

1. We're Expecting
The Expected Surprise
Matthew 24:36-44

On September 6, 1977, shortly after midnight, I was awakened from a deep sleep with the words, "It's time." At first I didn't know what my wife was talking about. Then I realized she was telling me that she had gone into labor. Even then I didn't believe her. She was three weeks overdue, and there had been a couple of episodes of false labor. I nearly told her to go back to sleep. However at 8:01 that morning our first child made her debut.

Isn't it amazing? For nine months and three weeks we had known that day was coming. We were anticipating it. We expected it. We knew that day had to come. Yet, when it finally did come, it caught us by surprise. I suspect that's not unusual. My guess is that after waiting nine months, a great many couples are caught by surprise when the great day finally arrives.

And if we are surprised by the birth of a baby after waiting nine months, how surprised must the world have been by the birth of a baby after waiting hundreds of years. About 725 B.C. Isaiah wrote these words:

For unto us a child is born,
 To us a son is given;
And the government will be upon his shoulders,
 And his name will be called "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." (Isaiah 9:6)

From that day on the people were looking for the coming of the Messiah. Yet, when he finally did come, they were caught by surprise. They were looking for him. But when he finally came, they weren't prepared for him.

And because they were prepared for him, his coming was a day of judgment.

We don't usually think of Christmas as a Day of Judgment. But it was.

Christmas is one of our two high holy days—there other being Easter. Everyone but a Scrooge loves Christmas. During the Christmas season we transform a cold, dark world into a winter wonderland. We join the chorus of angels singing carols about "peace on earth, good will to men." It is the one time of the year that everyone seems to understand the joy of giving.

We ought to enjoy Christmas. It is the Day of the Lord: the Day of the long-expected coming of the Messiah. It is the Day of Salvation.

But we must not forget the words of the prophet Amos:

Woe to you who desire the day of the Lord:
 Why would you have the day of the Lord?
It is darkness and not light;
 As if a man fled from a lion,

And a bear met him;
Or went into the house and leaned with his hand against the wall, and a serpent bit him.
Is not the day of the Lord darkness, and not light,
And gloom with no brightness in it?
Amos 5:18-20

Now, why would Amos say that about something as beautiful as Christmas? Because he was compelled to remind us that the Day of the Lord is also the Day of Judgment.

Christmas Day was a Day of Judgment. If you don't believe that, turn to the first chapter of John, where he describes Christmas Day: "In the beginning was the Word... And the Word was made flesh and dwelled among us... He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not." (John 1:1,14,10-11)

Christmas Day of a day of judgment because, on that day, people came face to face with the God they said they loved, the God they thought they loved, and they discovered that in their heart of hearts they didn't really want anything to do with him.

When Mary brought the baby Jesus to the Temple, a man named Simeon was there in the Temple. He had gone to the Temple daily for many years, praying that he would see the Messiah before he died. When he saw the baby Jesus he knew his prayers had been answered. He took the baby into his arms and said to Mary, "Behold this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against... that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed." (Luke 2:33-35)

Christmas Day was a day of decision. When we come face to face with Christ, we have to make a decision. At that moment we stand at a fork in the road. We hear the voice of Joshua, "Choose ye this day whom ye will serve." Shall we take up our cross and follow Christ on the narrow road of service, self-sacrifice, righteousness, justice and holiness? Or shall we continue serving our false gods of power, wealth and prestige. Until that day we may think we can do both. But that day we know we can no longer serve God and the world. We have to make a choice.

Some will be like the rich, young ruler, who eagerly sought out Christ, only to discover that the day he met Jesus was his day of judgment, because he discovered that the price of eternal life was higher than he was willing to pay. He thought he could serve God and the world. But when he came face to face with Christ, he had to make a decision. With great sorrow, he turned away from Christ.

Someday Christ will return. It will be Christmas all over again. We've been expecting him for over 2,000 years. And it we will be surprised. Some will not be prepared.

"Then two men will be in the field; one is taken and one is left. Two women will be grinding at the mill; one is taken and one is left." Who is taken? The one who decides to go. Those who are left will be the ones who have chosen to stay. They will say to Christ, "I cannot leave the things I love to go with you." They will reject Christ, just as many rejected Christ 2,000 years ago.

In the Day of Judgment, it will not be Christ who rejects people. It will be people who reject Christ.

The coming of the Lord will catch us by surprise. The wise thing to do is to prepare for his coming every day. The way the coaches put it is, “You play the way you practice.” If we are to be prepared to decide for Christ on the day of his coming, we must decide for Christ day by day. The Spirit of Christ actually does come to us each day, knocking at the doors of our hearts. Each day we need to make a decision to follow him.

There is a story about a college student who had failed miserably in his first semester at college. As he prepared to go home for Christmas, he text-messaged his brother. He wrote, “Failed in all exams, please prepare father.” A few hours later he got a text message from his brother that said, “Father prepared. Prepare yourself.”

God has prepared for us. Jesus said, “In my father’s house are many mansions. I go to prepare a place for you.” Christ has made preparations for us. Now it is up to us to make preparations for him.

There is a little town in East Texas called Tatum. I pastored in a community nearby right after I got out of seminary. An elderly member of my church was telling me that in the days before automobiles, people would take the train from town to town. Tatum was an especially rough and lawless town. Gun fights were common. It was so bad that as the train approached Tatum, the conductor would say, “Next stop Tatum. Prepare to meet thy Maker.”

That is the message of Advent: “Next stop Christmas. Prepared to meet thy Maker.”

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