better, in our lives and in the world. Maybe I could do more for the poor and needy. Maybe peace really could come about in a particular part of the world. Maybe that broken relationship with my relative could be healed. Maybe I could spend less time at work and more time with my children. Maybe I could get more involved in my neighborhood or community. Maybe I could break out of that pattern of behavior that harms me and those around me, and displeases God. Maybe this Christmas, things really could change.

Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard told a story about a goose who was wounded and landed in a barnyard with some chickens. He played with the chickens and ate with the chickens. And after a while, he thought he was a chicken. Then one day a flight of geese came over, migrating to their home. They gave a honk up there in the sky, and the goose heard it. Kierkegaard said, "Something stirred within the breast of this goose. Something called him to the skies. He began to flap the wings he hadn't used, and he rose a few feet into the air. Then he stopped, and he settled back again into the mud of the barnyard. He heard the cry, but he settled for less."¹ Maybe that's part of what happens to us at Christmastime. Our hopes and expectations rise. We envision new possibilities for

ourselves, for our families, for our church, and for the world. But then various things happen, time proceeds, and we end up settling back into the familiarity of what we are and where we are, instead of moving further into the new reality created by God's promises.

But then Christmas comes around again, and we join the angels in singing, "Glory to the newborn King; / Peace on earth, and mercy mild; / God and sinners reconciled.' / Joyful, all ye nations rise, / Join the triumph of the skies." That's no small dream with scaled down expectations. That's a grand vision of God's sovereignty and glory. And when we sing it, we declare that no matter how much things in the world and in our lives seem to overwhelm this vision of God's glory, and no matter how much they attempt to topple our hope, we still hold to God's promises. What's more, we hold God to those promises, knowing that he has called us, and claimed us, and made us his own through Christ. We belong to him and to the future that has already been set in motion by his coming.

Jeremie Begbie tells a story about attending a worship service in a poor South African township. He says:

I was told, immediately before the service, that a house around the corner had just been burned to the ground because the man who lived there was a suspected thief. A week before that, a tornado had cut through the township, ripping apart fifty homes; five people had been killed. And then I was told that the very night before, a gang hounded down a fourteen-year-old, a member of the church's Sunday school, and stabbed him to death.

The pastor began his opening prayer: "Lord, you are the Creator and the Sovereign, but why did the wind come like a snake and tear our roofs off? Why did a mob cut short the life of one of our own children, when he had everything to live for? Over and over again, Lord, we are in the midst of death."

As he spoke, the congregation responded with a dreadful sighing and groaning. And then, once he finished his prayer, very slowly, the whole congregation began to sing, at first very quietly, then louder. They sang and they sang, song after song of praise—praise to a God who in Jesus had plunged into the very worst to give us a promise of an ending beyond all imagining. The singing gave the congregation a foretaste of the end.²

I like Begbie's description: Jesus "plunged into the very worst to give us a promise of an ending beyond all imagining." In one respect, that plunge into suffering and death, and the resurrection that followed, began with Jesus' birth, as God entered into the rubble of this world in order to redeem, rebuild, and restore, to accomplish what only he could accomplish.

Because of what God has accomplished, and because of his promise to complete that accomplishment, we don't stop expecting. Though nostalgia can be good, and often dominates the mood this time of the year, we don't idealize the past and try to set up residence there. Instead, we occupy the present, as fully as we can, letting God's word of promise energize us and empower us for living faithfully and righteously. And all the while we keep watch for the fulfillment of what God has sworn to do.

So on this Christmas Day, the last Sunday of the year, we reflect on what we can expect of God, and with that, what God expects of us. What you expect of yourself. What we expect of each other. Because of Christ's coming, we don't let go of the vision. We don't relinquish our hope. We never stop expecting.

¹ As told by Leighton Ford in his sermon, "Hope for a Great Forever." Preaching Today, Tape no. 96.

² Jeremie S. Begbie, "The Sense of an Ending," in *A Place for Truth: Leading Thinkers Explore Life's Hardest Questions*, ed. Dallas Willard (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2010) n.p.