

## I.

In our sermon series this fall we've been waiting and waiting and waaaiting for a Savior to rescue the people of Israel from themselves as well as the foreign powers that oppressed them, and now he has arrived.

A favorite line from the great Christmas carol comes to mind: "Good Christian men rejoice; with heart and soul and voice; give ye heed to what we say: News! New! Jesus Christ is born today! Jesus Christ is born today!"

There still may be unopened presents underneath your tree, and our bones may be weary from celebrating Christmas with family and friends, or we may be sad about how Christmas turned out for us personally, but today we celebrate the imponderable news that God has spoken for himself in the person of Jesus Christ. Let us pray together:

PRAYER: Lord God, we thank you that Jesus Christ fulfills the longings of every human heart. Teach us from your word today to so that we might hear the *good news* afresh and claim Jesus Christ as hope of our lives and the hope of the world. Amen.

## II.

When I was at a family celebration this week, one of my cousins told me about family's preparation for Christmas. In the bus-i-ness of raising three teenage kids, his wife, Kelly, went out to Home Depot, and brought home a Christmas tree. Her youngest son was in the driveway when she arrived home with it, and when he saw it, he ran inside his house and yelled to his Dad and siblings, "Mom has RUINED Christmas! She picked the tree without us!"

You see, she didn't heed the family tradition of driving to the store together with the whole family and looking at a hundred trees and then selecting the one they all agreed was best. The kids were so busy with soccer tournaments and hanging out with their friends, Kelly just decided that she'd better get one herself.

But then something even more devastating happened. Instead of getting out the Christmas tree lights and going through the ritual of checking each light, Kelly just took a new set of white lights and wound them around the tree so that in a matter of minutes the tree was beautifully lit. Again, when the youngest son walked into the family room and saw the tree lit with white lights instead of the traditional colored lights, he ran out of the room and yelled at the top of his lungs, "Mom has RUINED Christmas again!"

You see how *easy* it is to "RUIN" Christmas. It doesn't take much effort at all! There are so many layers of expectations and longings piled up surrounding this event that you never know when you're going to trip over one.

## III.

I tell this story in humor, of course, but there is a challenge in it that I think we need to hear. All of us have expectations, whether they are of Christmas or of God or of family members or of friends at work, that we need to evaluate against God's truth. It is way too easy to assume that the things we long for most in life are important to God.

#### IV.

The passages we read today from Malachi and the gospel of Mark are all about expectations and longing. As Pastor Jeff preached last week, for hundreds of years from the time of their exile to Babylon in 587 B.C., the people of Israel were subjugated to the rule of others. God had promised them that they would be a *great nation* and that they would *bless all the families of the earth*, but because of their disobedience they never experienced the fulfillment of God's promise.

By the time Caesar Augustus came to power in 27 BC the western world was controlled by the mighty armies of Rome, and Palestine was merely a backwater town in a sea of outposts dominated by Rome's mighty rule.

#### V.

And, yet, just as through all of the ups and downs of Israel's history, there remained a small band of people who still believed that God would make good on his promises. Prophet after prophet stood up in the rubble of Israel's failures, and declared that *the* God of Abraham and Moses and Elijah was the same God who would *one* day act decisively to bring salvation to Israel and to the whole world.

<sup>1</sup>"See, the day is coming," the prophet Malachi announced, "burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and evildoers will be stubble; the day that comes shall burn them up, says the Lord of hosts . . . <sup>2</sup>But for you who *revere my name* the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall."

This is such a powerful vision of the promised future, isn't it? Justice will finally be done and Israel will be set free.

#### VI.

But notice *what it is not*. It is *not* a declaration that Israel can go on doing what it has sometimes done and ignore the commands of God, treating the economically poor with contempt and worshiping other gods. Yes, God would act *justly* to bring good news of healing and energy to a worn-out people, but *they* would need to set aside misguided expectations and prepare themselves for the way of the Lord.

#### VII.

A couple of weeks ago, *Time* magazine published its annual issue of "The Year in Photographs." One of those photographs caught my eye more than any other. It was a photograph of a platoon of Marines in Afghanistan after a 6-day march in which they carried 120 pound packs on their back in 135-degree summer heat. In that march, they barely had any time to rest, so this was the first time that they could get a full night's

sleep in six days. The photographer had awakened at daybreak when the soldiers were all still in their battle beds and caught the sun rising in the west as it rose up over where they were sleeping.

These Marines had been marching for 6-days in heat that would probably kill most of us here on the first day, but because of their training and because of the importance of their mission, they persevered until they got to a place where they could camp. And then—this is the part that got to me—for their beds, they dug little grave-like trenches 18-24 inches deep. They didn't get out of their uniforms; they didn't put down their weapons, they just lay down in the holes they had dug and in utter exhaustion and fell asleep.

Because of the size of the trenches they dug, and the way the photograph was taken, they looked like they were sleeping in little evenly-spaced graves. You can imagine what a relief it was for me to read the caption next to the photograph that said, "The Fatigue of War." They weren't in graves after all, they were merely sleeping.

#### VIII.

You and I may not be Marines and we may not be able to march for six days without sleep, much less in the desert's heat with packs on our backs, but many of us have been at a place where we were so exhausted by something that was eating away at us that we didn't know how we would carry on. For these soldiers, I could just imagine what they felt like after six days of marching without a full night of sleep. They must have been asking themselves, "How long, Lord? How Long?"

#### IX.

In a different way, that's where the people of Israel were when they heard the words of John the Baptist. Just when they thought that they couldn't take it any more and their march through history had come to nothing, God fulfills the words of Malachi by sending a prophet in the manner of Elijah to proclaim that the day of the Lord had finally arrived.

#### X.

If you're like me, John the Baptist has always been a mysterious figure in scripture. I mean, who wears camel's hair and eats locusts and wild honey any more? Maybe some hippies left over from the 60's! But if you have been following along this sermon series, it's not difficult to see that he fits right in with the likes of Elijah and Jeremiah and Hosea and other prophets that called people back to God.

The first few verses of Mark's gospel tells us that thousands of people trekked out to the Jordan River to be baptized. They wanted a new start. They were motivated by a longing for a different way of life. They were tired of the march through history they were on and they wanted a new beginning. So when they arrived in the desert, which is not unlike our Death Valley here in California, there was John, ready to wash them with the baptism-of-repentance and hear their confession of sin.

I suspect that there were some who went out to the desert who still believed that they could obtain a new beginning without having to undergo a transformation in their own hearts, without having to set aside longings that were not of God. Some of them still might have believed that God had called Israel to be a political power rather than his servant of reconciliation and peacemaking and righteousness. I don't know.

But his message was clear. "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals." In other words, "Get ready for the true meaning of salvation. If you think I'm something, wait until you meet Jesus. He's going to baptize you with the Holy Spirit!"

## XI.

I told a story earlier of how easy it is to ruin Christmas. We can do it by misplaced longings and misplaced expectations. During the time between now and Easter, we're going to be watching how Jesus fulfills God's plan for saving Israel—and the claims that Jesus' life and ministry places on our lives as well.

Mark quotes the prophet Isaiah to speak of the John:

"See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way;  
<sup>3</sup>the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:  
'Prepare the way of the Lord,  
make his paths straight,'"

You don't have to eat locusts and wild honey today or dress in camel's hair to get right with God. God's calling your name and he's waiting for you. Don't ruin Christmas. All you need to do is turn toward him and place all the longings of your heart in his arms. That's what it means to "repent"—to "turn around" or to "change one's mind." Basically, it's accepting God's truth for your life and history over your or our culture's.

We need our minds changed about a lot of things, don't we? Take a look at your longings this morning and see if they are from God. If they are not, lay them down at your Savior's feet. He knows what to do with misguided longings, and he welcomes everyone who turns to follow him.

In the words of one of my favorite Christmas Carols: *Now we hear of endless bliss: Joy! Joy! Jesus Christ was born for this! He has opened heaven's door, and man is blessed evermore: Christ was born for this! Christ was born for this!*

Amen.