

Christmas Day – 25 December 2009 – The Rev. Madelyn L. Betz

Isaiah 52:7-10 • Psalm 98 • Hebrews 1:1-5 • John 1:1-14 • Christmas Day (III) •  
December 25, 2009 • St. Thomas, Hanover, New Hampshire

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

As we arrive at Christmas Day, I hope you are at a place where you can take a deep breath. Perhaps you are thinking, “We’ve made it to Christmas Day at last”—or perhaps it feels instead like Christmas has arrived way too soon. In one way or another, today is a day for managing our expectations because we all have them about Christmas and I acknowledge that they are often mixed. We do best when we can hold our expectations loosely, be open to however the holiday unfolds, and concentrate on being grateful and full of thanks. One English author put gift-giving and receiving in perspective when he wrote, “Children are grateful when Santa Claus puts in their stockings gifts of toys or sweets. Could I not be grateful ... when he put in my stockings the gift of two miraculous legs?” [G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, quoted in *Advent and Christmas Wisdom from G.K. Chesterton*, p 43]

We all smile and nod about childhood letters to Santa that contain *long* lists, with *every* expectation for *total* fulfillment. We don’t outgrow expectations when we become adults, but hopefully we learn to manage them. Idea → hope → expectation → fulfillment. That’s the trajectory that children believe in with all their hearts. In our adult attempts to provide order and control in our lives, that which passes as managing our expectations, we sometimes go heavy on the managing part and lose sight of the lightness of having expectations in the first place. I think many adults have in mind the same basic thought process as children—the movement from idea, to hope, to expectation, to

fulfillment—but we sometimes skip over the second piece, hope, and so we ultimately miss out on the fullness of the joy of promise. The end result of skipping that childlike step is that, more often than not, we think and speak of expectations in the negative... “well, what did you expect?” or the cynical classic “Blessed is he that expects nothing, for he shall not be disappointed.”

The best Advent preparations bear us along with hope for the promised coming of this day. The celebration of a birth that happened 2000 years ago carries with it the automatic satisfaction of fulfillment, Christmas also holds the continuing promise of God’s presence, and the hope, and dare I say expectation, of new meaning with each year’s celebration.

We don’t need this morning to rehearse the details of the Christmas story as told by Matthew and Luke; we know the story, the shepherds and angels, the stable and manger, the baby and his mother. As soon as the first Christmas carol is sung, it all comes back and we find ourselves reminded about Christmas as paradox, turning expectation on its head—savior as vulnerable baby, fear expressed as joy, light overcoming darkness.

John the Baptist’s story is not a typical human story. Against expectation, he was a man whose entire life, even before birth, pointed to another. John came, not to make his own mark in the world, not to gain personal wealth or power, but to stand as a witness for the advancement of someone else. John came to testify that the kingdom of God was near, very near.

And in the birth of Jesus that we celebrate today, we have the very image of true light and true life. Like John, Jesus did not come to gather personal power, but lived a life

of vulnerability, sharing relationship with God with all who will accept that gift. Another part of the gift of the Christ child is described in today's Gospel as light. Similar to the Star of Bethlehem, Christ's light shines in our path to let us know how to live as children of God.

A man named Oswald Goulter served as a missionary to China in the first half of the twentieth century. During World War II one December, his sponsoring mission agency gave him a ticket to get home by boat. On his way back to the USA, he had a stopover in India. When he arrived in Bombay, he found there many boats filled with Jews, being housed in these floating sanctuaries to protect their lives from Nazi Germany. The Jewish boats couldn't land anywhere. The people were not accepted or welcome. Oswald went from boat to boat to see them and to say to them, "Merry Christmas!" "We're Jewish," they responded.

"I know, I know. But what would you like for Christmas."

"Don't you understand? We are Jewish."

"I know. Merry Christmas."

"How beautiful upon the mountains," Isaiah wrote, "are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns.'" [Isa 52:7] We've spent the weeks of Advent preparing for today through the words of the ancient prophets and John the Baptist. Particularly during Advent, we remember John as the messenger or forerunner, the one who came to prepare the way. John declared good news—good news of salvation not for an elite group of people, but for all. This good news was not new news. Isaiah was only one of the ancient

prophets to have already declared these tidings of joy. Isaiah proclaimed God's salvation as good news for all the nations, even to the ends of the earth. The way of Jesus, the way of love, justice and faithfulness was not new either.

The writer of the letter to the Hebrews defined the revolutionary difference that makes the story of Jesus new news. "Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son... a son who reflects God's own glory and the exact imprint of God's very being." [Heb 1:1-2a, 3a]

God's own expectation in Jesus' birth and life on earth seems to have been to make a connection with mankind such as had not been possible before. This messenger, this Son of God, was not just delivering a message, but was bringing a message by his very being. The vulnerability of this baby, his life of love, justice and faithfulness, was from day one, a reflection of who God is and therefore who we, as Christians, the adopted children of God, ought also to be.

"Merry Christmas," said Oswald Goulter to the Jewish refugees. "What do you want for Christmas?"

The people again replied, "We're Jews." And again Goulter said, "I know, but what would you like for Christmas?"

This man was becoming a nuisance, so they said, "How about some pastry? That would be grand."

Goulter scoured the city until he found a bakery that made European-style pastry. He sold his ticket for home to get the money to purchase some. He went back to the boats

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and shared the pastries with the people.

As he spoke about this experience later, a member of one congregation stood and asked, “Why would you do that? They didn’t even believe in Jesus.”

“I know,” he replied, “but I do.”

Merry Christmas. Amen.