

“What Are You Waiting For?”

Luke 2: 1-7

Cornerstone Evangelical Presbyterian Church

December 24, 2011

Christmas Eve

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Text: Luke 2:1-7 (NIV) ¹ In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to his own town to register. ⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

It's good to be together again on Christmas Eve! For me, this makes twenty years of Christmases at Cornerstone and I'm always amazed at how quickly they come. Sometimes it feels as if we just left here a week or so ago having celebrated Christmas. And, as a few of you know, the older you get the more quickly the time seems to pass. I'm told by one of my many math and engineering types that there is a very sensible explanation for that. It's because when you are say...ten years old, each year of your remaining life is a small per cent age of the remaining whole. So, if you're ten and you're going to live to be eighty, each year is only 1.42 per cent of the time you have left. But when you're sixty, each year is five per cent of the time you have left...so it goes faster. OK? Sure. I really don't follow that either but it does seem like we just took down the tree...which by the way is really silly thing to do. I see no reason not to just leave it up!

But we all still...wait for Christmas. It's the fitting end to each year. The choir sang "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year" and we all like Christmas. Personally, Christmas represents some traumatic memories for me because I had two older brothers. Their names were "Mean" and "Meaner." One was so nasty he used to tell me that if I annoyed him he would untie my belly button...and it could never be tied back up ...and my backside would fall on the ground and I would never be able to get it back on properly! I'd have to go thru life holding myself together like this!

The three of us shared the same bedroom and I slept in the middle bed. One night when I was about five, they told me that it was Christmas Eve. I didn't think it *was* Christmas Eve since there was no tree up or any snow or any mention of Christmas. But they assured me that the next morning I would find a living room full of presents and a great big tree. Then they lay there in

the dark quietly singing “Silent Night” as I fell off to sleep. Imagine my mother’s bewilderment the next morning when I raced downstairs to see the tree and the gifts and asked where everything was...on that morning in July! Ever since then waiting for Christmas has sort of aroused my anxiety levels. I once sat up all night waiting for Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer to stop by my bedroom window because he sent me a “note” the previous Christmas. He didn’t come by and I am still waiting!

But once again it is Christmas Eve and we look back at another fascinating and unsettling year. And the world does seem even sillier on some levels doesn’t it? The curious news never stops! That unhappy little man in North Korea died and now he is on display in his leisure suit! Can’t wait to see what happens over there. We recently heard that the Communist Chinese militants are developing a microwave laser weapon that will eliminate all need for land forces or missiles. When it is ready, they can simply aim it at the United States and within an hour every household will be filled with people losing their minds and sniveling hysterically wondering what is happening! I’m just hoping that the Chinese never figure out that they don’t really need to develop a laser weapon to drive us crazy. All they have to do is keep selling us Christmas tree lights! You know...the ones that promise you if one goes out the rest stay on! And we keep buying them? Perhaps we are waiting for Christmas tree lights that actually stay lit. That will make us happy.

And there is so much more to wait for. We’re waiting for the European debt crisis to abate and we are waiting for the debates to be over and we’re waiting for Congress to pass a budget if they will stop talking about light bulbs and major league pitchers who took steroids...and other pressing matters. And in the midst of all of our waiting we are pummeled with endless advertisements that try to push us into action. Like “Buy gold before it is too late!” Or “Get your free house scooter from the Scooter Store...whether you need one or not.” My least favorite is from a giant clothing retailer whom I will leave unnamed. His ads say “Don’t wait! Three days only! Buy two...get three. Buy five, get nine! Buy eleven, get the whole store only at blank, blank, blank!” Everyone is pressing us not to wait...but everyone is waiting for something. But what?

What are you waiting for that...once obtained..will make your life complete? Are you waiting for that great promotion? Are you waiting for a new car or a new home or marriage? Are you waiting for retirement or perhaps an inheritance? Are you waiting for Utopia on Earth? That’s what the Occupy Wall Street people were actually doing. They apparently believe man is capable of self-correcting his own evil ways. So, they were protesting against “greed” which was a lot like protesting against bad weather in Michigan in winter! OK. Protest but I’ll bet you we still get bad weather. That’s just how it is. Yet...although in my view the “Occupy” movement was totally irrational, some of those folks were on to something. They were waiting in their own unrealistic way for society...to get better. Not realizing that greed comes from sin and not simply from economic policies...they are waiting for and insisting on...Utopia here on

planet Earth. They were waiting for the Wall Street bankers to throw money out of skyscrapers and to dismiss their student loans and for everyone henceforth to make nice. But in this world of sin that will never happen without the return of Jesus!

More importantly...what are *you* waiting for at this point in your life? In my view, far too many Christians are waiting for a change in Presidents and the chance to fire everyone in Congress and the return of prayer to the schools ...and then everything will be fine. But that view will probably disappoint. Let's consider a couple of people who were waiting for someone far greater than all than we can imagine. They were waiting for the Kingdom of God! Consider our well known passage tonight:

Luke 2:1-7 (NIV) ¹ In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to his own town to register. ⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Now, let's consider this account from the point of view of a skeptic not only about God and the Lord Jesus Christ but about the Bible itself. When I was an atheist, I would look at a text like this and ask: "Are you kidding? Who in the world cares about all of this information? Caesar Augustus was the Emperor and Quirinius was the Governor and Joseph was related to King David so he had to go to Nazareth in Galilee to Judea to Bethlehem with Mary who was married to him and expecting a child....etc. Why in the world would the writer give his readers all of this kind of tedious detail?" I mean...there is no good reason for it...*unless*...he is about to say something so extraordinary that it will need to be verified by his readers!

Think of it this way...if what we are saying tonight at Cornerstone was later on said to be a matter of life and death...if what I'm about to say will affect your soul and your life forever even forever beyond the grave...if it is *that important*...I would need to provide the kind of detail that would make it verifiable! The kind of detail someone could check to be assured that this event really took place. So...someone recording this sermon might write: "On Christmas Eve December 24, 2011, when Barack Obama was President of the United States and Richard Snyder was the Governor of Michigan...a gathering of people met at the Cornerstone Evangelical Presbyterian Church at 9455 Hilton Road in Brighton, Michigan to hear that they can live forever!" All of that detail tells us that this really happened in a real place at a real time! So, we can trust that the Bible is telling us these events really happened. Leading back to our question: "What Are You Waiting For?"

One more thing: many have politely waited for this Christmas Eve here at Cornerstone because we have good music or whatever. But very few people even knew about Joseph and Mary and the long trek to Bethlehem. Few people knew about the coming of Christmas...the birth of Jesus. Yet some were waiting for their Savior. In fact, there is someone we need to check on who was waiting...a man named Simeon... let me set the stage. Jesus has been born and it is the eighth day after his birth...

Luke 2:22-32 (NIV) ²² When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord... ²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him.

What was Simeon waiting for? The text says he was waiting for the “consolation” of Israel! The word translated “consolation” [“parakley-sis”] means “comfort” or “encouragement” or “good news!” Simeon was living in a badly broken world just like our world. Roman armies subdued everyone and the Jews were largely held in official bondage and there were wars everywhere. Half the children died before they were one year old...homosexuality was commonplace and violence was everywhere. And God seemed distant and uncaring at times. But Simeon was a praying man and the Holy Spirit of God had told him he should wait with anticipation...that God was about to do something never before heard of or imagined!

²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷ Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸ Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: ²⁹ "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. ³⁰ For my eyes have seen your salvation, ³¹ which you have prepared in the sight of all people, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

Simeon was not waiting for success or a cheerful retirement or even grandchildren. Those things are great but he is noted for one thing; he was waiting for the coming of the Kingdom of God! What are you waiting for? Are you waiting for a Kingdom without greed and without wars and without brutality and where sin is no more? Are you waiting for a Kingdom where God is King and you can see him face to face and live in perfect peace, contentment and joy? Or are you waiting for something else in this Kingdom of the World that will not be what you had thought it would be and that will leave you disappointed? Are you waiting for something ephemeral...short lived...like success or the fabulous house or the hottest car ... is that what you're waiting for? If so, you will be disappointed. The Bible says we should live this life as strangers here whose highest priority is the Kingdom of God.

Just to lighten up for a moment...the other day I was listening to a talk show as I drove and the discussion was Christmas movies and their themes. The panel had reduced the list of best all-time Christmas movies to three: "It's A Wonderful Life" where Jimmy Stewart and Donna Reed play innocent love birds. Second was George C. Scott as Scrooge in Dickens' "Christmas Carol" and third was a tossup between "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer" and "Miracle on 34th. Street" about an old guy who insisted he was Santa Claus!

Well! I was tempted to phone in my nomination for best Christmas movie and it would have been "Shrek!" Really! Shrek? Why? Because there is a scene in "Shrek" that is theologically priceless! It's when Shrek breaks into the tower to rescue Princess Fiona. She has been lying there...WAITING... for who knows how long? She has been waiting for her handsome, charming Prince to come dashing in and rescue her. He is supposed to gently kiss her lips and put out his hand to romantically lift her to her feet and then sweep her away to paradise. That's what she has been waiting for! Instead, in comes big old burly, funny looking Shrek who sort of grabs her by the arm and never thinks of a gentle kiss...he proceeds to drag her down the hall while she protests and says something like "You're not a handsome prince and this is all wrong! It's not supposed to happen this way!" And that's what we get when stop waiting for the Kingdom of God and His presence. We find ourselves wanting to scream at the world and say "It's not supposed to happen this way! I've been waiting for happiness and fulfillment and whatever and it's not supposed to happen this way!" And let's face it when we see our world and hear so much troubling news, we at least quietly say to ourselves "It's not supposed to happen this way!" And we get disappointed and worse we get darkened so that even our brightest people are all mixed up and their thinking becomes clouded with yes...darkness...probably because when we stop waiting for the Kingdom of God we start really misunderstanding good and evil.

Christian apologist Ravi Zacharias recently wrote these words:

"We live in strange times. Who would have ever thought that the fastest growing church in the world would be in China and that academics in the west would earn their livings by ridiculing Christianity in institutions that in many instances were founded by Christians? Countries that have been without the Gospel now realize that it is the Gospel that has given the west the basis for its belief in human dignity and essential worth, and yet the elite in the west have somehow convinced themselves that everything has happened in a vacuum." [RZIM Newsetter; Dec. 2011]

He's right. Strange times indeed. Worse than that, when men and women stop waiting for the Kingdom of God and when they stop longing for the Kingdom of God and when they stop pleading for the Kingdom of God to come, they become foolish and darkened in their thinking

and ways. They become like those spoken of 700 years before the birth of Jesus by the Prophet Isaiah when he said:

Isaiah 5:20 (NIV) “ Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.”

When a society no longer waits for and longs for the Kingdom of God that society becomes hopelessly confused and upside down and finds itself calling evil good and good evil. Here's a perfect example...some folks may not like the football player Tim Tebow for his Christian witness. But a recent edition of “Atlantic Monthly” remarkably named Tebow as “One of the 15 Most Divisive Athletes in Recent History” because of his on-field prayers and open joy in speaking of Jesus. This is a young man who spends his time off ministering to the world's poorest souls in Haiti and the Philippines instead of partying and driving a gold plated Escalade. He is really an offense to these writers. And that kneeling stuff to pray openly? Let's face it; it is really repulsive! So, the editors at Atlantic Monthly included Tebow in a list of divisive athletes. Interesting! But...who were the others? Well... one who spent time in prison for animal cruelty, another who was guilty of obstruction of justice, another guilty of tax evasion who was banned forever from baseball for betting on games, and another who showed up at a book-signing event wearing a dress...and another who is in jail and who probably murdered his wife. And Tebow. Can we not see that praying after a great play on the field is easily as divisive as those other things?

He kneels and prays on the field. He is waiting for Kingdom of God and his offense is in saying so. But in the end...that actually *is divisive*. Worldly people will hate you if the Kingdom of God is your highest priority. They will include you on a list of moral miscreants and then consider themselves clever for doing so.

We close Christmas Eve this year at the end of the Gospels. The Lord Jesus Christ has been Crucified 33 years after Simeon beheld him as he was promised. Simeon's waiting was over as he probably moved on to Paradise shortly thereafter. But at the very end we read of a man who provided a gravesite for the Crucified Christ. A Godly man. We meet him in here in Luke chapter 23:

Luke 23:50-52 (NIV) ⁵⁰ Now there was a man named Joseph, a member of the Council, a good and upright man, ⁵¹ who had not consented to their decision and action [to Crucify Jesus]. He came from the Judean town of Arimathea and he was waiting for the Kingdom of God. ⁵² Going to Pilate, he asked for Jesus' body.

We can only imagine that Joseph of Arimathea was as joyful as Simeon three decades earlier! Joseph was thrilled later when he heard of the Resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Like Simeon and so many others, he was waiting for one thing: the Kingdom of God to come on Earth and to be established forever in the Heavenly realms where there will be no more death or crying or

pain but only indescribable joy in the presence of God the maker of Heaven and Earth. Simeon had been waiting and Joseph had been waiting...for the Kingdom of God. What are *you* waiting for?

I'll close with a preacher's yarn but one that I love to tell. An old farmer had not been off his property in years. One day a big black limo pulled up quickly leaving swirls of dust in its wake. The driver hurriedly put down the window and said "Old timer...we're lost. Which way is the airport?" The old farmer said "I don't know. I have not been off my farm in years. Sorry." The driver was stunned and said "OK...how about the nearest highway or intersection?" But the old farmer just shook his head apologetically. The driver was totally flabbergasted! He stared at him and said "Old timer! You don't know where the airport is and you don't know where the highway is and you don't know where the next intersection is? You don't know you too much do you?" And the old farmer looked down gently and then looked up and said "No...I don't know too much. But I know one thing; I am not lost!"

How about you? Do you know that you are not lost? Do you know that on this Christmas Eve? Do you have everything but you are lost? Are you racing thru life in a big limo with all of life's comforts...but you are lost? You can tell if you're lost by considering this question: what are you waiting for? I am waiting for the Kingdom of God. Are you?

Let us pray.