

As a child I remember that the most difficult part of Christmas was simply waiting for it to come. From Thanksgiving to December 25 seemed more like an eternity than a month. Days seemed like weeks. Weeks felt like seasons. Time seemed to stand still.

Waiting is foreign to our society. It seems unnatural. We hunger for immediate gratification. The idea of delayed satisfaction is a stranger to our thinking.

The symbols of our unwillingness to wait are all around us. Fast food chains boom because we don't have time to eat. We stand in crooked lines, then yell out an order, get it down in five minutes and then get back to the rat race. We haven't got time to sit down and read a book anymore. Perhaps it is a sign of the times that we have condensed versions of the Bible. In kitchens all over America there are gadgets to get the meal prepared quickly. I would guess Mr. Coffee started it all. Simply spoon in the coffee and pour water. The coffee is made before you can even find a cup. When we become sick we want to be made well now, not later. Medicine, doctors, pastoral care and love are often rejected if they are not swift.

I, like you, accept most of our no—wait approach to life, with the exception of instant potatoes, which are intolerable. But the truth is that, though we do not like waiting, waiting is a part of living. We must wait for payday, a break, quitting time, and for the mailman. When you do your Christmas shopping, you had certainly better be prepared to wait in a line to get checked out, wait to get a parking place, and wait through at least four red lights before making a left hand turn on Poplar Ave.

But there are also very serious matters for which we wait. Some wait for health to return, some for the coming of food stamps, some for marriage or remarriage. We must wait for peace. A scared child waits for the coming of morning, and a scared adult awaits death. And an expectant mother waits for delivery. Waiting can be pure agony. It's like the jury is out.

The problem is that scripture time and time again tells us that God's clock is wound in a different way. Time is different to him. We look at seconds; he looks at the ages. Waiting, not hurrying is one of his characteristics. And this waiting God tells his people that often, they too must wait.

And that is where the story of Christmas really begins. It begins thousands of years before the birth of Christ. They longed for that one who would bring light out of darkness, and make the blind to see. They

Longed for that one who would turn their sorrow into joy, and vanquish their enemies. But, God said, you must wait. Let us look at how God's people have waited throughout the ages:

First, there is the waiting of John the Baptist. The people of John's day experienced a special kind of waiting. When Jesus was a young man in his late 20s, John the Baptist was a desert prophet warning everyone of the wrath of God and the judgment to come. His message was harsh. It was a sharp rebuke especially of the religious leadership. The people had been worked up into such frenzy that they thought that he was the

messiah. Many who came out to see him would go home to family and workmates and gossip about him. They were convinced he was the messiah or had something to do with it. But John said, no, I am not he and for now, you must wait: He said, I came to tell you about the light that is to come. The people pressed him to say more but all that John would say was: I am not he.

Let me tell you s story. There was a woman once who wanted peace in the world and peace in her heart, but she was very frustrated. The world seemed to be falling apart and her personal life wasn't that great either. One day she decided to go shopping, and she went to the mall and walked in to one of the stores. She was surprised to see Jesus behind the counter. She knew it was Jesus because he looked just like the paintings she'd seen in museums and in devotional books. Finally she got up her nerve and asked, "Excuse me, but are you Jesus?" "I am." "Do you work here?" "In a way; I own the store." "Oh, what do you sell here?" "Just about everything," Jesus replied. "Feel free to walk up and down the aisles, make a list, see what it is you want, and then come back and I'll see what I can do for you."

Well, she did just that. She walked up and down the aisles, writing furiously. There was peace on earth, no more war, no hunger or poverty. There was peace in families, harmony, no dissension, no more drugs. There careful use of resources. By the time she got back to the counter, she had a long list. Jesus looked over the list, then smiled at her and said, "No problem." And then he bent down behind the counter and picked out all sorts of things, and finally stood up, and laid out the packets on the counter. "What are these?" the woman asked. "Seed packets," Jesus answered. "This is a catalog store." "You mean I don't get the finished product?" "No, this is a place of dreams. You come and see what it looks like, and I give you the seeds. You go home and plant the seeds. You water them and nurture them and help them to grow, and someday someone else reaps the benefits." "Oh," she said. "And she left the store without buying anything."

John understood that he was planting the seeds. The message is we must wait. Are you willing to do the work and wait?

Second This is season of advent, the four Sundays prior to Christmas. For the Christian it is a time of waiting. It is perhaps an awkward season, because we would much prefer to dismiss with the preliminaries and get right down to the particulars of the birth of Jesus. We would much prefer to hear as the scripture lesson: And there were abiding in that country we would the words of Isaiah spoken centuries earlier: Prepare ye the way of the Lord. Make straight your highways. But the message of Advent is that we do not have permission to rush God's story. It says to us that for now, we must wait.

Even the hymns of advent remind us of this: Come, thou long expected Jesus. O Come, O Come, Emmanuel. We long with anticipation. The day of fulfillment will come. But for now, the people of God must wait.

There is special kind of waiting that many of us at some point in our lives will experience and that is the birth of the first-born child in your family. I remember going to Lamaze classes fully understand what was happening. How excited we were when we got to see that first ultra sound picture. I insisted that it was a boy. But I had to wait. There was an appointed time and nothing I could do would make that day come a single minute closer. And then the day came. I had to put on this green gown and shower cap. Again I had to wait. I distinctly remember standing around waiting. Waiting while she went through labor. I will have to admit her waiting was a lot different then mine. But we wait for a few hours more with an anticipation that only a parent could possibly understand.

How will you wait for the birth of the Christ child during this advent season? Will it be with a blank stare, or will it be with a surge of exciting anticipation, wanting to know all that you can about it. For now we must wait. But, my friends, how we wait makes all of the difference in the world. Amen.

ChristianGlobe Network, [eSermons.com Sermons](http://eSermons.com), by Brett Blair

## II

You can't see light unless you are in the shadows or the dark. Turn your lights on during a sunny day, and you'll never know they're shining. The sun streaming in your windows bathes everything in a natural light. You don't seek to turn on your lamps when you feel you have enough light already. But spend awhile in the dark, and you'll soon be longing for any semblance of light.

The amount of light we need is also relative. Those who live in the city become accustomed to a huge amount of light –from streetlamps, buildings, signs, and roadways. If electricity fails and the lights go out, it feels like a strange and lonely place. Those who live in the country however with no streetlamps on the roads and few houses for miles experience a very different kind of life. Driving on winding, country, back roads can be challenging in the dark, especially when the moon is new or clouds obscure the stars. That kind of pitch blackness is something most of us are not used to. For those of us used to city lights, we cling our hope on our headlights as we make our way slowly through.

This December, meteorologists and astronomers tell us, we will experience a “Christmas Star” –an enormously bright celestial event that hasn't occurred in hundreds of years, not since 1226. For the “star” to shine as brightly as this one will on December 21<sup>st</sup>, Jupiter and Saturn will need to align by only .1 degree. The image will appear as one star. Scientists tell us that the planets won't align this closely again until the year 7541![\[1\]](#) But you can only see it about 30 minutes after sunset!

For those feeling the burden of economic pain, virus fatigue, and general holiday blues, the coming of the “Christmas Star” has generated a real and tangible excitement. For some, it's the thrill of seeing something rare and new, special and wondrous that no one has witnessed for thousands of years. For many, it's a sign of hope in the world that things will soon be better. Light for us signals something inside of us that triggers joy, hope, and even faith.

In John the Baptist's witness to the coming Messiah as told by John the apostle, he uses the metaphor of “light” to talk about the presence of God coming into the world to renew it, change it, give it hope. John tells his listeners that he has come to testify to the light. What he is saying is that he has seen it, witnessed it with his own eyes, and he knows in his heart that divine, world-altering change is coming. For just as a bright light seems to pierce the darkness with its amazing energy and blinding brightness, John knows that God's coming into the world is a kind of “piercing” of time and space, a kind of rare and super-natural occurrence that is going to be a powerful force within the world, an occurrence worth watching and waiting for.

Just as we stand with our binoculars in awe of that amazing, brilliant star lighting up the sky, so we too as Christians stand in awe of the Light sent into the world. For this was a time when the heavens opened up and a transcendent and mysterious God broke through reality as we know it with a presence that would stun and stir the very foundations of all we knew and believed in.

This was no simple God-encounter on a mountaintop or altar. This was God altering time and space to “tabernacle” within a human conception of reality. And it happened in a dark, wilderness kind of place.

In a sense, the world had become a kind of wilderness in the time before Jesus was born. When John the prophet cries out “in the wilderness,” he is not simply calling for repentance from the fields. But he is the “voice” of all humanity, God’s people, crying out from their inner wilderness places. His is a primal voice.

Every one of us has that “primal voice” inside of us, that inner voice that cries out in pain, in despair from our place of darkness. It’s our place of doubt, fear, pain, and desolation. It’s our place of raw humanness that recognizes its limitations, its lowly position in the universe of being, its humble need for assistance in the vast world of uncontrollable and unrelenting pestilence.

John’s voice is our collective voice, a prophetic voice that climbs into the reaches of our hearts, that alerts us in our darkness that something is about to change, that something big is about to happen, that hope is around the corner, true hope, real change.

Last week, we spoke about the importance of repentance, about clearing the debris and distraction from our roadways and paths, so that Jesus, our savior, could alter our way and guide us in the Way that leads to life. But it’s hard to gain the impetus for repentance if you don’t anticipate the light. Let’s face it, we are a carrot chasing people.

Given our druthers, if we thought there would be no pay, many of us wouldn’t go to work. If we thought there was no one coming to visit, we probably wouldn’t spend the time cleaning and prepping that we would if we knew that company would be coming soon.

Our impetus for our “roadwork,” our repentance and preparation is the knowledge of the coming of the Light.

Many years ago, during a particularly vicious hurricane storm, the lights went out all across many major cities in Florida. In the dark, firemen and rescue teams fought through rubble, debris, and water to try to rescue those who were not able to evacuate in time before the storm hit. The dark water looked ominous and their clothes felt slimy and salty. The night felt tedious and hard and long. Yet they pushed on, certain that eventually, day would come and their job would be made easier with the light.

This season of coronavirus has in a sense put everyone into a dark kind of wilderness place the like of which we haven’t experienced before in our lifetimes. We feel alone. We feel isolated. We feel sad. And we feel afraid. A few months ago, we felt that nothing would ever change, that life would go on “endlessly” in this sad state of despair. We felt that the darkness had become long, and that a “light” at the end of the tunnel would never come.

Then word of vaccines began to emerge. And as though a light had come on, we began to feel hope.

God knows, we are a people who need light. We need it to live, to work, to function, and to feel alive. Light for us is hope. Light for us is life.

But for Christians, our light is more than a simple vaccine or opening of our homes and towns. It's more than witnessing the conjunction of two planets or even the end of a deadly disease. For us, the Light in Jesus is an eternal promise of hope, an eternal vow of presence, that no matter what dark places we encounter, God will be there, and hope will always win.

God's emergence into the world in the form of Jesus is the greatest miracle the world has ever known. It's a knowledge that reminds us in every time and place about the magnitude of God's power, and the truth of His presence.

This December 21<sup>st</sup>, I hope you'll step outside for a moment and witness to the light. But more than that, I hope this December 25<sup>th</sup>, you'll witness to the true Light, the one that promises not just better times coming, but miracles of the kind you have never before seen in your life and in the world.

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[1] See Jonathan Kegges, "Christmas Star: Jupiter, Saturn Combine for Rare Great Conjunction," Weather, <https://www.clickorlando.com/weather/2020/12/05/jupiter-saturn-combine-for-rare-pre-christmas-great-conjunction/>.

ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., , by Lori Wagner

III

We all know that appearances matter. When officials at Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts, wanted to advertise their college to high school students a couple years back, they found that they had a problem. It had been a snowless winter in Williamstown. However, the officials felt that snow would make their college look more inviting to prospective students. Hence, they imported 60 tons of manufactured snow and posed student models beside the "snowdrifts."

A defensive director of admissions explained, "We're not faking anything. We are just hoping to get some good winter shots." It was, after all, real snow off real trucks. (1)

Playwright Gore Vidal says that when his play *The Best Man* was being cast back in 1959, Ronald Reagan was proposed for the lead role of the distinguished front-running Presidential candidate. He was rejected. It was decided that he lacked the "Presidential look."

Appearances matter. I like the story of the woman who was out in the yard working when a moving van pulled up next door. She walked over to welcome the newcomers to the neighborhood wearing her dirty work clothes. The following week, the new neighbors invited her and her husband to a housewarming party. The woman wanted to make a better impression this time. She colored her hair, struggled into a girdle, painted her lips, applied eye shadow and false eyelashes, painted her fingernails, and popped in her contact lenses. She admired herself in the mirror and said to her husband, "Well, tonight they are going to see the real me!"

Appearances matter. And God wants to give us all a new look.

chapter 61 of Isaiah. Jesus used the first part of this chapter to announce his ministry, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor..." Beautiful words, powerful words. But note the less familiar words that follow because they refer to our new look, "...and (to) provide for those who grieve in Zion, to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor."

Isaiah is writing about those who are grieving over a fallen Israel. BABYLONIAN EXILE He is writing about folks who are feeling defeated, disappointed, down-hearted, and he is telling them that someday they will be called "oaks of righteousness...." That's quite a change of appearance, from defeated, disappointed, down-hearted to sturdy, erect and proud, like oaks.

Well, here's the good news for the morning. It matters not how defeated we may be feeling, how down on ourselves or our world we may be. Christ offers us the opportunity

to stand tall and proud and victorious. How does it happen? Isaiah tells us about the changes God would make in our appearance.

One of my complaints is when the Church liturgists decide to cut verses from the scripture readings. What Isaiah says next is missing from our reading but you can find it in your Bibles.

FIRST OF ALL, HE SAYS THAT GOD WILL PROVIDE US WITH "A CROWN OF BEAUTY INSTEAD OF ASHES." Ashes are the symbol of grieving, mourning, despair. During Lent people put ashes on their foreheads as a sign of contrition and repentance. There is a time for ashes, but according to Isaiah, God's yearning is to replace our ashes with a crown of beauty. One translation says a garland of beauty.

The crown and the garland are symbols of victory not defeat. They say to the world, "Here is a winner." Can you imagine the change that would take place in our lives if you and I had that sense of confidence, poise, and self-worth, of knowing that we are winners? Imagine yourself right now wearing a crown or a garland of beauty.

I was reading recently about former college and pro football star Pat Haden. When Pat played football in the pros, he was small by today's standards, only 5' 10-1/2". He was also light " only 173 pounds. Still, he had a gift " and I am not referring to his athletic ability. The gift was a voice inside his head that said, "Pat, you can do it."

"You can do it, Pat," his two older brothers used to tell him when he was a little boy. "You can do it, Pat," they told him when his wobbly passes dropped to the ground. "You can do it, Pat," they told him when he was stuck on a school project. And they would encourage him to work harder. "You can do it, Pat. You can do it."

"I ended up knowing that I could do anything I wanted to do," Pat remembered years later. And time after time Pat Haden beat the odds and proved the confidence of his older brothers to be correct, "You can do it, Pat." (2)

Don't you wish you had an older brother like those two older brothers? The good news is you do. So do I. Christ came into this world to tell us that we can do it. This is the Good News that Jesus announces when he refers to this passage in the incident in the synagogue we find in Luke. We can be more than conquerors through him who loves us. If we have the faith even of a mustard seed, we can move mountains. All things are possible to those who believe. We can do it. Christ didn't come into our world that we might wear the ashes of defeat. He came into the world that we might wear the beautiful garland of victory. God has for each of us a crown of beauty.

IN THE SECOND PLACE, GOD HAS FOR US "THE OIL OF GLADNESS INSTEAD OF MOURNING...."

When Christ comes into our lives we receive an attitude adjustment, from sad to glad. Some followers of Jesus could use that kind of adjustment. Some saints must be a pain even for God to endure.

It's like three women who arrived at the Pearly Gates at the same time. St. Peter came but said he had some pressing business and would they please wait. He was gone for a long time, but finally he came back and called one of the women in and asked her if she minded waiting.

"No," she said, "I've looked forward to this for so long. I love God and can't wait to meet Jesus. I don't mind at all." St. Peter then said, "Well I have one more question. How do you spell 'God?'"

She said, "Capital-G-o-d." St. Peter said, "Go right on in."

He went out and got one of the other women, told her to come on inside, and said, "Did you mind waiting?" She said, "Oh, no. I have been a Christian for fifty years, and I'll spend eternity here. I didn't mind at all." So St. Peter said, "Just one more thing. How do you spell 'God?'" She said, "G-o-d. No, I mean capital-G."

St. Peter said that was good and sent her on in to Heaven. He went back out and invited the third woman in and asked her if she minded waiting. "Yes, I did," she said huffily. "I've had to stand in line all my life: at the supermarket, when I went to school, when I registered my children for school, when I went to the movies, everywhere, and I resent having to wait in line for Heaven!" St. Peter said, "Well that's all right for you to feel that way. It won't be held against you, but there is just one more question. How do you spell 'Czechoslovakia?'"<sup>(3)</sup> antidisestablishmentarianism originally, opposition to the disestablishment of the Church of England, now opposition to the belief that there should no longer be an official church in a country

G. K. Chesterton once said, "Joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian." Not every Christian believes that. There are some Christians who believe if you are truly pious, you wear a perpetual frown.

One of the greatest preachers the Christian faith ever produced was one of those who promoted a sour-faced faith. His name was Chrysostom. Preaching at the end of the fourth century, he saw jollity as pagan. He declared that Christians must weep for their sins. He contended that God doesn't want his children to play. Chrysostom believed if the devil can get people engaged in frivolity, he's won the day. Even saints and Fathers of the Church can get it wrong.

What foolishness. Isaiah tells us that God will give us "the oil of gladness..." Chesterton is right. Joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian. It's like the old story of a man strolling through a social club. He is surprised to see three men and a dog playing cards. Pausing to watch, he asks, "Can that dog really play cards?" "You bet," answers one of

the members. "That's incredible!" the man says. "Not really," another member shrugs. "He's really not that good. Whenever he gets a good hand, he wags his tail."

Friends, you and I are holding a good hand. We are God's own elect. How can we help but show our happiness? We don't have tails to wag but we have smiles to give. He gives us a crown of beauty. He gives us the oil of gladness.

FINALLY, ACCORDING TO ISAIAH, HE GIVES US A GARMENT OF PRAISE INSTEAD OF A SPIRIT OF DESPAIR. That's how He finishes our wardrobe. A crown of beauty, then oil of gladness, and finally, a robe of praise.

I love to be around someone who is robed in a garment of praise, don't you? C. Ward Crampton, a noted gerontologist, lists five qualities of living which are necessary for healthy aging. One of these is praising God. There is something about praising God that is healthy for soul, mind and body. Of course, like any great gift of God, even praise can be abused.

Story about the head man in a village in Pakistan. He asked the members of a little Christian church in the village to move to the edge of town from next door to his house. He offered to work out an exchange of properties if they would do it. He was concerned his Muslim wives, hearing the joyful singing of the Christians, would be influenced. They might even become Christians.

He had good cause to be threatened. If we truly came into this place of worship each week with a spirit of praise, the world would be trying to break down the walls to join us. And we would profit from the experience as well. Praise is to nourishment to our souls. It lifts us to higher ground.

This then is the new look God would give us. We who once floundered in defeat and darkness can stand tall, proud and steadfast as "oaks of righteousness." He gives us "a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair."

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1. "College Out to 'Snow' Students," The Knoxville News-Sentinel (Feb. 22, 1989), Section A, p. 7.

2. Contributed " source unknown.

3. The Rev. Patrick Napier in HOMETOWN HUMOR, U.S.A., Loyal Jones and Billy Edd Wheeler, eds, (Little Rock: August House Publishers, 1991).

4. J. B. Fowler, Jr., ILLUSTRATED SERMONS FOR SPECIAL OCCASIONS, (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1988)

