



Pastor Ken Nelson's Sermon

SERMON – CHRISTMAS DAY

ISAIAH 52:7-10

DECEMBER 25, 2021

“THE HAPPY CHRISTMAS CHIMES ONCE MORE – RIGHT?”

There are sad to say, times in our lives when long, careful periods of planning and the expectations that rise with it go unfulfilled. The spheres of life in which this is true are many.

I offer two - the first, frivolous perhaps, are vacations. They always end too soon, cost too much and are not as idyllic as what “*Travelocity*” or your best friend who goes there every year promised. Even if we might be having the “time of our lives” the specter of its termination gnaws away at us as do thoughts that maybe we should have gone to _____ instead.

The second, more consequential – weddings. Themselves short, they are no less anticipated and inaugurate a lifetime commitment. Wedding days also create stress. I always tell couples they should relax, it will be fine, and no one will notice if in the 31 minutes we are in the church a minor detail is missed! This usually falls on deaf ears - the day has too much significance. As well it should - life is never the same after. For better or worse, richer, or poorer, in sickness and health and all that, two lives becoming one flesh changes those lives. Unlike vacations, marriage affords us no “try something else” options next year!

Christmas was also such a day. Long preparation went into it. Centuries in fact of calling, loving, guiding, protecting, tutoring and forgiving Israel, all in anticipation of the day God, who through the prophets said repeatedly “*I am with you*”, through Jesus finally was. Like two who in marriage become one flesh are supposed to – God in the flesh felt what we feel - forging a whole new relationship between God and humanity in the process.

God did not “vacation” here – thought admittedly our creator made lots of primo places to do so! Which is why we cannot treat our Christmases like we usually treat our Christmases – a day to prepare for and then...poof, it's over - buying, baking, decorating for the sake of just a few hours over a night and a day. And even if we judge ourselves “prepared”, the day can still gnaw at us...maybe we should have done _____ instead! The world conspires to make us believe that Christmas *is* the preparation and that all of it is its own reward.

We have loaded the *day* with more sentimental meaning than it can bear – whilst forgetting the event it commemorates has more meaning than our finite minds can bear. The English poet Oscar Wilde said, “*In this world there are only two tragedies. One is not getting what one wants, and the other is getting it.*” Maybe that's too cynical. After all life should be enjoyed- even its short-lived pleasures. And after all, this is Christmas morn! But Christmas often strings together these two sentiments of Mr. Wilde and forces us to confront his musings this way.... *what do we do now that we are happy? And what do we do if, and when that happiness is over?*

Christmas after Christmas when I was young I endured the feeling of being so, well, disappointed when the final gift was unwrapped. Instantly, my gifts looked so ordinary, so regular. Now they belonged to reality, not my imagination. Sure, there would be play time over the next week of school vacation, but then.... well then it would be January – in Minnesota!! Still, anticipation is the essence of Christmas...the gatherings we gather for and gifts we long for, renew, even if only for a while, the God-given gift of anticipation.

Humans are instilled with the gift of looking forward to things and enjoying the looking forward part as much as the thing itself! I highly doubt the animal world looks forward to a meal like we do! They may be hungry, but do cows get “excited” when the hay or oats are tossed before their noses – do they “moo” amongst themselves about how those staples are their absolute favorites? But the experience of anticipation in us is as God would have it, because if anticipation is the essence of Christmas, it is more so the essence of life and particularly the Christian life. For us, the best is always yet to come.

Our lesson today from Isaiah gushes anticipation. To Israel, long waiting and long-suffering Israel, the good Lord is proclaiming that salvation has come to his people. They are the redeemed of the Lord, and the city in which they will again dwell shall never be forsaken. Their Jerusalem will be returned to them. But now that they got what they want - is that what they want? The answer Isaiah insinuates – is maybe, if they receive this redemption, this saving event, this God moment in time and use it for that which it was intended. That means they are to get busy being the righteous people they can be because the Lord has visited them with his grace.

Having gotten what they wanted, they needed reminding their joy could wither away as it had before in Israel's history. And why did it wither? Because they had not kept faith with the everyday tasks required of a covenant relationship with God. The happy news they had received from the Lord they must claim as their own they give themselves to the works of God. Anticipation is great...but it is not its own reward. That is found in the using of what has passed from the world of anticipation and into the world of reality. The very Gospel of God, the good news that God in Jesus favors you, has redeemed you, and will receive you into his eternal joy shines forth in today's Christmas message as it shined through Isaiah's words. The word became flesh and lived among us...but attend also to John's implicit warning – God comes to that which is His own, and many are they who don't know they are His own or don't want Him as theirs.

And so once again, Christmas comes to us, and we are happy – no? Yes, we are! Some of us a bit tired, but we are happy! Moments like this must be savored, days like today are unique and must remain so. But then what? A few more days of lightened activities, a New Year's Eve party (that we must plan and shop for!) and then it will be January – in Wisconsin!

And so be it. Today is the day we celebrate that God in his Son Jesus has graciously given to us the gift we do not deserve but which if we ponder and put it to use day by day - if we recognize it as gift and never think of it any other way, we will realize this is what we have wanted all along. The world, even the frigid world we walk back into in a while, will be glad we have been here today, receiving from Christ his love, and showing that we know what to do after and because we are happy in Christ. AMEN