

Christmas Eve 2023

Introduction

Do you remember the anticipation that you had for Christmas as a child? **PHOTO 1** How much you hated to wait? How each day of the twelve days of Christmas seemed like an eternity? We always opened one present on Christmas Eve after church. The agony of getting to the last day and then having to wait for some pastor to finish talking? Then waking up and realizing that what had been promised had been delivered?

Christmas is full of anticipation, waiting and celebration. But anticipation is not a child thing is it? We anticipate graduation days, wedding days, the day we get to drive, the birth of our children, retirement, a soldier's return home.... do you remember the feeling?

Anticipation brings with it...waiting...American's hate to wait. Waiting reminds us that we are not in control. We are dependent upon someone else and worse....we must submit to them. Waiting is a struggle with your desire to be in control. It plays out in waiting rooms, doctors' offices, airport terminals, post offices, hospital labor and delivery, the principal's office...yep we don't like to wait.

We like the fast lane on the freeway. Green lights and right turn on red. We like express lines at the grocery store, fast passes at Disney and Airline platinum lines for check in. If you don't believe me, next time wait ten seconds after the light turns green and watch what happens.

It is hard to wait patiently....in order to do so, you must really believe that what has been promised will be delivered. In fact, our waiting is not so dependent upon the promise but rather the one who stands behind the promise.

If we really trust the one who promised what we are waiting for, we will continue to wait. Our willingness to wait is dependent upon the trust that we have in the promise giver.

Maybe you are anticipating something right now. A day in the future, a day that holds potential, a promise yet to be fulfilled. The reason that you wait, the reason that you persevere is because you trust the promise maker. If you and I don't trust the one who promised us what is to come, then we stop waiting.

If you knew that God had made a promise to you, how long would you wait for it? Would you have moments of doubt? Would others ridicule you for waiting? Would you ever give up?

Once God started to fulfill that promise do you think you would recognize it in the early stages? Or do you think only after the promise has been completed?

This Christmas Eve, we are going to look at a story that is often overlooked. It is the story of a promise fulfilled. In fact, it is a story that took thousands of years to come to fruition. In fact, the only thing that kept anyone anticipating this promise is that it came from God Himself.

It was the faith and trust that people had in God that kept them looking on the horizon for a deliverer. God had promised a Savior... one who would restore our relationship with God. One who would take the punishment that justice required on our behalf. One who would take our place under the wrath of God.

Christmas is a reminder...that God works on His timeline not ours...He is usually slower than expected and He does things His way and not ours. In fact, your opinion and convenience are not the driving forces behind God's timeline.

Often God is fulfilling His promise to us but we don't recognize it because He is doing so in a manner that we do not expect. We want a full blown plan outlined so that we can vote on it and God just shows us the next baby step and nothing else happens until we take it.

We are going to look at someone who waited a very long time for God to fulfill His promise.

He is one of my favorite Christmas characters...that you never see in decorations or manger scenes. His name is Simeon. He had waited his entire life for the fulfillment of a promise. He kept believing when others walked away. Lives of all the Jewish people had been horrible under the oppression of the Romans. They had seen so much in life, pain, sorrow, grief, oppression, despair...one went through years of torment... They looked for the promised Messiah to save them.

Much like slaves in the South in the 1860's looked for one who would deliver them from bondage, the Jewish people were looking for a Messiah who would rescue them from the Romans. The promise of emancipation and freedom is what kept them hopeful.

Simeon was an old man at the end of his life. God promised him that he would live to see the Messiah...the Promised One.

Simeon, along with the entire nation, dreamed of a day when God's promised deliverer would come and rescue them....but there was something deeper than the oppression of the Romans. Their relationship with God was broken...The Jewish people had turned away and as a result God had been silent for 400 years. Not one word from a prophet...not one message from God...they thought God had given up on them.

For many of the Jewish people the wait had been too long and they had given up....lacking the faith and trust that God would keep His promise. They gave up on God's promised Savior and decided to try and save themselves.

They focused on the Romans but the real struggle was with God. They had abandoned God and were suffering because of it. Our nation is in the same state today. We are standing against everything that God stands for and arrogantly daring God to do something about it.

We are soon to become one nation not under God but rather one nation under the wrath of God. They needed a Savior and so do we. But the Savior God sent was not the one they expected.

They thought their problem was the Romans so they were looking for Rambo. But their real problem was with God. What they did not expect was a spiritual revolutionary...one who would deliver them from the condition of their souls.

40 days after that first night in Bethlehem Jesus is brought to the temple. He comes to be dedicated to the Lord. Simple peasants devoted to God following all the Old Testament laws. Five times Luke tells us that they "Did according to the Law of the Lord" They were devout Jews.

Luke 2:22–24 (ESV) 22 And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") 24 and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons."

Joseph and Mary were devout and obediently rich in their faith, but poor financially. God showing us that it is not the size of the gift but the heart behind it.

Simeon

Luke 2:25–26 (ESV) 25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

Simeon loved God and God's Spirit was upon him. In other words, he was operating under God's guidance and revelation and not man's. He was given spiritual insight that very few had. He saw and understood God's plan.

Luke 2:26–27 (ESV) 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.

Simeon knew that the Son of God has come to the Temple of God. The promises of the Old Testament about to be fulfilled in what would be the New Testament,...the new promise. Simeon went to the temple because God told Him to.

The Messiah...the Promised One...Simeon would lay eyes on Him before he closed his eyes to this world. Simeon was likely expecting that He would see a strong powerful charismatic man.... and yet once again God was doing things differently than we expect.

Luke 2:27–28 (ESV) 27 And he came in 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,

A baby....Simeon was likely surprised...God's deliver would still have to grow up...God's promised one was a dependent helpless baby. None the less, Simeon holds Jesus... He holds God incarnate in his hands in the temple. He can't help but thank and praise God for keeping His promise.

Luke 2:28–32 (ESV) 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 that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”

Interesting that he didn't say...My eyes have seen the Jew's Messiah....He said my eyes have seen your salvation. In other words, I understand Your mission God...I see what you are doing. Not only who the Messiah is but how He is going to save the world. Simeon is saying...I see it all...I see your plan God...I see the full potential and mission of this child.

Simeon then reveals that this child was not here to be the Jew's Messiah...He was here to bring salvation to all people. The Gentiles who lived in spiritual darkness and the Jew's who have looked for the light.

Luke 2:34–35 (ESV) 34 And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is opposed 35 (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.”

This boy will grow up to be the center of great controversy. He will cause division and conflict. He will cause acrimony and strife. He will be the center point upon which all humanity turns. Long after His life on earth ends, he will be the most controversial person in all of human history. Muslims, Jews, Atheists, Agnostics, Hindu, Buddhists, Mormons, Scientologists and Christians all disagree on this man.

He is the center of unity for those who love Him and disunity for those who do not. There is no middle ground with this child...He is either the Savior of the World or He is not. He is either your Savior or He is not. Not because He is selective in who He loves and how He saves, but because we are.

Imagine waiting your whole life to see the Messiah...expecting Rambo and getting a baby.

The Messiah had come, but they would have to wait another 30 years before He starts His public ministry and intimates God's plan to save mankind. He is so different than what they expected.

His Kingdom is not gained by sword and spear. His kingdom is gained by love and sacrifice. He will make us live more, give more and forgive more. His is a slow revolution that will turn the world upside down.

Simeon had seen God's salvation. This child thus far had done nothing...but Simeon had seen it all. God did keep His promise...God is faithful and God is offering Salvation to everyone who trusts in Him.

Maybe that is all that you needed to hear tonight. Maybe if you were totally honest with yourself this Christmas Eve...you know that you too are struggling with God. Something is wrong spiritually and you don't know how to fix it. You are full of anxiety, fear, worry, and are tired of pretending like you have it all under control.

Maybe this year has been for you...a year of despair. You may have come here tonight holding on to the last thread of hope that remains. Christmas is a time of celebration but it is also a time for some of depression and despair. Perhaps you came here tonight because you need some evidence that God is faithful and His promise is not only true, but true for you. You need to know

above all else that God's promise is true and more importantly....while you may have given up on you...God has not. Christmas is that promise.

You are not alone. We are all like Simeon. Our lives at time seem dark and without hope. We have heard that Jesus brings hope, love, forgiveness and peace. We in some way to feel at peace...peace with our past, peace with ourselves and mostly peace with God. How can God love me...when I don't love me? How can God have plans for me when I have given up on me? I do I fix this pain I have inside of me....I just need a sign of hope. Your darkness is real you just need to know that God's light is real.

We get discouraged...we doubt God's promises and God's timing...in fact we just doubt God. We hate to wait so we want to get some sense of control. Our situation reminds us that we are on God's timing and not our own. Please hear this...Even though God kept His promise to Simeon...it didn't come the way Simeon expected.

Simeon expected and ready for action Warrior and yet God shows him a baby.

It was only because Simeon was open to what God was doing that He recognized it. For all of us, God is working around us all the time. He never forgets, never leaves us and never moves from our side. Whether you believe in Him or not...He still believes in you.

I wonder if God is bringing the answer to your despair right now. He is working in your life....but likely in a way you don't expect. Perhaps just bringing you to this place for this moment...not at all what you expected and yet none the less...somehow deep inside you feel something stirring...that something is hope.

I wonder how much more God will need to reveal to you before you recognize what He is doing. I want to encourage you to be open the possibility that God is already working in your life but it is not what you expected.

Many missed the Messiah because He was not what they were looking for...He was what they needed...just not what they expected.

God works in mysterious ways...but He is always working. We want a Rambo and He sends a baby. We want our life to be wrinkle free...He wants to iron out our relationship with Him. We focus on this world...He wants to make sure that we are in the next world..eternity with Him.

I can promise you one thing tonight...God is intimately aware of all that you are facing...God knows the pain and suffering that you are enduring...and God is working all around you. You know you are not here by accident tonight...right? He He just wants you to know that He is not here by accident either.

Christmas is a reminder...

Christmas is a reminder that God works through what seems to be small and insignificant things...and His plan unfolds in unexpected ways. So many miss God because He is not what they expect...or demand.

Many have already decided what God can and can't do...how He should do it.. Like a present at Christmas...they have God in their box and He can't be anything that they don't allow. God doesn't define Himself....you do. God stay in my box, do what I say you can do, make your truth what I tell you it is and be the God I have decided that you must be.

No surprises, no expectations of me...just stamp your approval on what I want to do, change your Bible to agree with me, make sure you save me in the end and make sure that you stay in my box and be quiet. But when Simeon lifted up Jesus he proclaimed that God is too big to stay in your box. He would reveal who He is and He would not be constrained by human ignorance.

Simeon met Jesus in the Temple. For centuries people had come to the temple to connect with God...now God has come to the temple to connect with people...

Christmas is a reminder to us that God didn't come to earth just to hang with us. Jesus as sent by the Father on a very specific mission. He was sent here to die. His mission was one of self inflicted human assisted suicide. Death by Man...but death orchestrated, required and carried out by the Father and oddly His love for us.

Simeon said that Jesus would reveal the hearts of men. Your heart...my heart...the heart of every person. Not what you say, the way you behave, not your moral compass, not how good of a person you are...or are not.....He will reveal your heart regarding one thing....Himself. Specifically, what your heart says about what He did on the cross.

Jesus would force the world to decide if He is their Savior or not....Look around...He is good at it.

We live in a world where people are more clearly divided about Jesus than ever before. God's word is crystal clear on homosexuality, marriage, sexual identity, sex outside of marriage, the definition of truth, the definition of sin, the end of this world and the only path to Salvation. Our society is rejecting everything that Jesus says is true and those who disagree with them are now accused of a hate crime or racism.

Simeon was right...Jesus would reveal the hearts of man. Your heart...my heart...everyone's heart.

Think about how crazy Simeon's prophecy has become. What he spoke 2000 years ago over this God child is exactly what has happened. What are the chances of something like that? Why did God tell us about Simeon?

John 14:29 (ESV) 29 And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place you may believe.

We are still talking about this baby...He is still forcing a decision and people are still trying to shoot Him and His truth down. Our world is dividing over this man. God told us so that when it happened, we would believe in Him. God wanted to make sure that we understood the mission of this child. He came to force all of us into a decision point. Did He die on the cross as my Savior for my sins...or not.

So let's make sure we understand the mission.

We are naturally born sinners. We acknowledge our faults, but we consider ourselves good people....moral people...but that is only because we are comparing ourselves to each other. The problem is that the vast majority of people we know will not be in heaven. We are comparing ourselves to the group that fails.

It is when we focus on attention on God's Holiness...that the depths of our depravity, selfishness, and pride become glaring. Compared to God and His perfection and holiness...our sins are horrific. They are offensive and separate us from Him. We can't be in relationship with Him because he is Holy and we are not.

Our sins separate us from God. We can't, on our own, become Holy and.... He can't ignore our sin. That is the problem of mankind. He created us for relationship with Him and that relationship is broken. God loves us too much to leave things alone. So He came...He came to us as a gift. He must bring justice and must punish sin, but He came to take His own wrath...for what we have done...on Himself. Jesus, our gift at Christmas, is an offer for God to die in our place so we could live with Him.

Our sins hurt the heart of God and hurt other people. Yet God still wants a relationship with us...and our selfish nature must be destroyed for that to happen. We need to be saved from ourselves. God put in us a desire to have our relationship with Him set right.

God knows...it is a terrible thing for humans to stand in the just wrath of a holy God. And yet...that day is required... promised....certain...and real. And no human will survive. None of us can survive the just punishment that God must pour out for our sins.

The mission of this child and the meaning of Christmas is that God would restore the relationship of people with Him by solving the sin issue that separates us.

Jesus revealed Himself to the world..but so many...many who call themselves Christians...have changed Him...make Him more presentable...less offensive..more tolerant...changed His truth...made Him more like....well the God they would like to be. They are trusting a Savior that does not exist anywhere except in their mind. Jesus warned us...

Matthew 7:21–23 (ESV) 21 “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ 23 And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’

If you want Jesus and truly want to be saved then you must accept Him as He claims to be not as you want Him to be. If you truly want God's solution, you must accept Him fully and exactly as He reveals Himself to be. And the great news? You don't have to wait...You can receive Jesus now.

Do you know what is worse than waiting? Finding out you waited and didn't have to.

Maybe you have been waiting for God to show up and help you out of your mess. Maybe you are expecting a full blown plan and God has instead showed you only a single first step to take. Everything depends upon you taking that first step of faith....

Maybe, like Simeon, what you have been waiting for your entire life is right in front of you. Wouldn't you hate to find out one day that you waited for something God had already delivered? That you never saw it because you were not willing to take the baby step that He offered to you?

Perhaps this day...Christmas Eve 2023 is the day...The day that you have been waiting for your entire life. A day like Simeon had...when the Spirit of God reveals to you the Son of God. He is not what you expected...perhaps not what you really wanted...and yet you can't deny Him.

God is inviting you to do what Simeon did...to see the potential of God's plan... to embrace and lift up the Christ child and the Christ Man. To fully receive the only gift that matters at Christmas...Jesus Himself. Fully unwrapped....ready for you to finally take Him out of your box.

Like Simeon, you can leave this place tonight knowing that you can one day die in peace. You have seen and embraced your salvation. You don't have all the answers but you know the journey for you has started. No longer fighting with God but now surrendered under His love.

Simeon saw the Lord's Salvation. I pray that you have seen it too.....Let's Pray.

Prayer

Candlelight Service