

What Do You Expect, Want, or Need for Christmas?

Matthew 11:3 *Are you the one who is to come or are we to await for another?*

^{NRS} **Mark 1:1** The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. ² As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; ³ the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" ⁴ John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. ⁵ And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. ⁶ Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. ⁷ He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. ⁸ I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

^{NRS} **Isaiah 40:1** Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. ² Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the LORD's hand double for all her sins. ³ A voice cries out: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. ⁴ Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. ⁵ Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken." ⁶ A voice says, "Cry out!" And I said, "What shall I cry?" All people are grass, their constancy is like the flower of the field. ⁷ The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the LORD blows upon it; surely the people are grass. ⁸ The grass withers, the flower fades; but the word of our God will stand forever. ⁹ Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good tidings; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings, lift it up, do not fear; say to the cities of Judah, "Here is your God!" ¹⁰ See, the Lord GOD comes with might, and his arm rules for him; his reward is with him, and his recompense before him. ¹¹ He will feed his flock like a

shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep.

This is the **Second Week of Advent**. The Advent Wreath helps us to think and to prepare for the coming or *advent* of Jesus both as the infant child Jesus and as the crucified risen Jesus the Christ who will return again. He is both the Christmas and Easter gift for the world. Remember those words of the *Great Thanksgiving Prayer* that we will recite together later in the service. “**Christ has died; Christ is risen; Christ will come again.**”

The words that characterize the four weeks of preparation for the supreme gift of Christmas are: **hope, peace, joy, and love**. The first Sunday's focus is on the anticipation of hope that comes from God. Now this week we look for the peace that passes our understanding, followed in the third week by the joy of Christmas in the pregnancy of Mary; and finally, the fourth week anticipates the ultimate reality of God's love made real to us in the Christ child in Bethlehem and Jesus on Calvary. Three of these four weeks usually are more intense as we look at ourselves to prepare for the receiving of God's grace into our lives and this world. This is a time to be penitent for our sins and to repent, turning toward God for healing and salvation. John knows that he cannot forgive sins, only the Messiah. Will we be **ready** for the Messiah? Will we be **urgently seeking** God's will

to be done on earth as it is in heaven? But, in the **third week**, there is a respite from our intense yearning. This is the **joy** that is symbolized by the **third candle** in the color of pink or rose. The other three candles remain purple and the center one remains white for the birth of Jesus that we celebrate at midnight on Christmas Eve.

As some of us gathered in the office to think together about this week's scripture of John the Baptist, we created some possible topic titles. They were: 1) what do you expect for Christmas? 2) What's in it for me? 3) What do you expect to get? 4) What's on your wish list? (Like eBay, Amazon.com and others who create "**wish lists**" for friends and relatives to buy presents from.) These were all very good but we synthesized these four topics into one, which is our title today, "***What Do You Expect, Want or Need for Christmas?***" We recognized that there is a big difference in the way we approach Christmas from these questions. **Expectations** at this time of the year may be overblown or unreal. This may be a time when we are influenced by sentiment or nostalgia for years gone by. We may also be trying to project an expectation that cannot possibly happen. Or, in the spiritual sense, we may be under estimating the expectation that God lays before us in the coming of Christ.

There is also the critical **difference** between “*wants and needs*” at Christmas. Things we “**want**” are **not necessarily** that which we “**need.**” As to gifts for ourselves or others, we may not reasonably be able to afford what we **want** to give or receive at Christmas, especially this year. Money is going to be tighter and we need to adjust our budget belts. We need to be careful of going into unnecessary debt from over extending our credit cards to get presents that we will be unable to pay for. We need to test the question of “what we **want**” against what is “**needed.**”

Material things are what we often expect might give us happiness, joy, and security. We mistakenly believe that these things will satisfy our needs. But, the reality is that these types of wants seldom fulfill our hopes and expectations. We just land ourselves deeper in debt and piled higher with depression and regret. It is an addictive cycle that imprisons us in false realities.

What do we need? What should we expect? What can match our wants to our needs and leave us in a place of in our hearts and in our world?

First, what do we **expect** at Christmas? In the Bible story of John the Baptist we are given an account of his expectation for the coming Messiah. We are told to **expect a deliverer**. Everyone admires a leader who stands up for what he believes against all odds. Indeed, John the Baptist had a

reputation as “*odd*.” He had his followers; and among them was the son of a carpenter from Nazareth who was his younger cousin. His name was Jesus. John who was a man of the wilderness was dressed for the occasion, wearing camel’s hair outer garment and a leather belt. He must have looked scraggly and unkempt. His eating habits were as primitive as his clothing – he ate locusts, which is a type of grasshopper that can devour a field of grain as part of large group. There can be so many of these locusts that they will blacken the sky as if the sun was blocked out and it suddenly was night time. But, John ate a type of locust that was more edible for him. So, he ate these locusts and swallowed them down with wild honey. OK, he might not have gotten many invitations out to eat or many responses to his seasonal dinner parties.

But, John the Baptist’s **message** was simple and striking right to the quick of the human soul. People flocked to hear him speak. They lined the shore along the Jordan River and the whole Judean country side. He invited folks to be baptized. **Baptism** was a common practice for cleansing; but in this case John was proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. He could not forgive; so he only told folks to be ready for the one coming, who is greater than he who has the power to do what he cannot do. This **one has the power** of the Holy Spirit to **forgive** sin. This made him

more powerful and godlier than even John the Baptist. This one might be the **deliverer** that the Jews had hoped for and expected to usher in a new age.

From the earliest days of the Hebrew people in bondage in Egypt, they cried out to God in their misery and God responded through Moses to deliver them from the hand of the oppressors and to free them from slavery. For thousands of years people have found their hope in this story that God hears their cries and will respond. This is the ancient story of the **Exodus** and the **Passover** of the angel of death.

The Hebrew people continually, even to this day, expect a deliverer who would come at any time to begin the age of the kingdom of the Messiah. They needed a righteous and just kingdom and to be free from the power of Rome also. But what they wanted and expected was **different** from what they received.

The *light* of our *Advent* candles is shining in the shadows of our lives in these difficult times. These candles remind us that Christ comes as one whom God sends. He is the *light of the world* that **no** darkness can overcome.

God sends us a **way to believe** and to love God with our whole being – our heart, mind, strength and soul. What God sends is perhaps always a surprise to some degree! As **Moses** was the Old Testament deliverer from a

child save from the river of Egypt, so **Jesus** is our deliverer who passes through the waters of the Jordan River. He does this through *Bapism* for us at the hands of John the Baptist and by the power of the Holy Spirit. As believers today, we can know God and trust God fully by what we experience in Jesus Christ to heal us and make us whole again.

Today, all of us need one thing. We need *peace*. We need peace that God has intended from the very first acts of creation. We need peace with each other. When brother killed brother, we knew that we needed peace to prevent more killing. It is no different today. I know families that are torn apart in emotional battles of distrust and anger. They **need peace**. You and I know that we have been in war longer than we have been in peace in almost every decade. We need peace that will endure. We need to be able to lay down arms of war and to embrace each other as brothers and sisters of the human family.

We have broken trust with each other and betrayed our respect and the dignity of the other that God gave us in our creation. This demands reconciliation. This means that we **must find the path of peace soon or we will devour ourselves in hate and fear and distrust**. The gift of this season's expectation is peace. *Jesus is the Prince of Peace*. He is God's Son, who in the smallness of a child, reveals the largeness of God's grace

and mercy for all of humanity in every age, race, nation or tribe on this planet. Peace is more than the absence of war and hostility. It is also the delicate **balance** that comes to life that keeps order and welfare of all God's creation in a healthy place. The world is *sick* from **abuses** of the air we breathe, the water we drink, the land upon which we walk, and the interactions of all God's children upon this earth.

We need the Peace that passes our understanding that comes from a strong and deep dependence on the love of God. We need the peace that fulfills our wants for freedom from fear, from anxiety, from starvation of soul and body. We need to be able to come together in this room and to worship God with joy and celebration. We need to be able to eat at the same table in peace.

What do you want expect, want or need from Christmas this year that cannot be fulfilled if you and I come together before God? I **invite** you to the table of the Lord to eat and to drink peace, where we **dream the dream of God** and see the vision of the lamb and the lion lying together in harmony. Isn't that worthy of our Christmas hope and **expectation**?