P.A.X.: The Initiation Memory Verse: Revelation 21:5

Dec. 24th and 25th, 2022 Scripture Reading: Matthew 1:18-25

**SLIDE 1: Title**

 Welcome to this grand and glorious Christmas Eve/Day! Our time of waiting is over! Christ has come! We rejoice together at the coming of our Savior.

**SLIDE 2: Manger**

 But as the Advent of our newborn King is upon us, we cannot forget the blessings we have found in the waiting. And as we revisit the age-old story of our dear Savior’s birth, I want to briefly reflect on the Advent journey we have taken together. To be a people of prayer has been our call to action throughout our time of waiting. We began by identifying with the faithful Simeon whose whole life was characterized by expectant prayer. He was able to meet the extraordinary baby Jesus even in the ordinariness of everyday life. We took a look behind the scenes of the nativity with the help of John’s revelation to see the spiritual reality behind the physical birth of a seemingly normal baby who was born into a raging battle, a battle with which we are involved to this day and prayer is our mode of engagement in that battle. Pastor Cassi showed us, from the perspective of Mary, how the plans of God are disruptive to our own, His ways do not always accord with what we expect. Then the wise men, those kings from the east, they helped us see the posture we are take before this king….fall to our knees in prayer. We have been encouraged to engage in prayer thoughout this waiting period, but it must not stop now! Yes, Jesus has come, the promised child has been born, God is with us! But are we with Him? Are we making sure the Christmas event has power in our personal lives? We may celebrate what God has done, but are we aware of what he is currently doing? Are we privy to his plans? Do we need to be roused from sleep? This is why we pray. This is why we need to be in prayer together, because prayer awakens expectation.

**SLIDE: 3: Expectation**

Expectation…I hope that word sticks in your mind and in your heart. It is no small word. It includes hope and faith and trust. My wife and I are expecting a child of our own here very soon. When our daughter does finally come into this world, our waiting will be over. She will have arrived and the pregnancy will be ended. Yet, the Advent of her arrival is just the beginning. Now the work begins in earnest…feeding, changing, holding, singing, constant attention and care must be given. Truly the new life of the baby means the end of life for mom and dad, at least the end of life as we know it. That birthday is an initiation into a new and different life, an invitation into a new relationship.

 Christmas is the end of our waiting, in a sense that only concerns our calendars. In a much more real and practical sense, Christmas is a beginning, it is the initiation. Jesus is initiated into the carbon cage of humanity and we are initiated into a new relationship with the God who is with us, Emmanuel. When a baby is born, expectation does not end, it is only adjusted. We waiting period just racked up from nine months to now a lifetime. So I would like to explore how this initiation at Christmastime awakens us to a life of expectant prayer.

 Both Matthew and Luke give us an account of the birth of Jesus. Matthew focuses on Joseph, while Luke gives the spotlight to Mary. But in either case, we learn some crucial information about Jesus himself. Let’s take a look. In Matthew 1:20, an angel appears to Joseph in a dream. Now at the time, Joseph was thinking through the bad news that his fiancée was pregnant. This news was disgraceful enough, but on top of it all, Joseph knew full well the baby wasn’t his! But Joseph was a righteous man and he determined to call off the wedding quietly so as not to humiliate the woman he loved, despite the circumstances.

**SLIDE 4: verse 20, “Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”**

Then an angel appears to Joseph in a dream and says in verse 20, “Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.” So Joseph gets up the next morning, and sticks with Mary. He obeys the command of the angel and in that process his expectation is adjusted. There are a few more questions aren’t there. Joseph’s understanding, his expectation, had been: a strapping young lad who will have a penchant for carpentry, who will work hard and hopefully take over the family shop. Nothing wrong with that plan! But now Joseph’s expectations have been blown out of the water. He must have been drowning in a sea of questions: How can I raise a divine son? How can a spirit even impregnant a woman? What does it mean to save an entire people from their sin? Will he still be able to swing a hammer? Joseph had to ground his actions in his faith…he had to allow God to rewrite all that he had expected. And in trust, Joseph obeyed.

**SLIDE 5. “The angel said, ‘Don’t be afraid, God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob’s house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom.’” And as if that were not enough, and angel goes on in verse 35… “the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God’s Son.”**

 Likewise, Mary too obeyed. Luke records a similar encounter with an angel in chapter 1 verse 30. “The angel said, ‘Don’t be afraid, God is honoring you. Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. He will rule over Jacob’s house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom.’” And as if that were not enough, and angel goes on in verse 35… “the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God’s Son.”

 Most mother’s wish the best for their children. They want them to achieve in school and get a good job. They look forward to a couple of grandkids. Maybe some mothers even hope to raise a future CEO or even a president. But a Son of the Most High whose kingdom will never end? A holy child? The Son of God? Where to begin? What do you do with that? But Mary accepts the role and allows God to redefine her expectations.

 I wonder if we could say the same. We all sit here with certain expectations. We could probably predict how things will go for our holiday get-togethers with family. You might be even able to bet on the gifts that you will receive. We have an idea of how the coming year will turn out and we hope there are not too many surprises. Mostly, we expect more of the same. Do you find that to be true of you?

 I believe Christmas initiates something new. The coming of the Holy One, the Son of the Most High, the Savior, did not just require an adjustment on the part of Mary and Joseph, His coming changed the very fabric of the universe…God Almighty became man, and not a brawny prototype of physical perfection, but a helpless, weak and dependent baby. Why would God go about saving the world in this way? Because the birth of Jesus was an initiation of a brand new reality, an invitation to relationship.

**SLIDE 6: Jesus is the reason**

 I’m sure you have heard the phrase “Jesus is the reason for the season.” We recognize that the true gift given at Christmas was Jesus himself. Professor and pastor Harry Emerson Fosdick relates this truth to prayer. He writes, “The great gift of God in prayer is himself, and whatever else he gives is incidental and secondary.” We need to think about that for a moment. Are we content with knowing God himself or are we actually craving his outward gifts? What is our dominant desire? What is our expectation? Fosdick says that when we understand prayer as communion with God the inevitable effect is that God becomes real. “Prayer at its center is as simple and as profound as friendship.” This type of prayer, this communion, is possible because of Christmas. The birth of our Savior initiates our friendship with God. He comes to be with us so that we might be with him.

 For many Christians, Christmas as an historical event that they gladly celebrate, but they have not yet allowed the Savior to redefine their expectations. They certainly believe that God *is*, but they have yet to meet him. The friendship that God has initiated they have yet to reciprocate. As Fosdick puts it, “The practice of prayer is necessary to make God not merely an idea held in the mind but a Presence recognized in the life.” God came near, through Jesus, for this very purpose. He took on our flesh, he dwelt among us, he became as real as room in which you are sitting. But prayer, communion with God, is the means by which this very real baby born in Behtlehem becomes a very real friend to you and I right here and right now. Jesus is not an historical figure we remember, he is present here and now in our daily lives. But we have to allow God to awaken that reality in us, to redefine our expectations…and that transformative work is done through prayer.

**SLIDE 7: Title**

 Prayer awakens expectation. Christmas redefines our expectations. So let me just ask you, what do you expect in your relationship with God? Maybe some of us do expect a silent distance, maybe we expect to make requests with no result, maybe we expect more of the same. Fosdick warns, “No friendship can sustain the neglect of communion. Even God grows unreal, ceases to be our Unseen Friend, and dwindles into a cold hypothesis to explain the world, when we forget communion.” So communion in this sense simply means a relationship. We are invited to commune with God. And it is our relationship with him that gives the ritual of which we partake, any meaning.

**SLIDE 8: “No friendship can sustain the neglect of communion. Even God grows unreal, ceases to be our Unseen Friend, and dwindles into a cold hypothesis to explain the world, when we forget communion.”**

 That quote hits me a little too hard. I have wasted too many moments in my life feeling like God was unreal. I have had too many seasons in which I could not see my divine Friend. And oh how mournful to believe in God enough to know he created all things, but at the same time, dismiss relating to that loving Creator.

But God came near! He is here! He initiates a relationship with each and every one of us; a new reality that brings new expectations. We have already delved into the book of Revelation during this Advent preaching series, so I want to revisit and take the liberty to fast-forward the story a bit. If we turn to Revelation 21 we see the unfolding of what scripture calls the new heaven and new earth. Jesus, the Son of the Most High, the King of all kings, lives fully into his role. The progression from manger to throne has been completed. And as he takes his place upon that throne, he declares in verse 5, “Behold, I am making all things new.” This transformation of all things begins right here in the manger. And “all things” includes our relationship with God. “All things” includes the things we expect from our relationship with God.

How will we respond? There are many ways we should respond to this new thing that God is doing, but chief among them is to enter into this relationship that God has initiated through prayer. Author Richard Foster writes, “Real prayer comes not from gritting our teeth but from falling in love.”

**SLIDE 9: “Real prayer comes not from gritting our teeth but from falling in love.”**

We do that in the solitude of our individual lives. We seek out relationship with Jesus in the prayer closet, we express our love for him. But we also need to be praying communally. We bind ourselves together as brothers and sisters in Christ and seek his presence, his friendship as a church body. And in doing so, we allow God to awaken in us expectations that he has defined! Isn’t that glorious? That is what our P.A.X. teams are all about. And I want to continue to encourage you to be involved with one. We want to live alert and ready to go, we want to be expecting God to move among us, but however he might move, we desire above all else to simply be with him. I know this is true for my wife and I. When Tracy feels this new baby kicking around, she let’s me in on it. That touch serves as a very visceral reminder that we get to meet her soon! We get to see her, and hold her, and get to know her. As much as this child has impacted our lives already, once she is born, a brand new relationship is initiated and we get to begin the process of knowing her and being known.

The hymn writer and pastor George Matheson offers a prayer that I encourage us all to live: “Whether Thou comest in sunshine or in rain, I would take Thee into my heart joyfully. Thou art Thyself more than the sunshine; Thou art Thyself compensation for the rain. It is Thee and not Thy gifts I crave.”

**SLIDE 10: “Whether Thou comest in sunshine or in rain, I would take Thee into my heart joyfully. Thou art Thyself more than the sunshine; Thou art Thyself compensation for the rain. It is Thee and not Thy gifts I crave.”**

 May that be our prayer this Christmas…the gifts are great, the traditions are fun, but let us not forget the relationship that God has initiated on that silent night in Bethlehem. It is you Jesus, you yourself, and not simply your gifts that I crave. May that prayer awaken your expectation this Christmas. Amen.