

## FINDING CHRISTMAS PEACE: WISHING AND WANTING

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Luke 2:25-32  
Luke 2:36-38

Christmas is a time of heightened expectations. As my new Facebook friend, Captain Obvious would say, it's a time when we expect things that we don't expect the rest of the year. Round about the third week of November, when the inflatable Santas appear on rooftops and we hear nothing but Christmas music at the mall, we all start fantasizing. We dream of that elusive white Christmas in Montrose. We have visions of sugar plums – plates and plates of deep fried sugar plums with creamy chocolate and caramel centers that are completely lacking in calories so you can stuff your face with them and not worry about your weight.

One of the things we expect is that Christmas sales are going to be strong, and are going to help jump-start our economy. I don't know why we expected that to happen this year. Right up to Black Friday, the economic news was absolutely terrible as unemployment soared and the Eurozone scrambled to avoid a meltdown in financial markets.

But we all remember the headlines on Saturday: “American Shoppers Go Nuts.” “Black Friday Sales Surpass All Records.” The very expectation of robust sales became a self-fulfilling prophecy as people rushed out to buy this year's gifts with next year's money.

I kicked off the holiday season with a Thanksgiving visit to the LA Auto Show. As my daughters will tell you, I'm not normally a guy who has much interest in shiny metal, yet for the second year in a row, I felt a mysterious urge to go car-gawking with my brother-in-law and nephews.

And I've got to say, I was blown away by all the new technology. Just about every car I looked at, for example, had a CD player WITH a radio, AND a defroster that actually worked! I still haven't settled on anything, but when I find something in the three-to-five thousand dollar range, I plan to pull the trigger.

Later that day, while my wife was cooking turkey, gravy, stuffing, beans, cranberry sauce, mashed potatoes and muffins, making a salad, and setting the table, I played with the new Kindle Fire that I bought her for her birthday. (I'm sure none of you guys would do that to your wives as they slaved away in the kitchen. You might catch a bowl game or two. Or three. But *football* – that's completely different.)

As I surfed the web, I talked loudly to Mary about what a bargain her Kindle Fire was at \$199, and how useful it was going to be for me in my ministry, and how lucky she was to have such a generous husband.

Then I tried to buy and download a book. Part of it came through, but then I got a mysterious message. The message said the download couldn't be completed because the credit card number that Amazon had on file had expired, or had been cancelled, or some such nonsense. And of course I became irritated.

My irritation only increased when my wife sided with Amazon. She gently reminded me that we had recently been issued a new Mastercard because someone in Australia or New Zealand had used our old card to pay his subscription to some sort of nefarious online service. And we probably hadn't updated our card numbers in Amazon's system.

So Amazon was right – I was wrong. Yet I was *still* ticked off. I guess I expected that, as the newest members of the Kindle Fire family, we were entitled to a \$20 book as a Christmas bonus.

Marketers and advertisers train us to expect more and more from Christmas, and their efforts seem to be paying off. But, as the Grinch reminds us every year, if you took away every material reminder of the season – every glimmering tree, every fruit cake, every ribbon and tag, and every crèche scene from every village in the world – something wonderful would still remain. People would still sing about peace on earth and goodwill to all. And they'd still ratchet up their hopes for a holly, jolly season full of love and good cheer.

Most of us experience conflicting emotions this time of year. We feel childish excitement and pleasure, profound gratitude, and deep love for family and friends. We feel the impulse to give lavish gifts, tell bad jokes, drink too much special punch, and scream out the ridiculous tag lines to Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer.

At the same time, negative emotions sometimes overwhelm us. We feel stressed out by our over-booked schedules. We feel let down by others, and maybe envious of their happiness. We feel cut off from the people we love, and homesick even when we're home. In our darkest moments, we feel disappointed with God and with the life he has given us.

Some religious people blame our Christmas disappointments on the excessive commercialization of the season. If we would just put our focus on Jesus and not on parties and ipads, they tell us, we'd finally experience the perfect Christmas we've always longed for.

But that diagnosis is overly simplistic. The Christmas let-down isn't just what happens when we're tired of our new toys. It really stems from the fact that the promises of Christmas are never fulfilled as we would like them to be. We yearn for a world at peace, but the New Year always brings news of more war. We long to see human hearts changed, but our failures and weaknesses remain.

What all of this means is that our Christmas joy is incomplete, and maybe even tinged with a bit of sadness. That will be true as long as we live in this in-between time when God's kingdom is here in our midst, but is still coming to be.

The Savior is born, yet we have to wait for his return.

Jesus is alive in his people, yet most of the world doesn't know him.

And the only thing we have to carry with us, after we've taken down our lights and eaten the last of our See's candy, is hope – hope that God will finish what he started in Bethlehem – hope that his light will continue to shine even when the world rejects him.

For Simeon and Anna, hope apparently is more than enough. They're the two characters we meet in this morning's Gospel readings from the second chapter of Luke. We don't know much about either one of them.

Simeon is a righteous and devout Jew. He's been watching and waiting for the coming of the Christ, Israel's Messiah. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that before his death he would see the Messiah. And that same Spirit has led him to the temple in Jerusalem at exactly the time that Jesus' earthly parents decide to go there with Jesus.

It's important to understand what Joseph, Mary and Jesus are doing at the temple. Jewish law requires a mother to wait forty days before going to there to offer a sacrifice for her purification. The law also requires the firstborn of both people and animals to be dedicated to the Lord.

So the trip to the temple has great spiritual significance for the whole family. And even though they only have to travel about five miles from Bethlehem to get there, Mary and Joseph enter the holy place with heightened expectations. The temple is the center of spiritual life for Israel, and Israel's Messiah is arriving there for the first time.

Enlightened by the Spirit, Simeon recognizes Jesus the moment he lays eyes on him. Taking the month-and-a-half old child into his trembling hands, he lifts him and offers a song of praise that brings to light his intimacy with God:

Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,  
you may now dismiss your servant in peace.  
For my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,  
and the glory of your people Israel.

- Luke 2:29-32

Simeon personifies the deep yearning we feel at Christmas. He has been watching and waiting for the Messiah all his life, and now he has come. Yet for him there's no Christmas let-down, no disappointment in the fact that the Savior of the world is an infant in diapers.

Compared to us, Simeon knows next to nothing about who Jesus. He's clueless about what Jesus will teach, and the miracles he will perform, and how he will die and be raised from the grave. But none of that matters. What matters is that the God who has proven himself again and again in the past has now fulfilled the greatest promise of all. He has sent to his people a Savior.

If we feel disappointed at Christmas, it's mostly because we don't understand God's promise. We watch and wait for a Savior who will cause wars to cease, and feed every hungry person, and heal our ailing economy. What we fail to understand – and what's so clear in Simeon's mind – is that peace is a condition of the heart. It's the new reality for those who have been set free from sin and have been filled with the new life – the eternal life – that only God can give.

Simeon reminds us that, while we may feel disappointed with God, God hasn't failed us. Jesus isn't the kind of ruler that you and I would have chosen for the world, and he isn't the kind of Savior that most of us watch and wait for at Christmas. But he's exactly what we need, here and now, and not just in the by and by when time will come to an end and the earth will be re-created.

There's something else in Simeon's story. Though we're told almost nothing about Simeon, we know enough to understand why he is righteous and devout. He seems to be one of those rare saints who longs for God and God's peace. His heart has been shaped by his unwavering hope. His wishes and his wants have become the means by which his character has been forged.

Some people believe we'd all be happier and more satisfied with our lives if we would just lower our expectations. Our instinct as parents is to warn our kids not to ratchet up their hopes at Christmas. We don't want them to collapse in despair when they don't get the Red Rider BB gun, or the Barbie Celebrity Mansion, or the Mac Book Pro they've been craving all year.

But, as Simeon reminds us, our problem isn't that we want too much. It's rather that we want too little. We don't hunger for the bread that God offers us each day. We don't thirst for the living water that only Christ can give. Instead, we lust after things that can satisfy us only for a season.

It's no exaggeration to say that our wants are the very means by which our character is shaped and formed. If we aspire to be righteous and devout like Simeon, we have to fix our hope on the things of God. We have to discipline our will so that our motives stay pure and our purposes don't waver.

Our tendency is to want the wrong things, and to want too many things. A recent study confirms this insight. It turns out that, at any one time, the average person has at least 150 tasks to be done. And of course our mental to do list never goes away. As one item on the list is accomplished, another pops up. The stress created by having so much work on our plate has several negative affects.

First, we find ourselves worrying about problems that we can't remedy.

Second, we feel paralyzed. We become unproductive. The more work we have to do, the less able we are to get it done.

Third, we pay a high price in terms of our physical and emotional health. When we have too many goals for our lives, and especially when those goals conflict with each other, we're more prone to depression and anxiety and all the illnesses associated with those negative mental states.

The remedy for us probably doesn't entail moving to a ranch in Wyoming. And it probably doesn't entail quitting our job or dropping out of school. The remedy is to tutor our will to want what God wants. It's to seek peace not in the outward circumstances of our lives, but in a growing relationship with God in Christ.

What about Anna, the widow from our second reading? She's the prophetess who has been living for years at the temple. She spends her days fasting and praying to God. She's the prototype of the saint who has forsaken everything for God. Like Simeon, she recognized Jesus as Israel's Messiah the moment she laid eyes on him. She testified about him to others in the temple who, like her, were watching for the Messiah, and looking forward to the day when Israel would be saved.

I don't think God's calling us to spend all our waking hours at church, or in contemplative prayer in a cloistered cell. But he's reminding today that our true home isn't in the world, but instead is with Christ in his heavenly kingdom. And that helps us to understand why Christmas never quite lives up to our high expectations. I love the way Kate Bosher makes the point. Dr. Bosher teaches Classics at Northwestern University:

Isn't it funny that at Christmas something in you gets so lonely for – I don't know what exactly, but it's something that you don't mind so much not having at other times.

What we're lonely for – what we crave – at this hope-filled time of the year is intimacy with God. That loneliness is a gift. It's a message from God's Spirit to our spirits. It's the beginning of an answer to the deep, deep yearning of our hearts for peace.