

Christmas Expectations

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[0 : 00] The Living God, we believe that what we have just read, you have inspired, you enable the collector to accurately write down these words.

And we pray now in your mercy and grace, you would help us understand them. And more than understand, you would help us actually live into the reality of which they speak.

For we pray this in Jesus' name, Amen. What are you expecting this Christmas?

Christmas is a time of expectation. Which means of course, that if our expectations are not grounded in reality, Christmas can also be a huge disappointment.

A time of broken expectations. I think it was the Christmas when I was in grade 7. My brother and I had discovered where my mother had hidden the presents we were going to open on Christmas morning.

[1 : 05] So we decided, or at least I decided, to sneak into the closet and carefully unwrap the presents just enough to get a peek at what we were going to get.

We discovered a chemistry set and a building set. One of those that involves miniature steel girders with nuts and bolts and pulleys and electric motors.

I was sure the building set was for me and the chemistry set was for my brother. And gladly he agreed with this analysis. I could hardly wait until Christmas morning.

For weeks I dreamt of all the cool structures I could design and construct. When Christmas morning came, my father handed me my gift and I unwrapped it and it was the chemistry set.

My brother unwraps his gift and it's the building set. I would like to say that I never again sneaked a peek. I'm not a peek to peek. But I can say that I never again made the mistake of getting ahead of my dreaming.

[2 : 15] I'm dreaming of a white Christmas. Just the one I used to know where the treetops glisten and children listen to sleigh bells ringing in the snow.

Or, I'll be home for Christmas. You can plant me. Please have snow and mistletoe and presents on the tree. I'll be home for Christmas if only in my dreams.

I never understood that one. What are your expectations this Christmas? It all depends, of course, on what you think Christmas is all about.

Christmas. Christ-mas. It's the celebration of Christ. And as you know, Christ is the English for the word Christos, which is the Greek for the Hebrew word Messiah.

Christmas. Christ-mas. The celebration of Jesus the Messiah. The celebration of Jesus the Christ. Christ-mas. So the question is, what are you expecting this year of the Christ of Christmas?

[3 : 26] He is what it's all about. So what are you expecting of the Messiah? John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus, had huge expectations of Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah.

He was having really huge expectations. John the Baptist could sense that there was something cataclysmic in the air. And he had very good reasons for this sense.

He and his cousin Jesus had been born in unusual ways. John had been born to parents who were well past the child-bearing age. And Jesus had been born to a young girl who at the time of conception and birth was a virgin.

What could all of this mean? John's father, Zachariah, was a priest. Which meant that from John's birth, he was set aside to also be a priest.

His formative years were spent preparing for his priestly work. But somewhere along the line, he gets the conviction that he's to leave that assumed calling and go to live in the wilderness, in the solitude of the desert.

[4 : 41] Now, how long he lived out there, we do not know. But what we do know, this one's fading out too. All right? But what we do know is that in the solitude, in this lonely place, John brooded and

prayed and read and listened.

And he especially listened. Had his father told him, You know what, Mark, I'll just go without it. Just turn that off for a second.

Can you hear me in the back? No. Okay, go back. I have to go without it. Oh, mercy. Amen.

Amen. Had John's father told him what was said about John before he was conceived? He will be great in the sight of the Lord. He will drink no wine or liquor.

He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. He will turn back the sons of Israel to the Lord, their God. It is he who will go as a forerunner before him in the spirit and power of Elijah Elijah, so as to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. I wonder if John's mother, Elizabeth, had told him about what was said of his cousin Jesus before he was conceived. He will be great.

[6 : 00] He'll be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father, David. He'll reign over the house of David forever, and his kingdom will have no end. Had John's mother told him of that day when Jesus' mother came for a visit, and in Elizabeth's womb, John himself leapt for joy before he was born.

For hundreds of years, God had spoken to his people through the prophets, but by the time John comes on the scene, God had not spoken for nearly 300 years. 300 years, no prophetic word. Why that silence? We don't know for sure, but why now this flood of words about a king and a kingdom that would have no end. So out in the desert, John could listen to his thoughts, and more importantly, he could listen to the still, small voice of God. And out in the desert, he came to the conviction that something cataclysmic was about to happen. He came to the conviction that it was time for Messiah to come, for the Christ to come, and that he turns out to be John's cousin, Jesus of Nazareth. Now in the text we read, Matthew 3, 1-12, we see and hear John the Baptist's Christmas expectations. Here we see and hear John's expectations of the Christ of Christmas.

There are many in this text. I'm going to focus on three. First, John expects in Jesus to meet God. John expects in Jesus to meet God. He who is coming after me is mightier than I. Mightier because he who comes after John is God. God? Yes, God. John sees himself as a voice. This is the voice spoken of by the prophet Isaiah. And quoting Isaiah, the voice of one crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord. The way of the Lord. In the text, that means the way of Yahweh. Isaiah sees someone crying out to prepare the way for Yahweh. So later in the text quoted by Matthew, Isaiah says, Get yourself up on a high mountain, O Zion, bearer of good news. Lift up your voice mightily, O Jerusalem, bearer of good news. Lift it up. Do not fear. Say to the cities of Judah, here is your God.

[8 : 30] John expects in Jesus to meet God. Somehow, he came to the conviction that although Jesus was born a few months after him, his cousin actually existed before him. Somehow, John comes to the conviction that in the coming of the cousin, his cousin is the coming of the one who has always existed. And so no wonder John does not feel worthy to stoop down and untie the coming one's sandal. No wonder he lives his entire adult life pointing people to this coming one. And no wonder he would later say, when his cousin's popularity was on the rise, he must increase and I must decrease. John gladly removes himself from the limelight so that the light shines on the main actor on the stage. Make ready for the Lord, the Lord, Yahweh, God. John expects in Jesus to meet God. And he was not disappointed. Although he did not know how all of this was going to take place, and although he did not live long enough to see it all unfold, he nevertheless met in his cousin, the living God. And that is the fundamental declaration of Christmas. God has come to earth. God has become one of us and entered into our world in flesh and blood. John the apostle puts it this way, in the beginning was the word. The word was with God and the word was God. All things came into being by him and the word became flesh and dwelt among us. The apostle Paul puts it this way,

God who said light will shine out of darkness is the one who has shone in our hearts to give us the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ. In Christ, all the fullness of deity dwells in bodily form. But it's Jesus himself who puts it most startlingly. He who has seen me has seen my father. He who beholds me beholds the one who sent me. When you have lifted up the son of man, then you will know that I am truly, truly, I say to you before Abraham was born, I am. John expects in the Christ of Christmas to meet God. So I think John would have enjoyed singing Charles Wesley's Christmas carol.

Christ by highest heaven adored, Christ the everlasting Lord. Late in time behold him come, offspring of the virgin's womb, veiled in flesh the Godhead see. Hail the incarnate deity. Pleased as man with us to dwell, Jesus our Emmanuel, God with us. Prepare the way of the Lord. Prepare the way for God.

So, John's second Christmas expectation. John expects in Jesus to see the coming of the kingdom of God.

[11 : 37] Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is come near, he says. Somehow John comes to the conviction that in and because of his cousin, a whole new order of existence is breaking into the world, God's new world order. Somehow he comes to the conviction that in and because of Jesus, a great threshold is being crossed. And what the prophets longed for is now being realized. God's reign of light would now dawn into the darkness. God's reign of love would now melt the hostility and the hatred. God's reign of life would now overcome death. Healing would now take place. Justice would now be done. Repent, turn around, for the kingdom of God has come near. Now, although things did not happen in exactly the way John hoped for, Jesus was not moving fast enough for one thing. John could not see enough of the axe being wielded.

John did see the kingdom come. John lived long enough to hear Jesus himself say, the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God has come near. John saw Jesus healing people of all kinds of diseases and pains. John saw Jesus freeing people from the grip of the demonic. John saw Jesus reconciling those the world keeps apart. And John saw that indeed the future was spilling over to the present. Heaven was invading earth. And had John been allowed to live longer, he would have seen how the kingdom of God has spread throughout the whole world. His huge expectation, though not fulfilled exactly like he wanted, and we'll look at that next Sunday, was in fact being fulfilled. God was finally bringing to earth that for which the prophets before John had longed. Creation was being restored. Humanity was being liberated from the powers of sin and evil and death. The kingdom was coming. So I think John would also sing with Isaac Watts. Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Let earth receive her king. No more. Let sins and sorrows grow. Nor thorns infest the ground. He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found.

Which brings us to John's third Christmas expectation. His third expectation is the inherent implication of his the Lord's other two. John expects in Jesus to be baptized. John the Baptist expects to be baptized by Jesus the baptizer. As for me, I baptize you in and with water, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, and he will baptize you in and with the Holy Spirit and fire. The Lord who comes into the world at Christmas, who brings and bears God's new world order, comes to baptize. Yes, he comes to forgive, as John would later say of Jesus, behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

And yes, he comes to reveal, as John would later say of Jesus, this is the Son of God, who because he lives in the bosom of the Father, can reveal the Father. But what gripped John out in the desert is that the coming one, the Messiah, comes to baptize. I baptize you in and with water, but he will baptize you in and with the Holy Spirit and fire. Now, there's good reason for John to have this expectation. Throughout the years that God spoke through the prophets before John, God describes what is to come in the future using the words water, spirit, and fire. You find these words together, water, spirit, and fire. So listen to how God puts it. Listen to some of the texts that John was listening to in the desert. For instance, through the prophet Ezekiel, God says, I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be cleansed from all your uncleanness, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you. I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes. I will put my spirit within you, and you shall live. I will not hide my face anymore from them when I pour my spirit upon the house of Israel, says the Lord. Through the prophet Isaiah, God says, for I will pour water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground. I will pour my spirit upon your descendants and my blessing upon your offspring. Through the prophet Joel, God says, it shall come to pass afterwards that I will pour my spirit on all flesh. The prophet Daniel, I kept looking until thrones were set up, and the ancient of days took his seat. His vestiture was like snow, the hair of his head like pure wool.

[16 : 49] His throne was ablaze with fire. Its wheels were a burning fire. A river of fire was flowing and coming out before him. And through the prophet Malachi, God says, behold, I'm going to send my messenger.

He will clear the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. But who can endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears? For he is like a

refiner's fire, water, spirit, fire. As John, out in the desert, soaked in the prophet's vision of the future, he came to the conviction that it was time for all these promises to be fulfilled. And he realized that his baptism was a preparatory rite, but that his cousin's baptism was the real thing. I baptize you in and with water, but the one who is coming after me will baptize you in and with the Holy Spirit and fire. That is what John expects from the Christ of Christmas. The Holy Spirit and fire. Someone said after the first service, that's a very different Christmas wish list. Now, what does this refer to? Two different baptisms? First, the baptism with the Spirit, and then the baptism with fire? Or does the phrase, and fire, simply expand on in and with the Holy Spirit?

Throughout the prophets of old, the word holy automatically evoked, among other things, the notion of purifying fire. So it seems to me that John is saying that to be baptized by Jesus in and with the Holy Spirit is to be baptized by Jesus in and with fire. Again, as Malachi said, who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he's like a refiner's fire.

[18 : 41] The author of Hebrews reminds us, it's a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God, for he is a consuming fire. So John is telling us that the coming of the Holy Spirit is also the coming of fire. I baptize you in and with water, but he who is coming after me will baptize you in and with the Holy Spirit, the fiery Holy Spirit. Baptize. It's a rich word, a wonderful word, a word that drips with all kinds of meanings, so to speak. In both pre-biblical and biblical Greek, the verb baptizo simply means to immerse. It's used to describe events such as sinking in the mud or plunging beneath the surface of the water. In its passive form, be baptized, it meant to be overwhelmed, or to be inundated, or to be flooded. In and with. The text uses only one preposition.

I've been using two. Why? Because the Greek preposition that Matthew uses means both, in and with. The word in calls attention to that into which we are immersed. The word with calls attention to that which overwhelms us when we are immersed. So do you see what John saw after soaking in the prophets?

Just as Jesus immerses repentant people in the Jordan River, so Jesus immerses repentant people in the fiery Holy Spirit. In the fiery Holy Spirit. And just as those who went into the Jordan River were thus overwhelmed with water, so those whom Jesus baptizes are overwhelmed with the fiery Holy Spirit.

Or, as I have put it at other times, Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, comes into the world to dunk human beings into and to drench human beings with the very life of the living and holy God. That is what John expects from the Christ of Christmas. Theologians have a word for this. It's the word effusion. E-F-F-U-S-I-O-N. Effusion.

[21 : 15] And effusion is usually used with other words, creation and incarnation. In all three, effusion, creation, incarnation are the work of the triune God. Creation, mostly associated with God the Father. Incarnation, mostly associated with God the Son.

And effusion, mostly associated with God the Spirit. Now, I like how Reformed theologian J. Rodman Williams expresses it. Listen. We are dealing in effusion with that activity of the Holy Spirit, not possible to adequately describe, wherein the Spirit moves in freedom, pervading and filling human reality.

This is the coming of God to occupy and possess, to pervade and permeate, to fill and fulfill. I'm going to read those words again because they're so wonderful.

We are dealing in effusion with that activity of the Holy Spirit, wherein He moves in freedom, pervading and filling human reality. This is the coming of God to occupy and possess, to pervade and permeate, to fill and fulfill.

Effusion goes beyond creation and incarnation, not as a kind of third on the same plane, but passing through them, transcending both. Herein, God, while remaining transcendent, nonetheless possesses the heights and depths of creaturely existence.

[22 : 38] It is the filling of human existence with the glory of God. That is the something cataclysmic John sensed was about to happen.

I baptize you in and with water, but He will baptize you in and with the Holy Spirit and fire. The Messiah comes into the world to immerse us in and overwhelm us with His fiery life, thereby effusing us with the very glory of God.

And He does not do this just once. We are ordinarily baptized in and with water just once. But we are not baptized in and with the Holy Spirit and fire just once.

In the Gospel of John the Apostle, John the Baptist uses the present tense. This is the one who baptizes in and with the Holy Spirit. The present tense emphasizes continuous action.

This is the one who continually baptizes. It is the nature and character of the Messiah. It is the nature and character of Christ to baptize and keep on baptizing, to immerse and keep on immersing, to flood and keep on flooding, to invade and keep on invading, to permeate and keep on permeating, to overwhelm and keep on overwhelming.

[24 : 12] Not once, not twice, not three times, but again and again and again. Now this makes sense, does it not? Given who Jesus is, given how full He is, how can He possibly give us all He wants to give us just once?

And it makes sense given who we are, how finite we are. We simply do not have the capacity to receive all Jesus wants to give us just once.

And so, He comes and He effuses us with His glory. He keeps on effusing us with His glory until every millimeter of our being finally radiates with the purity of His life.

I wonder how John was able to handle what he saw out in the desert. I baptize you in and with water, but He who is now arriving on the scene will baptize you in and with the Holy Spirit and fire. And every time He does, there is a deep cleansing. He moves through our being, and He burns away that which is in the way of knowing God and living in His kingdom.

[25 : 25] And every time He does, says William Barclay, there enters into our fatigue and hopelessness a surge of new life, and we are freshly enabled to do the undoable, to face the unfaceable, and to bear the unbearable.

Now, as I have been living with John the Baptist these past weeks, my mind has kept going to how C.S. Lewis illustrates expecting to meet Jesus the Christ.

In the first book of the Chronicles of Narnia, these great children's stories, in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, Edmund, Lucy, Susan, and Peter, the children who get to go into Narnia, hear about this wonderful person who is to come named Aslan.

Aslan is the Christ figure in the story. And where I'm going to read from is where they're at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Beaver, and like all of the animals in Narnia, Mr. and Mrs. Beaver can speak.

Mr. Beaver is telling the children about what will happen when Aslan comes to Narnia, which at the time is under the spell of the evil witch.

[26 : 39] We read, Mr. Beaver speaking, Aslan will put to rights, as it says, in an old rhyme in these parts. I love this.

Wrong will be right when Aslan comes in sight. At the sound of his roar, sorrows will be no more. When he bears his teeth, winter meets its death.

And when he shakes his mane, we shall have spring again. You'll understand when you see him. But shall we see him? Asked Susan.

Why, daughter of Eve, that's why I brought you here. I am to lead you where you shall meet him, said Mr. Beaver. Is he a man?

Asked Lucy. Aslan a man? Said Mr. Beaver sternly. Certainly not. I tell you, he's the king of the wood, the son of the great emperor beyond the sea. Don't you know who is the king of the beast?

[27 : 37] Aslan is a lion. The lion. The great lion. Oh, said Susan. I thought he was a man. Is he quite safe? I shall feel rather nervous about meeting a lion.

That you will, dearie. And make no mistake, said Mrs. Beaver. If there's anyone who can appear before Aslan without their knees knocking, they're either braver than most or just plain silly. Then he isn't safe, said Lucy.

Safe, said Mr. Beaver. Didn't you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? Of course he isn't safe. But he's good. He's the lion.

He's the king, I tell you. So what are your expectations this Christmas? Well, after spending time seeing what he saw as God peeled the wrapping of the presents and gave him a peek into the future, I cannot help but have John's expectations this Christmas.

I expect to meet God and to know God more fully than I knew him last Christmas. I expect to see new signs of the kingdom of God.

[28 : 55] I expect to see more signs of his reign of life and light breaking into your world and my world. And I expect to get further dunked and further drenched.

I expect to be cleansed by holy fire and to be filled with holy life. Prepare the way of the Lord. The kingdom of God has come near and he will baptize you in and with the Holy Spirit and fire. Fire. Fire. Fire. Fire. Fire. Fire. Fire.