Waiting for Christmas

Kids have a hard time waiting for Christmas. Here are some actual letters that were written to Santa:

Dear Santa Claus,

When you come to my house there will be cookies for you. But if you are real hungry you can use our phone and order a pizza to go.

Dear Santa,

I want a Puppy. I want a playhouse. Thank you. I’ve been good most of the time. Sometimes I’m wild.

Dear Santa, (From a 4-year-old) I

I’ll take anything because I haven’t been that good.

Dear Santa,

I’m not going to ask for a lot. Here’s my list: The Etch-A-Sketch animator, 2 packs of #2 pencils, Crayola fat markers and the big gift...my own color TV! Well, maybe you could drop the pencils; I don’t want to be really selfish.

Christmas is often associated with waiting. I can remember one Christmas when I was growing up that I really wanted a Scalextrix. I dropped hints everywhere. I wrote letters to Santa and all sorts of stuff. I even tried extra hard to be nice to my sister Dawn during the countdown to Christmas ­ which wasn’t easy to do!

When Christmas morning finally came, I jumped out of bed and ran to the tree. I looked for a box with my name on it. I looked everywhere but couldn’t find it. Do you know what I got that year? It was a different version of Scalextrix but not Scalextrix. It had battery operated controllers, and there weren’t any batteries and in those days you had to wait for three days before the shops were open again. Three days later when we got the batteries it didn’t work. I had to wait another whole year before I finally got a real Scalextrix.

What Are You Waiting For?

Let me ask you some questions. What are you waiting for this Christmas? Are you longing for anything? What are you expecting to receive? Are you looking forward to anything special this Christmas?

In the Gospel of Luke, we come across two characters who make their appearance in the final acts of the Christmas drama. One is a man named Simeon; the other is a woman named Anna. They don’t appear in any nativity scenes or in many Christmas cards, but they are significant players in the first Christmas pageant. Both of these individuals were waiting for something -- actually, they were waiting for someone.

Luke uses a Greek word of anticipation that identifies them as waiting with expectation for the coming of the Messiah, or Saviour. It literally means that they were “alert to His appearance, and ready to welcome Him.” We see this word in Luke 2:25 in reference to Simeon where we read that “He was waiting...” and in 2:38 to describe a woman named Anna who was, “...looking forward to...”

Simeon -- Waiting For Comfort
We’re introduced to Simeon in Luke 2:25. “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.” Simeon was righteous before people, and he was devout in His relationship with God.

Things weren’t going real well for the nation of Israel. They hadn’t heard from God for many years and were under Roman rule. They had lost their political independence and were living in fear of the capable, crafty, and cruel King Herod, and many were wondering if the Messiah would ever come.

Verse 26 shows us that Simeon had good reason for his hope and anticipation: “It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.”

Simeon’s expectation focused on the comfort that Christ would bring. Among Jews of Simeon’s day one of the popular titles of Messiah was Comforter. Like some of the Christmas songs we sing, they were longing for the Messiah to come and bring His comfort to them.

It strikes me that the desire to be comforted is a universal human need. We all struggle with loneliness, emptiness, insecurity, even desperation. In fact, the Christmas season is one of the major crisis times of the year for depression.

The Holy Spirit prompted Simeon to go to the temple courts at just the right time on just the right day that Joseph and Mary were bringing their infant to the Temple. When Simeon looked at the baby Jesus, now about 6 weeks old, he knew that God’s promise had been kept. Here was Emmanuel, “God With Us,” to make everything right, to provide significance by His presence, and to eliminate rejection, fear, and loneliness.

Verse 28 of Luke 2 says that Simeon reached down and took Jesus out of Mary’s arms and began to praise God. Let me pause here to make a comment. Parents, how would you feel if some old man came up to you, took your infant in his arms and started singing out loud? I’m sure this was a bit unsettling for Joseph and Mary. But Simeon didn’t look all that dangerous. As he broke out into praise, he acknowledged that God had not only fulfilled the individual promise to him, but also the promises of the prophets to send the Anointed One to comfort both Jews and Gentiles.

Anna -- Waiting for Forgiveness

The other Christmas Character waiting with anticipation was Anna. After her husband had died, she had dedicated herself to fasting and praying in the temple. In fact, the Bible says that she never left the temple ­ but worshipped day and night. She could have filled all 360 slots of the Bible Reading Marathon herself because she was always at church!

She was looking forward to the same person as Simeon was, but with a different orientation. Instead of looking for comfort, Anna was looking for forgiveness. Take a look at verse 38: “Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.”

The word redemption is related to the idea of captivity. The Old Testament Passover and the release of Israel from Egyptian slavery stood in Anna’s day as the ultimate redemption and the symbol of God’s power to release captives. Ultimately, Passover pointed ahead to that day when God would provide deliverance from the slavery of sin.

When Anna saw Jesus, she gave thanks to God and spoke of Him to all who were waiting for redemption. Here, at last, was the One who would save His people from their sins.

Jesus Provides What We Need

Friends, when Jesus came, He provided the very things that Simeon and Anna were waiting for -- God’s comfort and His forgiveness. Let me ask you a question. What are you waiting for this Christmas? Whatever it is, Jesus can give it to you.

Can any of you identify with Simeon this morning? Some of you are really hurting right now. You feel lonely, empty, afraid, and maxed out. Do you need some comfort? Some consoling? Do you need a fresh sense of God’s presence? If so, you can find what you’re looking for in Jesus. He came to console us right where we’re at.

Or, do you identify more with Anna? Are you plagued with guilt this Christmas because of something you’ve done or the way you’ve been living? Do you feel like you’re trapped in a pattern of sin that you can’t break out of? If you need forgiveness, Jesus can give it to you today. I can think of no better time than Christmas to do just that.

Action Steps

There are three action steps from this passage that will help you experience God’s comfort and forgiveness this Christmas.

1 -- Become a Marveler

Become a Marveler. When Joseph and Mary tried to process everything that was happening, verse 33 says that they marveled at what was said about Jesus. According to the dictionary, to become a marveler is to be filled with wonder, astonishment, and surprise.

Are you a marveler this Christmas? Or, are you too caught up in the busyness and stress of the season? Have you been running around because of the Holidays, or are you taking the time to make Christmas a “holy” day? Has Christmas become too predictable, too familiar? Have you heard the Christmas story so much that it no longer astonishes you?

Actually, this can be a dangerous time of the year for us. Our annual celebration of Christmas can immunize us to its reality. We hear just enough of the story each year to inoculate us against the real thing, so that we never really catch true Christmas fever.

Here’s an idea that may help you recapture the marvel of Christmas. Pick one of the Christmas characters and put yourself in their sandals. Imagine what it must have been like to witness the Christmas story first hand. Go ahead; pick one -- Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds, Simeon, Anna, or the Wise Men.

2 -- Become a Mover

Action Step 2 is to become a mover. Take a look at verse 27: “Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts.” Now drop down to verse 38: “Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God...”

Both Simeon and Anna were movers. When the Holy Spirit prompted them to move, they didn’t sit still. I wonder what would have happened if they had not responded? Actually, every one of the Christmas characters responded to the Spirit’s leading with the exception of Herod:

Mary was ready to move when she said to the angel, “May it be to me as you have said.”

Joseph demonstrated that he was a mover when he woke up from his dream and “...did what the angel of the Lord had commanded and took Mary home as his wife.” Matthew 1:24

The Shepherds were movers as well when they said, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened...” Luke 2:15

And, as we already know, the wise men saw the star and moved out of their comfort zone to find the King of Christmas.

Friend, when God prompts you to do something, then you need to do it. It might mean salvation for some of you. It might mean full surrender for others of you. Or, maybe the Holy Spirit wants you to be more involved in serving people. Do you sense Him asking you to do something today? Are you a mover? Are you willing to move? Don’t procrastinate when God prompts you to do something -- you may miss out on a miracle this Christmas.

I’m struck by what Simeon told Mary in verse 34. It must have taken her breath away. “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will spoken against…”

That’s not really a joyful Christmas greeting, is it? Simeon is not saying, “Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.” Rather, he pauses, clears his throat and tells her that Christmas will never be merry and the New Year will never be happy until people get moving and surrender their lives to Christ.

Here’s the truth. Christmas splits people into 2 camps. Since Jesus has entered the world, He has divided the human race. Jesus will cause the falling and rising of many. Because of who Jesus is and what He came to do, He forces people to make a decision about Him. The Bible uses powerful imagery,­ Jesus is either a rock that you build your life upon (that’s the sense of rising) or he’s the rock that you stumble over (that’s the meaning of falling). On the cusp of this Christmas, Jesus is calling each of us to a moral decision based upon our willingness to move and respond, we will either rise or fall.

You can’t stay neutral about Jesus. You are either for Him or against Him. You’re moving closer to Him, or further away. You either have the Son or you don’t.

3 -- Become a Messenger

Interestingly, as we work at becoming marvelers, we can’t help but become movers. That leads us to the final action step from this passage -- become a messenger. Notice verse 38 again: “...she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.”

Do you have family and friends who’ve been caught up in preparations for Christmas? Look at it this way -- maybe their anticipation and longings really represent an inner search for comfort and forgiveness -- those things that only the Messiah can provide. God wants each one of us to become messengers of the Christmas story.

Conclusion

Let me wrap this up. As you and I become marvelers, the wonder of Christmas will astonish us. Then, as we become movers, our needs for comfort and forgiveness will be met. And, as we take our role as messengers seriously, we’ll be in position to introduce others to the Christ of Christmas -- so that they in turn can find what they have been waiting for.

Friends, in a nutshell, Christmas is a marvelous, moving, message! How can we not find what we’ve been looking for? And, how can we keep quiet about it? Once you have the Son, you have everything.

Whoever Takes the Son

Many years ago, there was a very wealthy man who shared a passion for art collecting with his son. They had priceless works by Picasso and Van Gogh adorning the walls of their family estate.

As winter approached, war engulfed the nation, and the young man left to serve his country. After only a few short weeks, his father received a telegram. His son had died.

Distraught and lonely, the old man faced the upcoming Christmas holidays with anguish and sadness. The joy of the season had vanished with the death of his son.

On Christmas morning, a knock on the door awakened the depressed old man. As he walked to the door, the masterpieces of art on the walls only reminded him that his son was not coming home. As he opened the door he was greeted by a soldier with a large package in his hands who said, “I was a friend of your son. I was the one he was rescuing when he died. May I come in for a few moments? I have something to show you.”

The soldier mentioned that he was an artist and then gave the old man the package. The paper gave way to reveal a portrait of the man’s son. Though the world would never consider it the work of a genius, the painting featured the young man’s face in striking detail.

Overcome with emotion, the man hung the portrait over the fireplace, pushing aside millions of dollars-worth of art. His task completed, the old man sat in his chair and spent Christmas gazing at the gift he had been given.

The painting of his son soon became his most prized possession, far eclipsing any interest in the pieces of art for which museums around the world clamored.

The following spring, the old man died. The art world waited with anticipation for the upcoming auction. According to the will of the old man, all the art works would be auctioned on Christmas Day, the day he had received the greatest gift.

The day soon arrived and art collectors from around the world gathered to bid on some of the world’s most spectacular paintings. Dreams would be fulfilled that day.

The auction began with a painting that was not on anyone’s museum list. It was the painting of the man’s son. The auctioneer asked for an opening bid, but the room was silent. “Who will open the bidding with $100?” No one spoke. Finally someone said, “Who cares about that painting. It’s just a picture of his son. Let’s move on to the good stuff.”

The auctioneer responded, “No, we have to sell this one first. Now, who will take the son?” Finally, a neighbor of the old man offered $10 dollars. “That’s all I have. I knew the boy, so I’d like to have it.”

The auctioneer said, “Going once, going twice…gone.” The gavel fell.

Cheers filled the room and someone exclaimed, “Now we can bid on the real treasures!”

The auctioneer looked at the room filled with people and announced that the auction was over. Everyone was stunned. Someone spoke up and said, “What do you mean, it’s over? We didn’t come here for a painting of someone’s son. There are millions of dollars-worth of art here! What’s going on?”

The auctioneer replied, “It’s very simple. According to the will of the Father, whoever takes the son…gets it all.”
Puts things in perspective, doesn’t it? The message is the same this Christmas. Because of the Father’s love…whoever takes the Son gets it all.

Will you take Him this Christmas?

You’re invited to a birthday party today. It’s the birthday of Jesus. It’s His party ­ but He wants to give you a present. He wants to give you the gift of Himself. Will you take Him?