



Advent prayer:

In this season of expectation
We prepare to welcome Christ Jesus, Messiah
Into the bustle of our lives
and the hard-to-find moments of solitude

We prepare to welcome Christ Jesus, Messiah
Into our homes and situations
along with friends and families

Into our hearts, and those often-hidden parts of our lives
We prepare to welcome Christ Jesus, Messiah
For beneath the surface of your story
is an inescapable fact
You entered this world
as vulnerable as any one of us
in order to nail that vulnerability to the cross
Our fears, our insecurities and our sins
all that can separate us from God
exchanged by your Grace for Love.
We cannot comprehend the reasoning
only marvel that Salvation comes to us
through a baby born in a stable,
and reaches out to a world in need.
In this season of expectation
We prepare to welcome Christ Jesus, Messiah

Bible reading: [Isaiah 9:1 – 7](#), [Jeremiah 31:31 – 34](#)

Sermon - Anticipation and Expectation

The theme music from Jaws by John Williams brilliantly builds a sense of anticipation and expectation. You know somethings going to happen, you just don't quite know when – and you kind of brace yourself for action.

And the Old Testament is a little bit like that. Slowly but surely through the pages of the Old Testament the anticipation and expectation that God is going to do something builds. But the people just didn't know when or how.

The Old Testament is pregnant with expectation like a mother waiting for her child to be born. And the expectation is that God is going to do something astonishing. That sense of anticipation is cranked up notch by notch.

He will keep all his promises and fulfil all his promises. Our reading from Isaiah 9 is a good example of that as it talks about light in darkness, a nation being restored, lasting peace, a new king and an everlasting kingdom – and all that, through this amazing child.

And you don't have to look too hard in the Old Testament to find that level of expectation again and again.

And yet, despite all the promises and the high level of expectation nobody expected it to result in a baby born in a manger – nobody expected God to turn up like that. No-one expected he would offer peace and love and reconciliation through that child

Around the time that Jesus was born, the sense of expectation within the nation of Israel was intense. It was something that was very deep rooted and part of their DNA because it had grown out of the covenant that God had made with Israel.

The covenant that God made with his people is expressed again and again throughout the Old Testament and it can be stated very simply. God says, ***'I will be your God and you will be my people.'***

So, you had mutual binding promises that God made to his people and the people made to God – in a similar way to what happens in a marriage service. But by the time of Jesus the people's expectation was faltering because hope didn't match what was happening on the ground and the people wanted God to prove himself.

There was a sense that God needed to do something to hold up his end of the agreement. In those days, the quality of your god was judged by the success of your nation. If you were successful in battle and the economy was flourishing, then your god must be a good one. But the story of God's people for the last few hundred years had mainly been one of oppression by other nations – and now they find themselves subject to the Romans. And for many people, it seemed as if God had stopped being their God. If he was all he was cracked up to be then he wouldn't have allowed them to be defeated and occupied, if he was any good at being a god then they would be an independent nation and a wealthy one at that. This became like a national obsession – God was going to have to do something to prove himself.

I wonder if you ever feel that way.

If God is God, then why doesn't he stop the pandemic?

Why hasn't he answered my prayer?

That's how many people felt back then. Why doesn't God come and set us free from our oppressor? They had lots of promises and lots of hopes that went with these promises – but it seemed God just didn't deliver. Another thing that was going on was the people had turned a covenant into a contract – and a conditional one at that.

It went a bit like this – ***'if you will be our God, then we will be your people.'***

If God holds up his end of the deal, then we will worship him. Or to put it another way, ***'if God starts acting like God, then we will start acting like his people.'*** And sometimes those attitudes can be in us. If I come to church and read my Bible and am generally a good person, then God should answer my prayers the way I want.

Or, Lord, if you do this for me, then I'll do that for you. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours – but if you don't, then I won't. But God isn't interested in that kind of deal. God doesn't do something for us because we've done something for him or promise to do so. God is loving and generous and good and merciful and when we do experience his kindness in some way – don't think for a minute he is paying you back in kind.

He is our God, and we are his people – that's the reality in which we live and it's all about a relationship. We don't come to church or read our Bible for loyalty points that we can cash in later for an answered prayer. The reason we come to church or read our Bible is to meet with God and grow in our relationship with him. Why do we pray? We don't pray so we can give God the equivalent of our shopping list. We pray because we want to talk with our heavenly Father and spend time alone with him. Why would we be part of a church? We don't come for what we can get out of it – that's not covenant, that's consumerism. We come to meet with God and to be changed by him. We come to bless and support one another in our journey of faith.

Let me be honest with you. I know that when my relationship with Jesus is dry. My bible reading and prayer life and church services feel much more routine and duty than cultivating my relationship with God. They become habits of ritual rather than relational experiences. The times when I'm blessed most is when I come to church or read my Bible with an expectation that I will meet with God there. And it's that expectation that opens us up to God's Spirit working in our lives. Going back to Jesus' day, the people of God hadn't stopped doing all the things the Old Testament told them to do. They were still praying and giving and offering sacrifices and keeping all the festivals and going to the temple etc. and they still thought of themselves as God's people – but many of them had lost the expectation that it would make any difference or that God would show up. By the way, I'm not saying any of this to make you feel guilty. I'm saying this to offer us hope. I don't want anyone to be burdened by the thought that they have to do more as a Christian. What I would love is for us all (myself included) to experience a greater depth in our relationship with Jesus. And a big part of that is to ask God to rekindle our level of expectation by his Spirit.

I wonder what you were expecting when you came to church this morning – did you come with great expectations or any expectations? If we expect to meet with God, then we will. If we come with a desire to be changed, we will be changed. God wants to speak to us through the prayers that are prayed and the songs that are sung and through the Bible and even through the sermon. As God speaks to us he offers us his perspective – we see things differently and it can transform our outlook. Meeting God is not restricted to a church building. We can meet God in all sorts of places and circumstances. God will speak to us through circumstances and nature and people and the bible and apparent coincidences. We can expect to encounter God when we go for a walk, when we see a sunrise or an astonishing view, or when we stop to chat to a beggar on the street. We can expect to meet God in those we serve and in those who serve us. That can remind us of the astonishing truth that HE chooses to serve us. The more we live our lives with an expectation that we can meet God throughout the day, wherever we are and whatever we're doing – we will find him and meet with him in ways we never thought possible.

God loves to show up in unexpected ways and in unexpected places – like a baby in a manger.
I will be your God and you will be my people – that's relationship

The challenge for us is to live and grow in that relationship each day. I wonder if you need to raise your level of expectation? I know I do. As we go through each day, let's expect to encounter our loving God – whether that is in church, or when we are praying, or in conversation with someone, or out for a walk, or just doing what we consider to be mundane. We know that if we seek him we will find him.