

THE FIRST OF THE ADVENT CANDLES: EXPECTATION AND HOPE

The Advent Candles are just a manmade tradition, but they do have Biblical wisdom behind them. This first candle symbolizes the Christmas “Expectation and Hope.” Expectation can be a very powerful thing.

When I think of the power of expectation, I think of the first trip our family took to Mackinac Island. I had enough travel points to get us a Quality Inn room for a week. Kathy loves being by the water so we planned for months to go to the Upper Peninsula side, in St. Ignace, and be right on the shore.

When we get in the area, I see a sign for a Quality Inn and take a turn. It seems like we’re heading away from the lake, but we keep going, after all, it’s a Quality Inn. Well, the U.P. is known for two things; lake vacations and hunting. And when we got to this hotel, it was all about hunting. It was logs and antlers and no water in sight. It didn’t look like the picture and nothing like Kathy was expecting.

She put on a brave face, but when Kathy gets really quiet in the face of disappointment, it’s a bad thing. She’s saying, “Well, we’ll make the best of it.” I say, in desperation really, “Let me go inside and make sure we’re at the right place.”

To my relief, I had turned the wrong way and they directed me back toward the town. It was a sunny day and when we got to the right Quality Inn, the lake was a sparkling blue and it radiated right through the big windows on either side of each hotel room. It was absolutely beautiful. This time Kathy did cry, but happy tears. After the disappointment, the hotel was even more than we expected. Expectation is a powerful thing!

In the context of the Christmas story, what was the expectation? What were they hoping for? Sure, we can offer a pat answer with 2000 years of hindsight, but if we really look at the situation, we’ll find the answer isn’t that straight forward and we stand to learn something if we really look.

When it comes to expectation, even positive expectation; we are often at odds with God, and for a very simple reason:

We are finite, we all live on surprisingly short strand of the timeline. So, our expectations tend to center on the short-term and the immediate. That’s not surprising, when we have a need, it’s in our face, it’s immediate. If we’re suffering, a day can be a long time and a year can be an eternity. So, we often pray for things that are very close in our world, and ask for help now.

On the other hand, God is infinite. He is beyond time, and He is everywhere in creation at the same time. Not surprising then, that His plans are first, long-term and far-reaching. He wishes to save you and me, but His plan and expectation is to save humanity. He wishes to save humanity through all of time. His expectations are long-term and cosmic.

Let’s consider this: What happens if the short-term and immediate expectation and hopes are in conflict with the long-term and far-reaching expectation and hopes? Then what?

In the Christmas story, every person involved was confronted with the short-term and immediate versus the long-term and far-reaching. So, what were they really expecting? What were they really hoping?

We’re going to explore just three people involved in the story and see what we can learn. Let’s start with...

THE WISE MEN FROM THE EAST

Matthew 2

(NKJV) Wise Men from the East

¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ² saying, "***Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?*** For we have seen His star in the East and have ***come to worship Him.***"

...

⁹ When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. ¹¹ And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, ***they presented gifts*** to Him: ***gold, frankincense, and myrrh.***

¹² Then, being divinely warned in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed for their own country another way.

The Magi were an interesting group at this time. Popular opinion holds that at one time they were a fierce warrior people who once defeated, became a nation of priests and scholars. So they were the intelligentsia of the day. What brought them to the manger was at least, partly religiously motivated, but it was a journey of sheer intellect. Astrology and astronomy were basically the same thing, and the stars told of a great person about to enter the world. There were writings, not only from Israel, but Rome and other nations that spoke of a great king to come.

Their journey had a short-term expectation, and an immediate one. They are expecting an exceptional king of some kind, in the land of Judea. They are hoping to see this king face to face. So not surprisingly, they show up at the current king's palace. They expected a royal celebration to be going on. "Ok, we're here! Where is He? Where's the party?"

Even in a longer term, what did they expect? Did they expect a replay of Solomon? Did they expect a new golden age of Israel over the next generation? In the grand scheme of things, those are still short-term goals.

If that's where their expectations laid, just think how confused and disappointed they would've been. If they lived to a ripe old age after they returned home, they would've heard rumors. Things didn't change much in the nation of Israel. The Roman occupation went on as usual. In time, they might've heard about this amazing rabbi who was doing miracles. But word has it, that He got in hot water with the powers that be and they executed Him. In the short-term, it certainly doesn't seem like much had happened.

The account says that they came and worshipped this special baby-king. But the Greek for "worship" (proskoo-neh'-o) has a rather wide-spread meaning. It literally means- to kiss as a dog licking its master's hand. It can mean to simply pay homage; like kissing the signet ring on the king's hand. But it also means to prostrate oneself in an act of religious reverence. And there is much to imply that is what they were doing.

The gift of gold was for a king. Frankincense was a gift for a high priest, and myrrh was for burial. It was like they had an inside track on what was going on that even Israel didn't see. Maybe they had some understanding of the long-term plan. This special king was for more than just a quick rise of Israel on the world's stage. ...Then there's...

THE SHEPHERDS

Luke 2

⁸ Now there were in the ***same country shepherds*** living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid. ¹⁰ Then the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid, for behold, ***I bring you good tidings*** of great joy which will be to ***all people***. ¹¹ For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is ***Christ the Lord***. ¹² And this will be the sign to you: You will find a ***Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.***”

¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest,

And on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”

¹⁵ So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, “Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ And they came with haste and ***found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.***

For all the talk of shepherds in the Bible, they were actually looked down upon at this point, as a class of people. They weren't considered trustworthy. They weren't allowed to testify in a court of law. They were ceremonially unclean. Their work wouldn't allow them to observe the Sabbath properly. They were fringe members of the culture.

However, the shepherds mentioned here were a cut above. The pastures at that time of year around Bethlehem were used for the Temple sheep. This was the flock for the sacrifices. So, those watching over the lambs of God were given the first news of the Lamb of God.

But what did they expect? Well, first, nothing! They were excluded from the religious community. But now a message comes directly from heaven. We read through it and don't blink an eye, but it was mind-bending for these shepherds.

First, this heavenly birth is for “you.” You are not excluded as dirty shepherds, He is here for you. In fact, no one is excluded, He is for ALL people.

Next comes the title for this baby. It sounds churchy to us so we just read on by. But the truth is, the title the angel gives to this baby is used only once in the entire New Testament. And it is never used anywhere in the Old Testament. It is only implied.

This baby is the Savior, who is “Christ the Lord.” In the Greek, there would be no “the”, it was a combination of two names, “Christos Kurios”, in the Hebrew, “Mashyach Adonay” or, “Mashyach Yawyeh”, to us, “Savior God”, as one name.

We, as gentiles might say, “so what?” But the truth is, much of Israel's understanding was, the Messiah was the anointed one, he would be a prophet, he would be special, but not God Himself. Even today, that line of thinking is echoed in significant Jewish thought. Here are some recent rabbinical quotes:

Rabbi Tovia Singer says: “Anyone who thinks that God came down to us, manifested as anything, whether as cottage cheese or as Jesus, such person is going to the eternal fire of hell and will not enjoy Heaven.”

Rabbi Daniel Asor adds: “The Old Testament forbids pagan beliefs which evolve around “human idols” a man-god.”

<https://www.oneforisrael.org/bible-based-teaching-from-israel/the-messiah-is-god/>

Imagine these shepherds! Not only is the Messiah for us, He is actually God Himself. No wonder they ran to the manger. Expectations are changed. They expect to see God with a human face. But you know what; as amazing as this is, it is still a short-term and immediate expectation.

You wonder what these same shepherds might have thought in a few years when Herod slaughters all the young children in the very place they met God. Did they know He got away, or were they left confused? And even if they knew, did they expect the rise of a conquering king like much of Israel? If so, they never saw it. Even if they lived long enough, they'd see this baby, now a man, enter Jerusalem on a donkey of peace rather than a horse of war. They might have even seen this light, and savior, and God killed on a cross? If their expectation and hope was a quick fix for Israel, they would've been left disappointed and confused. Then there is...

SIMEON THE PROPHET

Luke 2

²⁵ And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was ***just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel***, and the ***Holy Spirit was upon him***.²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ.²⁷ So he ***came by the Spirit into the temple***. And when the parents brought in the Child Jesus, to do for Him according to the custom of the law,²⁸ he took Him up in his arms and blessed God and said:

²⁹ "Lord, now You are letting Your servant depart in peace,
According to Your word;

³⁰ For ***my eyes have seen Your salvation***

³¹ Which You have prepared before the face of all peoples,

³² A light to bring ***revelation to the Gentiles***,
And the ***glory of Your people Israel***."

³³ And Joseph and His mother marveled at those things which were spoken of Him.³⁴ Then Simeon blessed them, and said to Mary His mother, "Behold, ***this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel***, and for a ***sign which will be spoken against***³⁵ (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of ***many hearts may be revealed***."

As Jesus is being brought for the customary presentation at the Temple, God made sure He crossed paths with this man. His situation is entirely unique to everyone else in the story. He was in direct connection with the Holy Spirit. Of course, this was in the Old Testament sense. A prophet was under the direction of God's Spirit. It's interesting that the Spirit of God was "on" special servants, but not before Acts 2 do we find Him "in" His servants.

Even so, Simeon sees from God, so he sees as God. His expectation is based on the long-term and the far-reaching. The ultimate outcome will be opening the minds of the gentiles.

It will be for the "glory" of Israel. "Glory" is another one of those words in ancient Greek. It can mean praise and worship, but it also means dignity and honor. Ultimately, it is Jesus Christ who comes out of Israel that will bring God's people their dignity and honor before the world. But to get there, there would be the fall and rise of many, before He is accepted He will be "spoken against." Remember, there are two words for "sword" in the Greek. One is a short machete type, the other is a long military, meant for serious business- sword. That is the one that will pierce the soul.

This is a long-term plan. When Simeon went to the Temple, He had the short-term expectation of seeing the Messiah. But God had given Simeon the understanding of a very long-term, far-reaching expectation and hope.

SO, WHAT DO WE LEARN FROM THE CHRISTMAS EXPECTATION AND HOPE?

1. We learn that God is always working from **the long-term and far-reaching plan first**. He cares about us in the immediate, but when the short-term is in conflict with the long-term, beyond us and the moment, He will always choose the long-term.
2. We learn that if we develop a faith whose primary default is to the short-term and the smallness of my immediate situation, we are setting ourselves up for **disappointment and confusion**. -Again, is not that God doesn't care, or that He won't answer even the smallest needs. But it's important to realize that they don't come first.
3. It is very hard to default to the grand picture of the long-term and far-reaching, because that is not humanly possible. The only way we rise to the grand plan of things, even in the everyday; is to be like Simeon, and more! We live in the shadow of the Cross so, it's not just having **the Holy Spirit ON us, but IN us**. Only then will we see; and we won't understand everything, but it will make the working of God in our lives and world, a whole lot clearer.

So, what do you expect from God? And even more importantly, what is molding those expectations; your finiteness, or your filling?