

CHRISTMAS: A TIME FOR SHARING TIDINGS OF JOY

The Nativity of Our Lord
Christmas Eve
December 24, 2011

Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]

Great Expectations

Thousands of years ago, the prophet Isaiah proclaimed: A child is born to us! ... He will be called “Wonderful Counselor, ... Prince of Peace” (9:6, *GNT*). What welcome news for his audience, the war-torn people of Israel, who were besieged by a powerful enemy, the Assyrians.

What were their expectations? Surely this long-awaited king would come in pomp and majesty. Surely, he would crush the armies of their enemies and restore Israel to its former greatness.

Isaiah’s prophecy was given to reassure God’s people that, despite their disobedience and unfaithfulness, God would send a Messiah. In fulfillment of this promise, years later the Scripture states that Mary, the mother of Jesus, “gave birth to her first son, wrapped him in cloths, and laid him in a manger...” (Luke 2:7, *GNT*)

A king in a manger? Surely there must have been some mistake. That was certainly not what the people were expecting. Yet, Jesus was God’s gift to them, holy and humble, clothed in human flesh.

Like the people of Israel, many of us have flawed expectations. We fail to see what God has in store for us. Especially at the holiday season, we sometimes feign happiness and forecast automatic joy; we predict peace where chaos once reigned; we expect silver bells and Christmas lights to brighten our dreary lives. Oftentimes, reality shortchanges our expectations.

We can, however, expect great things from God. His gifts are unique, perfect (James 1:17), at times surprising (Romans 11:34), but always good. God sent Jesus into the world as a precious gift (John 3:16), a Savior for *all* seasons who would bring love, joy, and peace to all people. All our yearnings and expectations are fulfilled in him and we find ourselves saying with the hymn writer, Charles Wesley (1707-1788):

Come thou long-expected Jesus,

Born to set thy people free;
From our fears and sins release us;
Let us find our rest in thee.
Israel's strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Let us welcome the Christ Child, thankful that God, in his divine wisdom, gives us not just what we expect, but what we really need.

This Reflection for Christmas Eve was prepared by Dorette Saunders, who served on the staff of the American Bible Society as Senior Editor in the Education Unit of the Nida Institute for Biblical Scholarship. In retirement, Dorette continues as a consultant to ABS.

+ + +

This night we remember to pray for: The fulfillment of our hopes that have come to us in God's gift of the long-expected Messiah, born to set us free from bondage to sin. On this holy night, we open our hearts to receive the Christ Child as our Savior and King. May the light of his glory fill our hearts with peace and joy and guide us in newness of life.

Activity Corner: The Christmas Story

Gather with members of your household and read together the story of Jesus' birth as recorded in Luke's Gospel (2:1-20). Consider reading the text dramatically: assign one person to be the narrator, another to read the angel's message, others to read the song of the angel choir, and others to read the response of the shepherds. If you have been creating the "Advent Mobile" throughout the season of Advent, add the stars, doves, bells, and hearts to your Christmas tree or display them as a garland in your home. If you have been using an Advent Wreath during family devotional time, light all four candles plus a fifth candle (white), the Christ Candle, and conclude by singing "Silent Night, Holy Night" or one of your favorite Christmas carols. (If you do not have an Advent Wreath, consider lighting a white candle as you gather for family devotions.)

