

Advent Expectations

Joyce Cummings Tucker

John Knox Presbyterian Church, Mareitta, Georgia

As American Christians move through Advent and approach Christmas they bring to the season many different expectations. Many of our hopes for Advent and Christmas have been nurtured through the years by our Christian faith. Certain passages of scripture, certain hymns, certain customs awaken deep within us the authentic hopes and dreams of Ancient Israel and of the Christian Church throughout its history. We 20th century Americans can experience some of the wonder and mystery of Advent.

But to experience anew the deepest joys of expecting the coming of Christ, we need a clear understanding of the source of our expectations for the Advent and Christmas seasons. *Preachers can help church members separate out in their thinking and living the true Advent expectations from those expectations we derive from our culture.* For we approach the celebration of Christmas with many expectations which have little or nothing to do with the message and meaning of the coming of Christ.

Preachers can raise the important questions in many ways: Do we approach Christmas with an attitude of expectancy? If so, are the hopes and longings, the fulfillment of which is heralded by the Advent season, merely an extension of the expectations of our American culture? Or is there a radical difference between that Christian hope which grows in intensity as Christmas draws nearer and the general aspirations of our day? Is there a relationship between one's Advent expectations and one's sense of self-worth? To those who do not approach Christmas from a stance of expectancy we might ask the following questions: Is your lack of hope caused by a profound disillusionment with American culture? Do you value yourself in terms of culture's standards and therefore come up lacking? Have you heard the true message of Advent or has that message been blocked out by the trappings with which we surround the celebration of Christ's coming?

To begin to address these and related questions it is helpful to look first at some of the general expectations of our culture. What does our culture say gives value and meaning to life? Next we will look at those specific expectations which our culture associates with Christmas. Then we will consider the authentic expectations of the Christian faith as Christmas approaches.

I.

As we reflect upon our culture one hope is evidenced over and over again: the American expectation that our style of life will get "bigger and better." The voices crying for Americans to set voluntary limits upon our use of the world's resources and to simplify our life styles seem indeed to be voices crying in the wilderness. We may realize that everyone cannot continue to have more and

more but somehow we are exceptions. We may have become aware through continuous bouts with the frustrations of inflation that we dare not hope to make as rapid economic progress as many Americans once did. But we still expect to advance! Moreover, for a large percentage of us, our sense of self-worth is closely tied with economic progress. Very few are entirely free from feeling that our worth is somewhat determined by our ability to make progress toward economic success. We value ourselves by our ability to “get ahead” financially.

And it is the “getting ahead” that matters! For the most part we have not been able to make adjustments in our expectations because we have *started out* far ahead of most of the world’s citizens—and perhaps far ahead of where our parents before us started. We have heard over and over again the stories which preceding generations tell about making economic *progress* over the course of a lifetime by hard work and careful planning. The *process* of increasing the financial resources of the individual or of the family was what gave persons a sense of value. People could feel a great deal of satisfaction in being able to say that they started out with little or nothing, scrimped and saved, worked hard, suffered through bad times, but managed to make tremendous strides. Families could point out that they moved into a nice house, educated their children, enjoyed vacations in their middle years, and had money left for retirement. They were even able to leave money to their children when they died. And just think—they started with nothing!

In the last decade our experience has been different. We who perhaps started out at the bottom—but with many advantages—have discovered that hard work does not get us much *further* ahead. We have discovered that we are merely treading water. Those who purchased homes a few years ago find that their plans to furnish the living room the following year didn’t materialize. Four or five years have gone by and the living room is still bare. What happened to progress? And for many people that American dream of home ownership may never become a reality. Prices of homes are rising at an alarming rate. Some families discover that even with two wage earners in the family, they still don’t experience much economic advancement. Prices climb faster than income; at least it seems that way. Inflation is an ugly word which affects us all—especially those living on a fixed income.

The economic expectations of our culture for the last 30 or more years may have been unrealistic, even immoral. But Americans have clung to them and invested much of their feeling of self-worth in them. We have now reached a time of mounting frustration caused by these expectations. Thwarted expectations can lead to despair. *The preacher can help first by identifying the expectations, then by addressing the frustration, and finally by helping persons to set new expectations.*

I have emphasized the economic expectations engendered by American culture. But we also have other culturally defined expectations. In addition to comfort we expect love. But what kind of love? Much of the love portrayed in advertising and through the media is of a very shallow kind. As Christians we may well question whether we can ever experience the fulfillment we dream of from such a shallow and passing kind of love. But what if we are denied even our culture’s type of love? Our culture says that sexual love is readily available. And most of the people we see enjoying sexual love also are physically beautiful.

What does an expectation which links physical beauty and sexual fulfillment say to people who are not beautiful or handsome, no matter how hard they try to be, or who do not find a person with whom there is a mutual sexual attraction? The holding of these expectations can lead to despair and feelings of worthlessness, rather than to pleasure and feelings of joy.

And what about the expectations which surround the celebration of Christmas itself? Practically every part of American culture becomes involved in some aspect of the celebration of Christmas. Gift items of every conceivable type bearing ever-increasing price tags not only appear in stores but also greet us in extra sections of newspapers, in magazines, and on television and radio. The power of advertising propels people into stores. Slogans of good cheer are everywhere. American business is moving towards the biggest buying season of the year. For those who have money, spirits rise—at least temporarily. But what happens to those who have little money for buying fine gifts and little hope of receiving any either? For many, spirits fall and depression sets in. The approaching Christmas season only intensifies the feelings of alienation and estrangement. Instead of the experience of peace there is inner turmoil—feelings of self-doubt. If one's expectations for the approaching season are limited to those promoted by American culture, then there is potential for devastating disappointment.

II.

In contrast think of the authentic expectations of the Christmas faith. What happened to those expectations of God's breaking into human history which kept hope alive among a defeated people? Where is the longing for the coming of the everlasting God, the source of all life, who has promised redemption, who gives value to each individual person, who will overturn all forces of injustice and who will judge and create anew?

The true Advent hope does not look for fulfillment in any culture but looks toward the intervening of the God who gives value to all people and meaning to each life by taking on human form, entering into human affairs, experiencing human longings, human suffering—even death itself—and triumphs!

Why do Christians look forward to Christmas? Why do we prepare for four weeks for the arrival of that special day? Because Christmas tells us that we are valued by God. Christmas gives us a new way of assessing our value, another standard of human worth, which is in stark contrast to the standards of culture.

The birth of Christ shows God's identification with the poor, the oppressed of this world. The long-expected Savior was born to parents of no economic means or social prominence. The child became a member of a nation ruled by foreigners. The birth took place in a stable, among the animals with no conveniences for the mother or child. First century Jews were looking for a mighty king to overthrow the Romans. They, like 20th century Americans, were looking for salvation at the heights of civil power and economic prestige. Instead they received a baby born to parents for whom there was no room in the inn of Bethlehem. *God chose to enter the most humble of lives and thus to show the world that its expectations, its values were contrary to God's.* The Incarnation

tells us that no one of us is even close to being worthless or useless. We have all been given a tremendous amount of value by the God who made us and loved us to the point of becoming one with us through the person Christ Jesus.

How are we enabled to *feel*—to know on the feeling level—that we are of great worth to God? We need regular experiences of *being valued* in order to know with assurance that we are indeed of great value. *The church could plan its Advent events in such a way as to assure that each person would have at least some experiences of fellowship, of being valued by others within the Christian community.* We cannot communicate to persons that God values them if we do not show them that we value them. It is especially important for the church to communicate to its children that Christmas means that they are valued by God through the coming of Jesus Christ. We often leave out the children or make them participate in events designed with adults in mind. Our children, who get so caught up in the culture's Christmas expectations, must not be denied some opportunity to experience God's love through the family of God's people during Advent and Christmas.

According to Luke's Gospel, the angel who appeared to Mary to announce that she would be the mother of the Messiah said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." When the angel appeared to the shepherds they received the same word: "Be not afraid." To Christians of our day approaching Advent the word also comes: "Do not be afraid!" And we today very much need to hear that word! Do not be afraid to reject as invalid the expectations of our culture as to what gives life meaning and what gives people value. (Mary willingly broke with the *cultural* expectations of her day! Mary's response to the angel: "Let it be to me according to your word.") Do not be afraid to move into the future—even in this time of rapid change—for we know who we are. We are the people of God. One of the authentic expectations of Advent is to hear again that word, "Do not be afraid." If one's expectations are grounded in the culture, then there is reason to live in fear. But if one's expectations are grounded in the Christian faith, then there is reason to live in hope. For our hope rests in the Christ whom we know will come, even as he has come before and is with us now. We can await that coming with great joy, for the one who comes is the one who leads us into newness of life, even beyond all our expectations.