

“There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken.

Then they will see ‘the Son of Man coming in a cloud’ with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.”

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Advent is the season of waiting and watching. Our Advent devotional theme for this year, if you choose to take a stab at writing a piece to share, is “What are we waiting for?” So it’s wait, and watch. And for today, rather than having you wait for this sermon, I’ll take on the watching; the rest of the week we can wait.

So, what are you watching for? Any idea? We tend to emphasize the preparation of our hearts and lives as the focus of our waiting, with much less emphasis on the watching. One reason we do this is because barely the only watching that we do this season is for the weather forecaster to describe Santa’s flight path from NORAD on Christmas Eve. (Have you ever done that- tracked Santa’s path from the NORAD site in Colorado Springs... It’s pretty cool!) “You’d better watch out, you’d better not cry... and you know why”....

So for us this first Sunday of Advent, what are we to watch for? Might it be for the Second Coming? And if so, what are we to look for, exactly? If it’s for Turkish rockets & Russian jets leading to who knows what comes next, I think we’re on the wrong track... What do we believe about Jesus’ second coming that might help us in our watching? Do we even know enough about it to know what to look for?

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This first Sunday Advent is a busy morning, premiering the wreath liturgy, reintroducing Advent hymns and, perhaps, jotting down your early season to-do list on the margins of the bulletin... . How can anything we do here help us in our watching?

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote that Advent is like sitting in a prison cell. One cannot do anything except hope, pray, and wait; deliverance must come from the outside.

But the hoping and praying in and of themselves are in fact are interior signs of an outward happening. It’s not that the hoping and praying makes things happen, but just the same, the hoping and praying are all part of a larger process at work, of which hoping and praying are part.

When there is a change in the weather, they say you can smell it. When someone has something they are going to surprise you with, you can sense something is going on. We can read the signs.

The signs that Christmas is coming are already pretty obvious; easy to watch. Decorations are up in more places than last year, already. TV commercials feature Santa Claus, Rudolf the Reindeer and ubiquitous scenes of glorious shopping. The mail is full of catalogs. There is also simply the flip of the calendar from November to December that we will do, soon.

Our Christmas expectations can run high this early on; but as we well know from experience, the joyful anticipation in the air is not always matched by the reality of what will happen four weeks from now.

If our watching is only focused on a date four weeks away, we may well be missing a vital part of what it is we are meant to see, even now.

On this first Sunday in Advent our scripture lesson is a rather unusual sounding passage which bears little resemblance to our Advent preparations, yet has something very important to say about our Christmas expectations. The words from Luke are a clue that what we should be watching for at the beginning of this season is not necessarily about what we think we want. God has different, and better gifts in store for us than we know.

While the ‘theme song’ for this first Sunday of Advent may be ‘Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus’, let me propose today a slight change to that title; it might better be: ‘Come, Thou Long Un-expected Jesus’. Because the story that we receive today is not the same as the one that we think we’re getting.

The first Christmas had the opening sign of an old woman (Anna) suddenly ready to give birth to a son, oddly named John, by his father Zechariah who himself was suddenly made mute, unable to talk. The second sign of Christmas was a virgin named Mary who somehow became pregnant and whose betrothed, Joseph, was a strong enough man to trust and believe.

The unexpected happens, and we regard it as a story for the ages. So, what are we to watch for in Advent? What do we need to be alert to? Why, to be practically minded about this, why get ready to commemorate an event of the past when the future and its last day is still coming? How does looking in the rear-view mirror help us get to where we need to be in the future?

Because the unexpected is always bound to happen, and when the unexpected has already happened, we can actually learn from it, when we pay close attention.

So, what about the signs in the sun and moon and stars? What about the Son of Man coming in a cloud with power and great glory? How are we to get ready? After all, this last day is the day of God’s arrival. This last day is also referred to, in some circles, as the Day of Judgment; of us being judged. And that’s not all bad news- trust me.

Expectation and reality are sometimes quite different things. The baby who is born in the manger becomes the Christ who is for us judge as well as savior, and the scene of glorious, triumphal return is also the place where all deeds are exposed.

What will that judgment look like? Will God just count the good deeds and subtract the bad ones and, hopefully, there will still be enough good deeds left to call us good. How can we be judged good if we have done evil? And if we have done wrong, could our good deeds not make up for them? A judgment is worrisome. Such a judgment might well make us afraid of what God will do to us and that we'll become deathly afraid of God.

How do we get ready for the judgment? (Hmmm..... )  
(The answer is, in the same way we get ready for Advent, with anticipation, hope and deep, deep, joy.) We get ready for judgment, and the birth of our savior because Christmas is our redemption drawing near to us.

It just takes a little good theology to unravel this.

Christmas, the birth of Jesus, is not about judgment, but about our redemption. Jesus is born to redeem us, to wipe our slate of sins clean, to free us from the final measuring of our lives. Jesus comes, not to measure or judge, but to forgive the wrong doers, to forgive those who have done evil, to forgive those who do not love God enough and who are drawn away from God by other things. Jesus is doing a new thing with us. Instead of judgment, he brings forgiveness. Instead of condemnation, he brings mercy. Instead of accusing us he marks us with his love.

Jesus is born to be judged. Jesus comes to be condemned in our place. Jesus comes to die for us, in our place, taking that judgment that is coming and making it happen ahead of schedule. He suffers all of God's judgment and then God, out of love for us and for Jesus, raises Jesus up to life. God then lifts up Jesus above judgment. In Jesus, God puts mercy over measuring, forgiveness over condemnation.

It is all very easy to get discouraged that judgment, evil and wars and rumors of wars are always present, and then to allow fear to get the better of us, or to think that somehow we can shop our way out of our worries; trying to ensure that at least for one more day, Dec. 25, we will have some peace and quiet. And that's not a bad thing in and of itself; but if that all there is to our holiday planning, our Advent preparations, then we have missed the boat.

When things looks their worst, remember that Christians have been there before. Through the ages our brothers and sisters in Christ; even our parents, grandparents & more, have been through far more difficult times than ours... and God in Christ sustained them.

When we feel that things are dark, then it is for us to allow God's spirit to shine in & through us. There are signs of hope in the midst of distress and confusion. The candles we use at Advent are signs of the light that already shines in and through us, the small differences we make for others, that when pulled together make a huge difference for

others: prayers for those in surgery, comfort for those waiting on a loved one, peace for those chronically unsettled.... all pointing out the fact that Christ's coming is real; that it has been, and will continue to be, very real, and instrumental. Love for the downtrodden, mercy for the refugee, unexpected grace that becomes part of who we are and how we behave, in the model of Jesus humble and upside down arrival; a king born in a manger, a infant judge born to take on our sin.

You are the only one who will know the right and best thing for you to do to show Christ's arrival and forgiveness in your life. But do it, you must, to help bring your most faithful Advent into being.

Look at the future with eyes of hope! Christ is coming! The unexpected but promising opportunity awaits us all to be able to judge others as kindly as we ourselves have been judged, loved and forgiven by Our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Christmas carols are among the songs that we sing most frequently, the ones that we have most memorized—at least the first stanza of many of our familiar Christmas carols, we know by heart. And when you know a song by heart, one of the temptations you have is to sing it without ever thinking once what you're singing to the Lord.

We want these carols to serve as windows onto the biblical story. These carols are designed to poetically express truths based directly on particular Scripture passages, especially out of the gospels about the birth of Jesus Christ and its significance for us as His redeemed people. We want to use these carols as windows onto that glorious redemptive story contained in the word of God.

We not only want to understand the words better; we not only want to use the carols as a window onto the biblical story.

It was published in a collection of hymns in 1744 called, *Hymns on The Nativity of Our Lord*, and so their theme was the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. ...in these two stanzas alone of this carol, there are sixteen distinct scriptural allusions to be found in just these two stanzas. If you will look, there are eight phrases in the first stanza, and there are eight phrases in the second stanza, and each of them contains a beautiful allusion to biblical truth.

First there are the words, "Come, Thou long-expected Jesus." That asks us to look at the first coming of Christ from the perspective of an Old Testament saint.

For the Old Testament saint, Jesus' first coming has not yet occurred, and so we are asked to take the position of an Old Testament saint, not unlike Simeon in the passage from Luke that we're going to read today, and look at the coming of Christ with a longing expectation that the Messiah is coming into the world.

But there is an irony in Charles Wesley's very first words. He says: "Come, Thou long-expected...Jesus." That is a name that the Old Testament saint did not have the privilege of knowing. The Old Testament saint longed for the coming of Messiah, but he didn't know

that Messiah would be Jesus, and as new covenant saints we have the privilege of calling upon the name of the person of the Messiah.

Look at the phrase “From our sins and fears release us...” Here Wesley tells you what Jesus came to deliver us from: from our sin, from our guilt, from our fear of condemnation. Jesus the Messiah, our Savior, came to deliver us from sin and misery, and from the dread of God's judgment.

In fact, this theme continues on in another phrase of the first stanza: “Dear Desire of every nation...” Here Wesley is reminding us that Jesus the Messiah is the one, the only one, who can answer the need, the deepest need, of every land and every people. He is the only hope of salvation for every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And in another phrase of the first stanza, he says “...Joy of every longing heart.” And there

Wesley is telling us that Jesus is the joyful answer to the heart longing for peace with God. If there is a heart that longs for peace with God, for reconciliation with God, for communion to be restored with God, Jesus is the only one who can give a heart that joy. Now look at stanza four, and we'll continue on.

Another idea that we see in Wesley's two stanzas is found in this phrase: “...born, Thy people to deliver.” He's saying there that Jesus the Messiah was born. He became a human. He was incarnate for the purpose of our redemption. That was the purpose of his being born into this world.

In the very next words, “...born a child, and yet a king...” presents one of those ironies of the Christmas story, doesn't it? Jesus, though He is born as a child—obscure, un-looked for by His contemporaries—was yet the king of His people. “Born a child, and yet a king.”

Next, “...now Thy gracious kingdom bring.” When we pray the Lord's Prayer together, as we did this morning, one of the things that we pray to God is “Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.” This is a like petition: Thy gracious kingdom bring. It's a petition for Jesus' reign to come in us now. We're saying, ‘Lord Jesus, come and reign among us. Come and reign in us now.’”

The fifteenth petition is: “By Thine all-sufficient merit...” There we find in that phrase a petition for God to save His people by the merit of Jesus Christ. And it's one of my favorite phrases in all of this Christmas carol. It acknowledges that only Jesus' work, only Jesus' perfection, only His perfect obedience can save us. Our merits cannot save us, they will only condemn us; our works cannot save us, they will only condemn us. But Christ's work, Christ's fulfillment of the Law, Christ's perfect life, Christ's death on our behalf fulfilling the penal sanctions of the Law—these things save us, and so we sing this petition: “Lord, save us by Thine all-sufficient merit.”

And then finally, the sixteenth phrase: “Raise us to Thy glorious throne.” This calls on Christ, by His own merit and grace, to completely save us and to bring us into everlasting communion with the living God. And when we sing those two stanzas of this glorious Christmas carol after the service, all of those ideas are wrapped up; so, you see why you

have to understand what you're singing ahead of time, because the thoughts fly by as you lift them up in praise and petition to God. But how rich are the biblical ideas of that Christmas carol!

We're going to look at three particular truths that are found among those sixteen ideas based on Scripture: Luke, chapter two, verse twenty-one.

I want you to see three themes: the theme of Jesus' fulfillment of the Law; the theme of Jesus as the fulfillment of the promises of God; and the theme of the necessity of faith in Jesus.