

# **GET READY!**

An Advent sermon by James R. Blades, Senior Pastor  
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Malachi 3:1; Luke 2:25-33

"Behold, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple; and the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the LORD of hosts.

**Do you hear the note of suspense, of expectancy** in this last prophecy of the Hebrew Scriptures? The Jews noticed it. For four centuries they watched and waited. Watched and waited while the Persians, then Greeks, then Romans came to their land to oppress them. When would the Messiah appear?

This was the kind of atmosphere of expectancy that characterized the world into which Jesus was born. Palestine was astir with expectation of the Messiah's arrival. It could be any moment. Simeon's words of this morning's Gospel paint the picture of hungry desperate eyes that peeled the horizon looking for the long-anticipated liberation. "And there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, righteous and devout, who was *looking expectantly toward* the rescue of Israel.

"Now," said Simeon, looking at the prize, "Now, my eyes have seen Your salvation O God, which you have prepared in the presence of all the world's peoples, a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel."

Here, at long last, was the fulfillment of generations of prophetic expectation.

The word we have translated into the original Greek of our Bible as "expectation" comes from several roots in the original Hebrew and Greek text. *Yachal* in the Hebrew means to eagerly await; *Tsaphah*, means to keep ones eyes peeled.

These words paint a portrait of the very spirit of the our Advent season, when we not only *remember* the miracle of Christ's first Advent those many centuries ago but when we *eagerly await, keep our eyes peeled* for his present advents, his present "in-breakings" into the ordinary, commonplace routine of our lives today.

"Prepare the way of the Lord," cried the prophet. We use this season to prepare ourselves, to ready ourselves, to attune our attention, to scan our horizon for the wondrous intersections and interventions of God in our lives.

I remind you that on the day when Christ first appeared: appeared in a peasant's cradle, appeared at the muddy river Jordon to be baptized, appeared on the dusty streets of Palestine preaching, appeared in the Jerusalem temple proclaiming the Kingdom of God, most of the world had no idea what was afoot. Most of the religious community that encountered him had no idea Here was "the Lord" whom Malachi prophesied would suddenly come, yet they did not recognize Him.

Just so, it is all too easy for *us* to miss the evidences of his present visitations. And how does Christ appear to us today?

**He appears to us** in our inner stirrings:

- In the inspiration of a new idea that seems to come from nowhere.
- In the insight that leads us through some crisis.

- In that strange overwhelming sense of compassion over our children or grandchildren or loved ones or friends or strangers or even our enemies.
- In the prayer, when we don't know how to pray, that uncovers our heart's deepest longings."<sup>1</sup>

**Christ appears to us** in the friendship and encouragement and support of others. I don't know how many times across the years at just at the time I felt low and discouraged; I got a note of encouragement from a friend or parishioner who couldn't possibly have known I needed it just then. How many such words of encouragement have come to you at just the crucial moment? "Hush, I pray you," said the poet, "What if this friend happen to be God?"

**Christ appears to us** in our experiences of worship. Like Isaiah who at a time of great national crisis and chaos, went into the temple to worship and there while savoring the incense and listening to the antiphony choirs, was suddenly transported into the very courts of heaven. "I saw the Lord high and lifted up and God's train filled the temple."<sup>2</sup>

**Christ appears to us** in our moments of personal predicament. Like Jacob who, alone at the Brook of *Jabbok*, facing the consequences of his own deceit, wrestled with a man until daybreak, only to realize that the "man" was God's own compassionate, confronting presence trying to make Jacob finally own up to himself.

**Christ appears to us** in the need of God's children which beckon us to respond. "Inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it to me."

**Christ appears to us** in Creation: In the glory of the star-filled sky. In the splendor of the ocean sunset. In the bewitching intricacy of a rose or lily or hyacinth. In the restful resonance of a bubbling brook.

**Christ appears to us** in our life's opportunities: openings into which we have the occasion to invest our gifts and resources to promote God's own purposes in the world.

I tell you that, everywhere around us, visitations of Christ appear. But we can fail to recognize his appearing just as so many did in Jesus' own day.

And how do we miss them?

We miss them by being distracted from the present moment by past regrets and future anxieties. God lives and moves and speaks in the present moment. "And God said to Moses in the burning bush, "Go tell the children of Israel that I AM has sent you." And when our thoughts are preoccupied with the misgivings of the past or the worries of the future, it is all too easy to miss the visitations of God that brush by us in the present moment.

We miss God's visitations, too, when our spirits are soured by inner resentments. "If you refuse to forgive others, God will not forgive you," said Jesus. Does this mean that God's forgiveness hinges on ours? No, God's forgiveness is a sure and done deal. But when our hearts are already *occupied* by bitterness, it is hard for God's forgiveness and grace and mercy and love and encouragement and strength, to find a place there.

Here's something else that can make us miss Christ's advents into our lives: willful rejection of God's rule in our lives. It's just this simple: If I'm busy turning you

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 8:26

<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 6

out of my life, keeping you out of my affairs—If I refuse to answer the door whenever you knock because I don't want you in, how can I possibly have a relationship with you? There are people who cannot see God's visitations because they don't want God, don't want to trust God with their lives and fortunes, don't want a relationship with the divine just now, thank you.

Here's one other reason why we may miss Christ's many visitations and this is a big one: because our expectations are looking for Christ to appear in a certain way, and when Christ doesn't respond or act or appear in the way we expect, we become disillusioned or angry with God.

That's what kept the religious community of Jesus' day, many of *them*, from recognizing Him.

They were looking for a prince born to privilege, not a peasant born in an animal's stall. A conqueror, not a carpenter. A commander of legions, not a companion of tax collectors and sinners. They were looking for the Kingdom of God to appear in glory and glamour, not on a Cross.

"You look for the Kingdom of God to appear here and to appear there," Jesus said to them, "and behold the Kingdom of God is in your midst." But they couldn't see it, because you see, it did not fit *their* dreams.

Fact is, we often suffer the same misunderstandings when it comes to comprehending God's ways. We have our strong expectations, too, of how God should act, of how God should intervene in our world; of how God should appear in our lives.

And when God ends up acting and appearing and intervening in ways we never expected, we too are prone to become confused and bewildered and peevish. We watch for God to come walking into our lives through some glorious and grand opening, through doors of success, of deliverance, of harmony, of health and prosperity. Our eyes are fixed on those doors, watching for God's blessing to appear there.

And Christ ends up walking into our lives through doors we least expected or wanted: Through doors of disappointment or failure or loneliness or sorrow or conflict. "Nothing," said Arthur John Gossip, "so opens the door for God as a spirit of expectancy that looks out into even the blackest night, and listens confidently for His footsteps."

"Be dressed for action and ready to respond," said Jesus, "like those who are waiting for their master to return from the wedding banquet, so that they may open the door for him at the moment he comes and knocks. Be ready, I say! For the Son of Man is coming in a time and way you do not **expect**."<sup>3</sup>

Most readers of this passage assume that it is referring to Christ's great future second coming. But I think it has quite a broader application in this season of Advent: Those many instances across our *present* days when Christ's Spirit comes to break into our lives.

- Those inner promptings to helpful service
- Those moments of divine intersection in worship
- Those epiphanies of wonder in God's Creation
- Those visitations of God that don't always enter through the doors we are watching but through unwatched doors.

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<sup>3</sup> Luke 12:32-40, snippets

- Those messengers of God's love and encouragement and forgiveness that we don't recognize as angels because they don't appear to us with wings but with faces and words and hands of ordinary people.

What shall be our spirit of response this Advent Season?

“But as for me, I will watch expectantly for the LORD;” said Micah the Prophet. “I will wait eagerly for the God of my salvation; for my God will come.”

Wherever you are in your life, whatever your present circumstance this Advent Season: **Expect** Christ to appear in your life, **expect** God to meet you in worship, **expect** the Holy Spirit to speak to you through your meditations in Scriptures, **expect** God to greet you in your prayers, **expect** God to open the doors of opportunity to your talents and callings and gifts, **expect** God to meet your material needs and the needs of others through your generosity. **Expect** God's lavish grace to appear, keep your eyes out for it, your heart ready for it, your attention tuned to it in the present moment; for you do not know what hour your Lord may appear.

““And the Lord, whom you seek, will **suddenly** come ... and the messenger in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,’ says the LORD of hosts.”

And are we ready?