

Christmas 1  
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The time leading up to Christmas is a season of anticipation. Many of us made Christmas lists with the hope of receiving that special gift at the top of the list. We anticipate family gatherings as loved ones come from near and far to share this holy time. Those of us involved in worship leadership in the parish have worked hard in anticipation of the beautiful Christmas celebrations. There is shopping to be done in crowded stores as we plan for the Christmas feast. As Christmas draws closer our anticipation escalates.

Those who lived in Israel at the time of John the Baptist lived in anticipation. They anticipated the day when God's promises would be fulfilled. They anticipated a day when Israel would return to dominance as a world power not to be trifled with. They anticipated the coming of the Messiah foretold by prophets of old, one who would restore the kingdom of David.

When John the Baptist burst on the scene people became convinced that their anticipation was soon to be realized. John acknowledged that he was a voice crying in the wilderness to prepare the way for the Messiah to come. John was clearly a prophet. He preached repentance and judgment. He warned people to prepare themselves for the Messiah and as a sign of being made clean to be baptized.

John anticipated a Messiah who would be a mighty king. The Messiah would rule with authority and power, a great military leader capable of subduing the nations. The anticipated Messiah would liberate God's people from the oppression of the Romans. The Messiah would set free those held in prison and restore Jerusalem to her former glory. John anticipated a Messianic empire.

During the season before Christmas we talk about the anticipated second coming. We believe that just as surely as Jesus came once, he will come again. What does the idea of a second coming anticipate? Some anticipate a time when those who believe a certain way will be swept up in the heavenly kingdom and those left behind will struggle and burn in damnation. Some anticipate a time when peace will reign over the earth. Some anticipate a time when God will destroy the creation.

Often that which we anticipate does not turn out as we expect. That great gift we thought we just had to have turns out to be another product made in China that will not hold up in the way we had hoped. That family gathering is just another time when we tried hard to be nice to each other although we would very much like to tell certain family members what we really think. That great feast we anticipated tasted good but now it is back to the diet. The worship service had a few glitches so it was not the beautiful celebration we anticipated. Often our anticipations do not coincide with reality.

That was the experience of John the Baptist as he sat in prison. John's popularity was considered a threat by Herod. Besides John had condemned Herod's marriage to Herodius who was set on getting revenge. John could no longer proclaim his message from prison and he was eager to know if his heralded judgment was taking place. John was hearing stories about Jesus. The stories about Jesus did not conform to the judgment John anticipated. John wondered about Jesus' authority, things were not turning out as John anticipated.

So, John sends some of his followers to inquire of Jesus if he is the long anticipated Messiah or if there is another. Typical of Jesus, John's followers do not get the direct answer they anticipated. Jesus tells them; "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised and the poor have good news preached to them"

Jesus redefines for John and for us who the Messiah would be and what the Messiah had come to do. In essence the entire gospel story is the answer to the question posed to Jesus by John the Baptist.

Isn't that our history with God? Things do not turn out just exactly as we anticipate. God answers our questions but the answers are unexpected. Since the answers are not what we anticipate we think that God has not answered us at all. We ask God for salvation and God responds with a child born in a manger. We ask for forgiveness and God responds with a teacher who refuses to condemn. We ask for reconciliation and God responds with a death on a cross. We ask for life and God responds with an empty tomb. We ask for strength and God responds with tongues of fire. We ask for a kingdom and God responds with a church.

God's answers are seldom what we anticipated them to be. The wonderful reminder of Christmas is that God responds with love and grace that surpasses our understanding. So our prayer remains, Come Lord Jesus.