

West Valley Church  
12/11/11

**Christmas Anticipation**  
**Luke 2:21-40**

Had you picked up a daily newspaper in 1809, you would have read the big news that Napoleon I, emperor of France, had conquered Austria at Wagram, annexed the Illyrian Provinces (now part of Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia), and abolished the Papal States.

But in the same year, in France....Louis Braille, who devised a way for the blind to read, was born.

And in Germany.....Felix Mendelssohn, the great composer of symphonies, was born.

And in England....William Gladstone, the four-time Prime Minister and the father of public education, was born. Alfred Lord Tennyson, the poet laureate of Great Britain, was born. Charles Darwin, who, like it or not, was possibly the most influential scientist of the nineteenth century, was born.

And in America....Edgar Allen Poe, the master poet and storyteller, was born. Oliver Wendell Holmes, the writer and physician who developed surgical techniques still in use today, was born. Abraham Lincoln, the sixteenth and some would say most pivotal president of the United States, was born.

But at the end of the year in 1809, the only event anyone thought to be important was Napoleon's conquest of Austria. That was the big news.

Today, who remembers the "big news" of 1809? Unless you are a history teacher or a history buff, nobody really remembers Napoleon's conquests. But the whole world *was* forever changed by what seemed like insignificant, ordinary births that took place that same year.

The year that Jesus Christ was born, most people missed it. Only a few were aware of the cosmic, eternal implications of this baby, born in a barn to a very poor couple. Amazing, considering an entire nation spent many centuries anticipating his arrival.

One of the great things about Christmas is the anticipation. Even before the wrapping paper is thrown away on Christmas Day, kids are asking their parents, "How many days until next Christmas?" It doesn't help that stores decorate for Christmas around Labor Day. Retailers get more and more eager to cash in on the holiday shopping and consumer greed. Retailers love it. I heard one business

owner on the news saying that he thought this could be the greatest Christmas ever. Funny, I always thought the *first* one was.

I think for everyone, one of the exciting things about Christmas is the anticipation. It's true now, and it was most certainly true at the first one. Let's see what the Bible tells us about the anticipation of that first Christmas, from Luke 2:

“Eight days later, when the baby was circumcised, He was named Jesus, the name given Him by the angel even before He was conceived. Then it was time for their purification offering, as required by the Law of Moses after the birth of a child; so His parents took Him to Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord. The law of the Lord says, ‘If a woman's first child is a boy, he must be dedicated to the LORD.’ So they offered the sacrifice required in the law of the Lord— ‘either a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.’ At that time there was a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was righteous and devout and was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him and had revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Messiah. That day the Spirit led him to the Temple. So when Mary and Joseph came to present the baby Jesus to the Lord as the law required, Simeon was there. He took the child in his arms and praised God, saying, ‘Sovereign Lord, now let Your servant die in peace, as You have promised. I have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared for all people. He is a light to reveal God to the nations, and He is the glory of Your people Israel!’ Jesus' parents were amazed at what was being said about Him. Then Simeon blessed them, and he said to Mary, the baby's mother, ‘This child is destined to cause many in Israel to fall, but He will be a joy to many others. He has been sent as a sign from God, but many will oppose Him. As a result, the deepest thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your very soul.’ Anna, a prophet, was also there in the Temple. She was the daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, and she was very old. Her husband died when they had been married only seven years. Then she lived as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshipping God with fasting and prayer. She came along just as Simeon was talking with Mary and Joseph, and she began praising God. She talked about the child to everyone who had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem. When Jesus' parents had fulfilled all the requirements of the law of the Lord, they returned home to Nazareth in Galilee. There the child grew up healthy and strong. He was filled with wisdom, and God's favor was on Him.” (Luke 2:21-40, nlt)

Luke gives us more details about the birth of the baby Jesus than the other three Gospels. We see that Jesus was circumcised on the 8th day—this was in keeping with the Jewish law, and this was when his name was officially given to him, and it was the name the angel said it should be. He had to be dedicated to God—every

Jewish new-born male did. Now, Jewish law also said that the mother had to be purified—after she gave birth she was unclean for seven days leading up to the boys' circumcision, and then still could not touch anything considered holy for another 33 days. Then she could make an offering of sacrifice for purification—a lamb. If she couldn't afford a lamb, she could offer two doves or pigeons. That was Mary's offering, so we know they were very poor.

The priest, Simeon, was a devout and faithful man who was anticipating Christ's arrival, because God promised him he would not die before he saw the Christ. Simeon, sensitive to the Lord, knew immediately that Jesus was the One they had waited for so long anticipating. He was so grateful that he sang a hymn—one of three in the Gospels (Mary sang one and Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, also sang one).

Anna, a godly woman, also recognized that Jesus was the Christ; the long awaited Messiah, and told everyone who had been looking for Christ's arrival with great anticipation.

In this passage we can sense the anticipation on the part of the Jewish people. What do *we* anticipate at Christmas? We go through the yearly ritual of redecorating our entire house for thirty days or so, then box it all up and store it for eleven months just to do it all over again. And each year, a little more gets added. Nearly our entire attic is now Christmas décor. What things do we anticipate at Christmas? Family? Music? Children's programs? Decorations? Presents? Let me tell you what the Jewish people, along with all of creation, were anticipating: one thing was

### 1. **Comfort**

Verse 25 says that they were anticipating the consolation, or consoling, of Israel. These were a people who were terribly oppressed—they'd had a history of slavery, and even now were in their own country under the harsh rule of the Romans.

From the beginning, Jesus understood oppression. Not only was he born into and grew up among these oppressed people, but Matthew 2:12-13 says this: "When it was time to leave, they returned to their own country by another route, for God had warned them in a dream not to return to Herod. After the wise men were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. 'Get up! Flee to Egypt with the child and His mother,' the angel said. 'Stay there until I tell you to return, because Herod is going to search for the child to kill Him.'" (Matthew 2:12-13)

That means that Jesus was a Palestinian refugee. As a matter of fact, Jesus was born in the Middle East. Technically, that makes him an Asian-born baby who became an African refugee. The Christmas story is about an international migrant.

Half the babies born in the world are born in Asia, and Jesus could be considered one of them. Half of the 18 million migrants in the world are Africans, and Jesus touched the African migrant experience. Twenty percent of the babies in developing nations died the first year from water-borne diseases; whole villages of babies died before Jesus had an opportunity to die for them on the cross. Jesus was born in a borrowed barn and buried in a borrowed grave and was homeless for much of his life. He *understood* oppression.

Isaiah 53 says this: “My Servant grew up in the LORD's presence like a tender green shoot, like a root in dry ground. There was nothing beautiful or majestic about His appearance, nothing to attract us to Him. He was despised and rejected—a man of sorrows, acquainted with deepest grief. We turned our backs on Him and looked the other way. He was despised, and we did not care.” (Isaiah 53:2-3, nlt) Because he understands oppression, he knows our need for comfort. And he has delivered it to us. Isaiah also says in chapter 40, "Speak softly and tenderly to Jerusalem, but also make it very clear that she has served her sentence, that her sin is taken care of--forgiven! She's been punished enough and more than enough, and now it's over and done with." (Isaiah 40:2, the message) The Jewish people were waiting, anticipating the day that this would be true.

Jesus was the fulfillment of a new comfort for people. What do you anticipate at Christmas? Would you like comfort for your sorrows and difficulties? I can tell you I have visited with two different people in our church family who have cancer, both of whom have been told this will be their last Christmas on this earth. They are both believers in Jesus, and I am amazed at the comfort they have. That's what Christmas brings—Jesus said “God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” (Matthew 5:4, nlt) Maybe this Christmas you are alone for the first time. Death or divorce has caused this Christmas to be painful. Or you've dreaded Christmas for years because it's a reminder of a long ago loss and there's one less place setting at your table, fewer presents under your tree. All the festivities only serve to remind you how lonely you are. You don't have to anticipate loneliness or grief—you can anticipate comfort! Because God Himself can be with you! That's the second anticipation of Christmas, and it's

## 2. *Presence*

Notice I didn't say “presenTs” - I said “presence.” Sure, we anticipate getting gifts. I don't know if you've seen any of those children's letters to Santa, but I came across a few that were pretty good. One said, “Dear Santa, you did not bring me anything good last year. You did not bring me anything good the year before that. This is your last chance. Signed, Alfred.” I guess Santa's going on Alfred's naughty list.

“What type of fuel do you use for your sleigh or are your reindeers just hyper? Either way, I hope you won't miss our house.” - Matt, 11

“I have tried to be good Santa, but boys will be boys. You must know that cuz you are a boy.” - Henry, 8

“I want everyone in the world to play nicer with each other. Mommy wants everyone to take better care of the world and Daddy just wants to read his Sunday paper in peace.” - Ellis, 7

“Santa, you know how it is nowadays, my parents are divorced, so please put me on your special delivery list to come 2 nights, Christmas Eve at Mom's and Christmas night at Dad's. Thank you!” - Ashley, 7

Santa—I saw you wave to me at the mall. You really do love me!” - Allison, 6

“Dear Santa, I would love all the presents I asked for but my mom deserves them more. I have been getting presents all year from my mom and she works hard to get them for me. My mom doesn't know how much I love her that's why I want her to have all my presents. Love, Victoria” (12)

We love getting presents—it's something that is instilled in us. But in some of those letters you heard children saying what they really wanted: someone to love them. That's what Christmas is really about. Christmas is really about the gift of *presence*—God Himself, someone who loves us. Matthew chapter 1 quotes the Old Testament prophecy and promise: “All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord's message through His prophet: ‘Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son, and they will call Him Immanuel, which means ‘God is with us’.’” (Matthew 1:22-23, nlt)

Every year that came and went under oppressive rule made the Jews want God even more. Each year piled onto the previous and brought on greater anticipation of His “advent” or his coming to live among us—to be one of us—to always be with us!

That's why the words of John's Gospel are so meaningful: “The One who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He came into the very world He created, but the world didn't recognize Him. He came to His own people, and even they rejected Him. But to all who believed Him and accepted Him, He gave the right to become children of God. They are reborn—not with a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan, but a birth that comes from God. So the Word became human and made His home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen His glory, the glory of the Father's one and only Son.” (John 1:9-14. nlt)

Perhaps your life has left you in anticipation of His presence; Christmas is the promise of presence! If you are going through a difficult time, be comforted! God is near! He is present and he is nearer than you know.

The Jews were in the middle of terrible times, and that caused them to anticipate God's presence. Instead of focusing on the challenges you face and getting discouraged, look for more of God, more of his presence in your life. He is as near and present as you will seek for and allow him to be. In both the Old and New Testaments God promises you his presence and that he will never leave you and never forget about you.

Christmas brings comfort, God's presence, to be sure, but finally we anticipate

### 3. Rescue

When the angel told Joseph that Mary, still a virgin—would have this baby, he said also said that the baby's name should be Jesus, and here's why: because he would save or *rescue* people from their sin. The name "Jesus" is the Greek version of the Hebrew name "Joshua," which means "'YHWH,' or 'the LORD Almighty' saves." These people anticipated being rescued by God when Jesus arrived. They needed a rescue deeper and more significant than a political rescue—they needed an eternal rescue—to be rescued from the pain, the penalty, the death and separation caused by sinful choices and attitudes and their very nature. Temple sacrifices would only cover one act, until the next one, and didn't even touch the heart. Mary's sacrifice of the pigeons was only good until her next sin. The men were no better. The business of the Temple was constant sacrifices—no sooner did you make one then you would need another.

You and I make all kinds of sacrifices to get rid of our guilt. "Oh, I'll be nice to her since she may have heard me gossip about her. That'll make me feel better and maybe her too." "Oh, I feel guilty spending all this money shopping, I'll drop a quarter in the Salvation Army bucket on the way out." "Oh God, get me out of this mess, or get me through this surgery, and I'll go to church every Sunday for a whole month and I might even put something in the offering."

The fact is we need to be rescued, and no amount of niceness, no expensive presents, no sacrificial giving can change that (although you should still give generously to your church!). We are separated from a God, who loves us, and deep down we know that, and we know it's our fault. We know we can never do enough to make it right. Christmas is God Himself rescuing us from ourselves—from our sin! Psalm 130 says, "Help, GOD--the bottom has fallen out of my life! Master, hear my cry for help! Listen hard! Open your ears! Listen to my cries for mercy. If you, GOD, kept records on wrongdoings, who would stand a chance? As it turns out, forgiveness is your habit, and that's why you're worshiped. I pray to GOD--my

life a prayer-- and wait for what he'll say and do. My life's on the line before God, my Lord, waiting and watching till morning, waiting and watching till morning. O Israel, wait and watch for GOD-- with GOD's arrival comes love, with GOD's arrival comes generous redemption. No doubt about it--he'll redeem Israel, buy back Israel from captivity to sin.” (Psalm 130:1-8, the message)

God didn't send Jesus into the world to condemn you—he sent Jesus into the world to bring you comfort, to bring you God's own presence into your life, and to rescue you. Christmas reminds us that our anticipation is fulfilled!

Let me close with this story: in an article for Christian Standard magazine entitled "Carols for Any Season of Suffering," Matt Proctor reflects on the comfort and rescue that we can have because of God's presence with us:

My 5-year-old, Carl, and my 3-year-old, Conrad, love it when I dress like them. After they put on jeans and a blue T-shirt, they'll come ask me to wear jeans and a blue T-shirt. When I do, they have a saying. They will survey me, survey themselves, and say, "Look, Dad—same, same." For my birthday, Carl bought me a North Carolina blue mesh shirt ... because he has a North Carolina blue mesh shirt. We could be "same, same."

When I play living room football with my boys, Conrad will not let me play standing—so big and scary and towering above him. The theological term for this is "completely Other." Instead he insists I get on my knees. When I am down at eye-level, Conrad puts his hand on my shoulder and says, "There. See, Dad—same, same." They like it when I enter their world ....

This summer, I scraped my leg working on my house. When Conrad fell down and scraped his leg, he pointed at my scab, then showed me his and said, "Hey, Dad—same, same."

Here's the point ... God himself has felt what we feel. In the Incarnation, he chose not to stay "completely Other." He got down at eye-level, and in the Incarnation, God experienced what it's like to be tired and discouraged .... He knows what it's like to hurt and bleed. On the cross, Jesus himself prayed a psalm of lament: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1).

In your pain, you may be tempted to say, "God, you have no idea what I'm going through. You have no idea how bad I'm hurting." But God can respond, "Yes, I do." He can point to your wounds and then to his own and say, "Look: same, same. Me too. I have entered your world, and I know how you feel. I have been there, I am with you now, I care, and I can help." That is what Christmas is all about.

Matt Proctor, "Carols for Any Season of Suffering," Christian Standard magazine (12-23-07)

I don't know what you are anticipating, but I know what the people in Jesus' day were anticipating—the very reason Jesus came—to bring us comfort, to be with us, and to rescue us. That is what Christmas is, and no matter what you are facing, that is what Christmas can bring to you. No more having to anticipate; he is here!

*Pray*