

Dear Salem Family,

If you were to put yourself back into the shoes of your eight-year-old self, what was it that you anticipated most about the Christmas season? There is something intoxicating about the event of Christmas, probably marked by the gifts under the tree. I've always said that the best gifts are something that you a) need, b) will use, and c) don't expect. Anticipation combined with wonder is such a powerful part of the Christmas season.

Now take a moment and put yourself back into the shoes of Daniel or the Psalmists, because for those who lived during the Old Testament, they lived in constant anticipation of a day when the Messiah would one day come and make everything right. Of course, we know it wasn't the way they expected. Instead of a conquering king on a physical throne, they got a king who died on a cross like a criminal. But we also know that the true greatness of that story lay in the gospel underpinnings of what Jesus accomplished that we as humans could not: restoring the pathway to a right relationship with God through his life, death, and resurrection. But for those of us who live two thousand years after Jesus, it's easy to miss the anticipation of our spiritual ancestors. Consider in 1 Peter 1:10-12, which says,

*"Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look."*

It's probably a bit foreign to so many to think that we are indeed the recipients of a good news message that was a mystery for thousands of years (I had to put a spoiler in here for next teaching series...).

What about this Christmas? We all know how easy it is to get lost in the routine. Buy the food. Cook the food. Buy some gifts. Exchange some gifts. Celebrate Jesus. Before you know it it's over...followed by three months of anticipating warmer weather. But what if through Daniel (and the Psalms) the Spirit gave us a fresh perspective in 2024? The book of Daniel is filled with inspiring stories of faith and challenging truths, but one of its unique and greatest strengths is prophetically pointing us to two very specific events: Jesus' first coming, and his second coming. There can be no doubt that those moments will be unparalleled and unmatched as the defining moments in human history. And a famous preacher once said, the thing we should preach second most to Jesus' first coming, is his second coming.

Christmas then isn't simply an intoxicating event on the calendar to be celebrated or an obligatory box we check off for the year. Nor is Advent simply about programmatically reading the Christmas story each night and placing a magnet on the fridge. Christmas is about the story of redemption and relationship, salvation and sanctification, discipleship, and evangelism. Christmas is a time of celebration yes, but also of hopeful anticipation of Jesus' second coming. Which reminds us that we are invited into God's presence and called to joyfully live differently. It seems silly to deny that Jesus really was and will always be the perfect gift. I wonder how anticipating Jesus' second coming change how experience this season?

My prayer this Christmas is that we all find Christmas to be so much more than an event. That it be an invitation into God's beautiful presence, reminding us that our time on earth is incredibly precious. That we savor every moment with our family and friends all for the wonderful and glorious purpose of the gospel. I invite you, wherever you live, work, study, or play, to spread the richness of the best news ever to grace this planet. Jesus has come and will one day come again! Anticipation combined with wonder really is such a powerful part of the Christmas season.

Waiting in eager anticipation with you,

Pastor Seth