

The following is an excerpt from the sermon for week 1 of The Cast of Christmas Church Kit. The full sermons for the 5-week series, available in this church kit, are customizable for your congregation and preaching style.

Sermon 1

Prophets: Preparation and Expectation

Expected Delivery

You officially have twenty-four days of shopping until Christmas. Don't worry because we can shop any time of the day or night and just wait for the packages to arrive in the mail. According to the *Washington Post*, UPS will ship somewhere around 750 million packages this holiday season.[1] They'll do the work, and all we have to do is click and wait.

If you have friends or family who enjoy waiting for packages, there are some exciting new gift options you might try through gift-of-the-month clubs. For about \$50 per month, you can sign your loved one up for the bacon-of-the-month club where he or she will receive two one-pound selections of artisan bacon every month. There's a pickle-of-the-month club and even a PB-and-J-of-the-month club.[2] Just think of all the expectation you can give for Christmas as your parents or children check every day to see if their gourmet peanut butter and jelly arrives in the mail.

A number of years ago, CNN told the story of Charles McKinley's attempt at another approach to surprise and expectation by mail—which I wouldn't recommend—when he shipped himself in a crate from his home in New York to his parents' home in Dallas.[3] Somehow he actually made it home, but the final deliveryman saw Mr. McKinley through a crack in the crate and called the police. Unfortunately, he was arrested for an unrelated and outstanding warrant.

Christmas is certainly a time of waiting and expectation. You can feel the expectation build as children grow more and more antsy in their classes at school as they wait for

the big day to arrive. As we prepare and wait, it occurs to me that the vast majority of our lives is filled with waiting and preparation while only a fraction is filled with actual experience, celebration, or doing stuff. Consider the Thanksgiving meal many of us recently enjoyed. How long did it take to prepare it? How long did it take to eat?

Often when we think we're finally doing stuff, we're actually just waiting and preparing for stuff in a new location. Take camping. It feels like you're doing something. Actually, you're just waiting and preparing outdoors. You prepare the fire. You prepare the tents for sleeping. You prepare the meals for cooking.

If we stop to think about it, we really shouldn't be surprised that life is filled with so much more preparation and waiting than doing, because in some ways preparation *is* the doing. In fact, preparation is often the point. I don't think it's too much of a stretch to say that our short time on earth is more about preparation for eternity in heaven than what we accomplish or do on this earth. In fact, the best use of our time on earth is to prepare our hearts to become more like Jesus and to help other people get prepared to meet Jesus in heaven.

The primary point of the Old Testament is preparation for one moment. What some call the protevangelium near the very beginning of creation points to this fact. *Protos* is the Greek word for "first," and *evangelion* means "good news or gospel." So, the protevangelium is what most followers believe to be the first declaration of the Gospel. It takes place directly after Adam and Eve fell into sin. God declared to the serpent in Genesis 3:15: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel."

The work the serpent began that was expressed through Adam and Eve's conscious choice to sin would one day be crushed through the arrival of her offspring. That offspring, of course, is the One whom Christmas points to and celebrates. From the moment of the first sin onward, the entire Old Testament prepares and points us to the great moment when our Savior and Messiah came to save us from the curse of sin. The law and all the temple sacrifices show our need for a Savior. The slavery and sorrow of

the Israelites point to the bondage we all face before we acknowledge His arrival. The prophets looked and longed for His coming.

Seven hundred years before Jesus was born, the prophet Micah was inspired by God to look forward to His birth. In Micah 5:2, he wrote, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." Chris Tomlin's modern hymn proclaims: "Emmanuel, Emmanuel, God incarnate here to dwell . . . Praise His name Emmanuel." [4]

The one from ancient times whom Micah wrote about has more than one hundred different names in the Bible. He's called the Alpha and the Omega, the Word of Life, the Bright Morning Star, the Light of the World, I Am, the Ancient of Days, Jesus. His name Emmanuel means "God with us." And when Jesus arrived, He came humbly, quietly, in a small and forgotten town that didn't even have a proper room for His arrival. But let's not allow the circumstances He chose to fulfill these prophecies confuse what child this is. He is the Ancient One, the Creator, the Author and Giver of Life, the Word of God. For hundreds of years, the Israelites and the prophets looked to Him and waited for His rescue.

Advent is the perfect time for us to wait and prepare. As the prophets waited for Jesus's arrival, we wait and prepare for His Second Coming. In some ways we know what Micah, Isaiah, Moses, and so many who looked for Jesus went through. Like them, we know Jesus is coming again, and we don't know when. Like them, we need to prepare our hearts to receive and grow in Him now as we anticipate the day when we will meet Him face-to-face. While He may indeed tarry longer, you can be certain that we all are in our own Last Days. We will soon witness His arrival, or we will soon meet Him at the end of our own lives. Either way, we must be prepared!

Preparation Begins with Repentance

You might say that John the Baptist was the last prophet who had to wait for Jesus's first arrival. He shows us how to prepare our hearts for Jesus in our lives now and how

to prepare our hearts for Jesus's return. In Matthew 3:2, John says, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." In verse 8, John says, "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance." In verse 11, he declares, "I baptize you with water for repentance." *Repentance* in its simplest definition means "to turn." So, John isn't calling out, "You all better start feeling really guilty for all the things you've done." He's not saying, "I want you to feel really bad." Understand that repentance certainly can begin with feeling really bad. But what John is saying is, "Change your approach. Reconsider how you think about things, and begin to think and act differently."

The story goes that Harvey went into the hardware store to buy a chain saw. He told the clerk, "I want one that will cut down about ten trees in an hour." The next day, Harvey came back, and he was really upset. He said, "Hey, this chain saw only cut down one little tree in one hour." The clerk said, "Hmm. Let me take a look at it." The clerk pulled on the starter rope, and the saw started right up. Harvey looked at it in wonder and said, "What's that noise?"

Harvey needs to think differently and to change his approach. In the same way, Advent gives us an opportunity to consider our approach and make a change. Is this Christmas going to be like all the rest? Harried? Rushed? Stressful? Overwhelming? Or will we take our cue from the prophets of old who were waiting and preparing for His arrival? Will we allow this season to be one of reflection, adoration, and repentance? There is no better footing on the road to Jesus than a broken road with humility, understanding of our need, and repentance. As the psalmist tells us, "A broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise" (Psalm 51:17).

Despite the vast array of Old Testament prophecies describing the birth, life, death, and purpose of the Messiah, there was at least one idea that caused the vast majority of the religious leaders to miss the gift when it came. Strangely enough, they didn't really understand the significance of original sin. We know that regulations were incredibly important to them. Avoiding sin was paramount. But redemption for sin was nearly ignored. When they looked for salvation, they weren't really thinking about their need for salvation from sin. Instead, they were looking for salvation from foreign rule and

oppressive government. And their mistaken belief about the mission of the Messiah became their most important conviction about Him.

Let's not make the same mistake. Let's remember that we are in desperate need.

Although our feelings may tell us otherwise, it's not the need for a way to pay all our Christmas bills. We're not so desperate for a way to get everything done that needs to be accomplished before Christmas. We are desperate for a Savior who will cleanse us from our sin once and for all. We are in need of the Messiah who came to die for what we have done and how we have failed.

[1] Abha Bhattarai, "UPS and Others Warn That Holiday Deliveries Are Already Falling Behind," *The Washington Post*, December 12, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/business/wp/2017/12/12/ups-and-others-warn-that-holiday-deliveries-are-already-falling-behind/?utm_term=.7177dde4cfd5.

[2] Amazing Clubs, <https://www.amazingclubs.com>.

[3] Patty Davis, "Man Shipped from New York to Texas in Crate," CNN, September 10, 2003, <http://www.cnn.com/2003/US/Southwest/09/09/plane.stowaway/index.html>.

[4] Chris Tomlin, vocalist, 2009, "Emmanuel (Hallowed Manger Ground)," by Chris Tomlin and Ed Cash, track 3 on *Glory in the Highest: Christmas Songs of Worship*, Ocean Way Recording.