

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus

Luke 2:22-38

Introduction

Series: We decided to do an Advent series based on Advent hymns called “Songs of the Season.” For some reason, I just couldn’t get my brain to not call it “Songs of a Savior” (kind of unfortunate because we did a series on some Psalms with the same title). But maybe the mistake is helpful because these are not *simply* songs of the season. These songs are not about magical snowmen or bullied, iridescent, reindeer (as adorable as they might be). **Want to give me an aneurism, sing Run, Run Rudolph in church?** Those are songs related to some cultural phenomenon, not to the Christian holy season of Advent (and Christmas).

- The songs we are using to help us think well about the gospel and the incarnation are not sentimental, they’re rich theology. They are the product of years of Christian reflection and sanctified imagination.

Come Thou Long Expected Jesus: Let me read a few verses from this week’s song, composed in the 18th century by prolific hymn-writer Charles Wesley.

- Come, thou long-expected Jesus, Born to set thy people free; From our fears and sins release us; Let us find our rest in thee. Israel’s strength and consolation, Hope of all the earth Thou art; Dear Desire of ev’ry nation, Joy of every longing heart.
- Born thy people to deliver, Born a child, and yet a King, Born to reign in us forever, Now Thy gracious kingdom bring. By thine own eternal Spirit Rule in all our hearts alone; By thine all-sufficient merit Raise us to thy glorious throne.

The themes of this song intersect at the point of expectation and fulfillment; of a people waiting and then joyfully worshipping. And it doesn’t just look back to an ancient moment or forward to a future promise, but it is an invitation to see and respond to what God is doing and ask him to accomplish his will and way in our hearts today.

- And it reminds me of a beautiful scene connected to the Birth of Christ in Luke 2.

²² And when the time came for their purification according to the Law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, “Every male who first opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord”) ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice according to what is said in the Law of the Lord, “a pair of turtledoves, or two young pigeons.” ²⁵ Now there was a man in Jerusalem, whose name was Simeon, and this man was righteous and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶ And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. ²⁷ And he came in the Spirit into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him according to the custom of the Law, ²⁸ he took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, ²⁹ “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; ³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation ³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.” ³³ And his father and his mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴ And Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, “Behold, this child is appointed for the fall and rising of many in

Israel, and for a sign that is opposed ³⁵ (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), so that thoughts from many hearts may be revealed.” ³⁶ And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, ³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Summary: We see a simple scene of two faithful parents (“they”) taking their child up to Jerusalem to dedicate him to the Lord, for various rituals (both for the firstborn and for his mother) according to Jewish Scripture and custom. That is the **background** of this moment but not the **focus**. The focus is on these two people that greet this young family: Simeon and Anna.

- Simeon: A righteous and devout man; common name (one of Jacob’s sons); no description of vocation (not a priest); filled with the HS; a prophet (receives a confirmed word from God): And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. ²⁷ And he came in the Spirit into the temple.
- Anna (“Hannah”): A woman of devotion; very old (either 84 or 105, Gr. unclear); A prophetess (in a long line of prophetess’ in Jewish history¹ and the Hebrew Bible²).

There seems to be a hint about what is going on in Acts 2, Peter at Pentecost (quoting the prophet Joel) shows that a sign of the last days, the coming of the Messiah, is confirmed by the prophecy of old and young, men and women: And in the last days it shall be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams; even on my male servants and female servants in those days I will pour out my Spirit, and they shall prophesy (Acts 2:17-18).

- At a minimum we have here, in Simeon and Anna, a foretaste of that promise. But it seems to be more than that. Luke (the author of the Gospel bearing his name and the book of Acts) begins both accounts with the demonstration that the time has come, the Messiah is here, and he demonstrates it with prophecy from the sons and daughters of Israel.
- What’s happening? This is a giant neon sign on the Biblical highway telling us we’re seeing the promises of God before our eyes. This baby, Jesus, is the promised Messiah, the answer to all the prayers of God’s people, and the hope of every sinner come in the flesh. Our response, like Anna and Simeon is to recognize and worship, and to receive the salvation and joy that he brings to all who place their faith in him.

1. The Expectation of Israel

Come, thou long-expected Jesus, Born to set thy people free... Israel’s strength and consolation... Born thy people to deliver.

¹ Sarah, Miriam, Deborah, Hannah, Abigail, Huldah, and Esther.

² Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, Noadiah, and Isaiah’s wife.

Consolation: A word that plays an important part in “Come Thou Long Expected Jesus” and the story of Simeon and Anna is “consolation.” Simeon was said to be waiting for the consolation³ of Israel. Consolation, comfort, encouragement, etc.

- In Lk 6, the rich are described as already receiving their comfort (or consolation) through their possessions in this world.
- In Acts 9, the church is described as multiplying and being built up as it walks in the fear and comfort (consolation) of the Holy Spirit.
- Paul describes God in 2 Cor as the “God of all comfort (consolation).”
- This is the language of Isaiah that describes God’s comfort for the sin weary and contrite (not the proud).

Longing: Why does Simeon look for and long for comfort? Sin always results in separation and exile. Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden because of their disobedience. The Israelites were exiled from the promised land because of their idolatry.

- In this moment, they have returned from captivity in Babylon but it doesn’t feel like they are free. The exile doesn’t feel like it is truly over. Sure, the temple is rebuilt, but it’s missing the grandeur and holy objects of the first temple. It isn’t beside the palace like Solomon’s temple (because they have no king anymore). In fact, the Israelites are still under foreign occupation, at the whim and will of pagan rulers. **They are still slaves in their own land.** Exile was payment for sin, yet they are still in exile in their own land because they are still in their sin (so are we).
- So they long for freedom and deliverance, more than from exile, they long for freedom from sin (so do we). **And God has promised to deliver them** (and us).
 - All the promises of God in the Hebrew Bible come to fruition in the birth of Jesus. The Messiah has come to free God’s people from sin and death.
 - The birth of Jesus is the turning point of which Simeon and Anna waited. “We have found him! The one of whom the Scriptures foretold”

Expecting: But, it seems, only Anna and Simeon and a handful others noticed the messiah in their midst. How could so many read the Hebrew Bible, worship at the temple, and pray for God’s restoration, only to miss him when he was in the flesh, in front of them.

- (1) Some missed him because their expectation was proclaimed but not believed. Simeon and Anna, waited, longed, fasted, and prayed. They claim to want the Messiah but their life was not directed or devoted to his coming. It was lip service only. When you examine their wants, desires, and activities, you’ll notice a life directed toward the world not the kingdom of God.
 - The worst thing that could happen is that we, like many people of Jesus’ day, have all the information and the signs all around us but we miss what God is doing or (worse yet) we miss Jesus himself! Christmas carol illustration (Jesus is everywhere but no one can see it).
- (2) Some missed him because he wasn’t what they expected. Simeon and Anna had an expectant humility that desired to see God, not just what they wanted to see.

³ παράκλησις

- “That was the thing about the world: it wasn’t that things were harder than you thought they were going to be, it was that they were hard in ways that you didn’t expect” (Lev Grossman).
- It is always a little difficult and troubling when you **expect one thing and something else happens**. (Dana door; Amazon package delivery; expectations are the primary killer of relationships).
- The people of Israel, in the first century, had **various expectations** of what God was going to do. The Israelites were under foreign occupation by the Roman Empire. They had grown up hearing the **promises** God made to Abraham and David, promises of a prosperous nation, a righteous king, the Israelites being God's ambassadors on earth. **However, they looked around and things didn't seem to be going that way.**
 - The religious establishment was splintered. The political establishment was corrupt. The social order was confused. People were sick and hurt. There were rebellions and wars in the land. **There was an abundance of messianic expectation. God had promised a savior but what kind of savior would he be?** Surely he would be a king, a prophet, a priest. He would be a righteous warrior, a prophet of the law of God, a priest to restore the purity of Israel's religion. He would vanquish the enemies of Israel and unite the nation under his rule. And many of these expectations were true and informed by Scripture. But a whole swath of Biblical prophecy was avoided and ignored because it didn't fit into their desires.

God had prophesied a savior to come at a certain time, in a certain place, to a certain type of family but everyone missed it. They expected the royal lineage but didn't see the unwed teenager. They expected the military leader but not the suffering servant.

- "He was not the King they expected. He wasn't like the monarchs of old who sat on their jeweled ivory thrones, dispensing their justice and wisdom. Nor was he the great warrior-king some had wanted" (Wright)
- "There was much Jewish expectation of a Messiah who would 'redeem' Israel from Roman tyranny and even purify his people, whether by fiat or appeal to law... But there was no expectation that the Davidic messiah would give his own life as a ransom (20:28) to save his people from their sins" (Carson).
- "In Jesus' day, there were plenty of people who didn't want to believe his message, because it would have challenged their own power or influence. It would have upset their own agenda. For the last 200 years that's been the mood in Western society too. By all means, people think, let Jesus be a soul doctor, making people feel better inside. Let him be a rescuer, snatching people away [from hell]. But don't let him tell us about a God who actually does things in the world. We might have to take that God seriously, just when we're discovering how to run the world our own way" (Wright).

It is very easy to use the Bible, to try to make it say what we want it to say. It takes humility and submission to allow God to open your eyes to what he is saying, the hard and difficult things. It's easy to try and conform our conception of Jesus to our own desires and wants, it's quite another thing to recognize him for who he is and humbly surrender.

- Often when you let go of your expectations and demands of God, you make room to see and embrace all the other better things that he is doing? Should we have expectations? Sure! But they should be determined and directed by God.
 - The Bible doesn't say we should expect wealth, but suffering; not power but service; not despair, but hope; not endless searching, but contentment.
- "When we have the wrong idea of what God is like, the things he does surprise (and often frustrate) us" (Hanevich). But when we see him for who he is and trust him for what he's doing, we humbly follow and joyfully receive him.

Anticipation: Anna and Simeon see in Jesus the long-awaited redemption of God for his people. They have waited with anticipation (arrival of an anticipated child vs "I didn't know I was pregnant", Christmas morning). What a beautiful way to live our lives, with joyful, humble, expectant anticipation. It opens us to see what **God** is doing and join him in his work.

- Perhaps one reason Luke tells us about Simeon and Anna is to illustrate how holy and devout people respond to the promise of Christ's coming and how God responds to their longings. They see more than others see. They may not fully understand all the details but God mercifully gives them a glimpse before they die, of what they so passionately wanted to see, his kingdom come.

2. The Hope of All Nations

Come, thou long-expected Jesus... Hope of all the earth Thou art; Dear Desire of ev'ry nation...
Born a child, and yet a King, Born to reign in us forever, Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.

Beyond Hopes: It would have been amazing had Jesus been a political leader to save the Israelites from captivity but he was so far beyond that. ³¹ that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, ³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles,

- His salvation was not just for Jerusalem but for **all people** (i.e., the nations). Jesus is not a regional savior that has been invented by the Western world, he is not a therapeutic crutch of post-Enlightenment people. He is the savior of his people slain on their behalf before the foundation of the world.
- He is not a provincial deity but the God of all people and places, tribes and tongues. That's why Christmas is a universal holiday!
- He comes through the Jewish people so that all people can be blessed (a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel)! At the heart of what makes Israel special is that salvation comes through it.
- That's why he's the son of David (Jewish) and the son of Abraham (nations) (cf. Matt 1:1).
 - God's consolation shines the light of Jesus Christ not only for the people of Israel but also for the Gentiles. The point is that the blessing of God is now available to all who will receive it.
- Jesus is not just a political leader but a true savior. He's not just a religious mascot, but the actual "way, truth, and life."

- Mary and Joseph respond in wonder because the promise of Jesus is more than their special baby, and more than their national hopes, but light for all people:
 - I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed (Gen 12:33).

True Peace and True Rest: Christmas can only bring real hope, joy, peace, and love if this is true, if Jesus is true salvation.

- There is no peace on earth without Jesus who is our peace. At best we get nostalgia, sentimentalism, and empty traditions.
- Jesus isn't a mascot or good luck charm but Savior and Lord.

Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah 49:13: Sing for joy, O heavens, and exult, O earth; break forth, O mountains, into singing! For the Lord has consoled his people, and will have compassion on his afflicted.

- It makes sense to set your heart on Christ because there is a deep longing in your heart for consolation and comfort that this world cannot satisfy and God uses that longing to recognize and receive his gift: Jesus Christ. Don't seek it anywhere but in him.

3. The Joy of Our Hearts

Come, thou long-expected Jesus... From our fears and sins release us; Let us find our rest in thee... Joy of every longing heart... Born to reign in us forever, Now Thy gracious kingdom bring. By thine own eternal Spirit Rule in all our hearts alone; By thine all-sufficient merit Raise us to thy glorious throne.

Receiving Comfort Our Hearts Long For: We can trust God's plan even when it isn't the way we anticipated, and as a result see His grace in unexpected places. God is not working on our timeline or agenda (and we wouldn't want him to be).

- There's a Biblical theme of God coming at *just* the right time.
 - For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly (Rom 5:6).
 - As a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth (Eph 1:10).
 - But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons (Gal 4:4-5).
- Jesus comes at just the right time, to just the right people, in just the right place, fulfilling the perfect plan of God and answering soothing each and every hope and fear we have.
- God's promises, though long-delayed, had not been forgotten. Jesus and his ministry were God's fulfillment of his promises now centuries old.
- But at just the right time, God is bringing a King to lead the people out of exile, to free them from their sin.
- The consolation Jesus brings in fulfillment of Simeon and Anna's hopes is the application of God's tenderness to a war-weary people. It is the application of God's pardon for

sin-sick and guilty people. When Jesus was born, the voice of God became flesh and dwelt among us.

- **And it is the consolation that you are looking for too, if you haven't found it yet in Christ.**
 - Maybe you have been looking and hoping and crying for God's deliverance. You've chased it down in the power and pleasures of the world, but you are left wanting more. Only in Jesus will you find the comfort that you seek.

Make it Personal: But all of this calls for a personal response of worship and joy. The truths of Jesus are not meant to exist only in the prophetic past or the hopeful future but in our lives right now. The truth of Jesus is not just meant for "out there" but "in here." Both Simeon and Anna respond to the salvation of Jesus with joyful and exuberant praise. The joy that consumes their hearts is reflected back in praise to God and proclamation to any who would listen.

- Wesley did not want to just paint a picture of Jesus in the manger; he wanted the entire Christmas story to have a personal application. Wesley wanted to impress upon God's people that Jesus is not only the "desire of every nation," but is also the personal "joy of every longing heart." Jesus has the "government on his shoulders," but he was born to reign personally "in us."

Invitation: There is no joy of the season without Christ as king of your heart. You don't just will yourself into glad tidings and generous giving. In fact, for many, the holidays only exacerbate materialistic impulses, friction with family, loneliness and despair.

- "Jesus is a phenomenal teacher but his teachings will be too much for you until he becomes your Savior" (Lecrae).
- "Come" (Thou Long Expected Jesus) is an invitation. Jesus doesn't need your permission, this is for you. It's a call to surrender. It's an invitation to open your life to the rule and reign of Christ and the fullness of his joy.
- How is the heart prepared to receive Christ for who he really is? God prepares a person to receive Christ by stirring up a longing for consolation and redemption that can come only from Christ. A consolation that is not found in the world.

A Way of Life: And Jesus invites us into his way of life. Because we understand that his work on earth is not finished, we ask Jesus, to bring his kingdom in our hearts and to our world.

- In Advent, we long for the second coming of Christ and for the fullness of the kingdom. Yet, in our yearning we also open our hearts to him, inviting him to fill us and use us through the power of his Spirit. As we pray, "Come, Thou long-expected Jesus," we are asking him to come into our hearts afresh, to rule over us today so that we might serve him in everything we do.
- "In Advent, the church stands between two proclamations: 'God has come!' and 'Come, Lord Jesus!' The first anchors our confidence that the second will be answered. The life, death, and resurrection of Jesus shape our hope in the return, reign, and renewal to come" (Packiam).
 - Peter tells us to "set our hope fully on the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet 1:13). So God is preparing us to receive Christ

by stirring up a longing for the redemption that can only come from him. We can only welcome Christ joyfully at his second coming if we long for his rule and reign and redemption in our hearts today.

- Do you live a life of longing and desire to see Jesus? Do you long more than anything to be with him?