



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – December 16, 2007

What Are We Waiting For?  
Dr. David Bartlett

## **Matthew 11:1-11**

*Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities. When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he."*

## **1 Corinthians 1:18-25**

*For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart." Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.*

### I.

Years and years ago my parents decided that we would travel from our home in Missouri to spend Christmas with my grandmother in New York state. However there was no way to get five people and a bundle of gifts into a Ford coupe, so the plan was that

we'd have most of our gifts at home and then exchange a few more when we got to New York.

For some reason I do not remember, however, we could not have a fixed day for the family Christmas. My suspicion is we were waiting for something to arrive from Montgomery Ward. So for what seemed like weeks I arose each morning, ran into my parents' room and asked: "Is it Christmas yet?"

That's John the Baptist's question. For years he's been waiting and hoping and even preaching that the Messiah was on the way. At first he was quite sure Jesus was the one he'd been looking for, but then for some reason Matthew doesn't remember John suddenly isn't quite sure. My suspicion is that John himself is in prison, awaiting execution and understandably that makes him a little doubtful that the Messianic Kingdom is really on its way.

"Is it Christmas yet?" John sends his disciples to ask Jesus himself. "Are you the one who's coming, or should we expect another. Is it Christmas yet?"

### II.

Jesus, of course, gives a very smart answer. "Say this to John, 'What are you waiting for? Look around and see—the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the gospel brought to them.'"

That is what we're taught to expect at Christmas, what we're taught to expect when Jesus comes. Matthew says so, at least in part. And we know what is supposed to happen this season. Zechariah and Elizabeth who haven't had children get a child. God chooses an unknown woman from an unknown town to bear the savior. Amahl limps toward Bethlehem with the night visitors and when he finds the baby Jesus he can walk, he can dance. George Bailey finds out that he's the luckiest man in the world. That old guy in Macy's on 34<sup>th</sup> Street really is Santa.

That's what we're waiting for: a miracle, a sign.

"Go tell John what you've heard and seen."

And it is good to wait for that and hope for that and pray for that because sometimes that is what we get.

My friend George Hughes was coming to retirement after a long and distinguished career as a scholar. He was looking forward to travel and writing and speaking. And then one day he suddenly couldn't walk or move his arms—could barely speak.

All of us in his church prayed and prayed. And George hoped and hoped. And the doctors and the nurses and the therapists just kept taking his legs and moving them and taking his hands and moving them until somehow the motion reconnected with the brain and his mind began to do what it used to do.

And he walked and traveled and wrote and spoke.

And of course it was science, and of course it was hard work, and of course it was prayer and of course it was God and only people fussier than John the Baptist have to figure out how much of the miracle is which.

"Is it Christmas yet?" we ask.

"What are you waiting for?"

For healing; for hope; for a turnaround; for a surprise. For a healed relationship or a healed body. For a few more years than I'd expected.

"All right then, go tell John the Baptist what you see and hear. Sometimes there are miracles, sometimes there are signs."

### III.

Sometimes. But sometimes the signs aren't so clear. Sometimes we're so busy looking and listening for the first part of Jesus' speech to John—the part about the miracles—that we forget the second part: "What's more," says Jesus, "What's most of all," says Jesus, "Is that those who need it most have good news preached to them.":

We have no idea whether either the apostle Paul or the Christians in the church he founded at Corinth knew this story about Jesus and John the Baptist.

But we do know that they were paying a lot of attention to the first part of Jesus' word to John and ignoring the last part. They were hoping for miracles and working miracles and seeking signs from heaven and even getting signs from heaven but they were not paying much attention to the good news that gets preached to those who most need it.

The most successful among them were almost appallingly full of Christmas cheer. "Look what we can do in Jesus' name," they said to Paul. "We work miracles and heal people. We speak in wonderful tongues, just like the angels. We're smarter than we used to be and more successful, too. You've got to love this Messiah business."

Of course that left out a fair number of Corinthians. Those who wanted to do healings and weren't very good at it. And those who wanted to be healed, and weren't so fortunate. Those who thought it would be nice to talk like angels, but always ended up talking like—well, like Corinthians. Those who hoped that being Christian would give them the answer to every one of life's questions and discovered that sometimes being Christian just handed them a new bunch of questions with no noticeable increase in brain power.

Paul said that while he understood what they were waiting for they weren't waiting for the most important thing:

"Now some of you are looking for miracles, and some of you are hoping for wisdom, but just like Jesus we are preaching good news to those who need it most.

"And here is what we preach: We preach Christ, crucified, a stumbling block to some people and foolishness to other people—but to you who really need it: Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God."

"Is it Christmas yet?"

"What are you waiting for?"

“For miracles and signs and astonishing reversals?  
Then maybe; maybe it’s Christmas.”

“For the good news of God’s arms stretched out on a cross—God’s love poured out for the world—God’s touch when we feel most abandoned and God’s comfort when we feel most hopeless...

“Then Christmas is always on the way.”

#### IV.

My friend David Grey was younger than I, and I was young back then. Just finished his PhD. Husband, father of three young children. More energy than anybody I have known before or since. Climbed up on the roof of the garage they were building to put up a tarp and keep out the rain and slipped and fell and the spinal cord was broken.

All of us at his church prayed, and his family prayed. David hoped and hoped. The doctors and the nurses and the therapists did all they could-- and he could not move his arms and he could not move his legs. And cannot to this day.

But some grace attended the absence of his hardiness. His faith deepened and his love for his family and friends and his courage. And he became for people handicapped like him not only friend but advocate.

Because when he needed it the most he heard the good news.

“Some of you are looking for signs. And some of you are seeking after wisdom,” said Paul, “Here’s what we preach: Christ crucified...God’s wisdom and God’s power.”

That’s what we’re waiting for.

#### V.

At the Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church in Oakland California one Holy Week some of the members of the church built a huge wooden cross with spaces among the boards. On Good Friday the cross stood there bare wood with a purple cloth.

But on Easter it was filled with Easter lilies.

Everybody liked that. A miracle; a sign.

Then came Christmas and foolishly perhaps the worship committee decorated the church again. And on Christmas when people entered the church they saw it again—the large wooden cross, filled with poinsettias.

“Whoa!” some of them said. “This is a happy time. Mangers. Shepherds. Candy Canes. No cross.”

Paul would have known what to say: Some of us seek shepherds and some of us seek wise men. And there’s nothing wrong with that: But one thing more.

We preach Christ crucified, that broken man—Christmas, Easter and all the days between—that broken man, Christ, the wisdom of God and the power of God.

#### VI.

Richard Lischer teaches preaching at Duke. He started out as the pastor of a small Lutheran church in Missouri.

His first week he was faced with his first crisis. Let him tell it:

“The telephone rang, about 3 A.M. “Pastor...Ed Franco. My Doral is here in St. Joe’s. Gall bladder’s rupturing. It’s not good; not good at all. We need you here if you can.”

Lischer found his way to the hospital in his new town.

“Are we glad to see you,” Ed said, as though I was about to make a difference.

“Once I came face to face with them I realized that I hadn’t brought a little book or any other tools for ministry. If there was a ritual for that situation, I didn’t know it. But I did take a good look at Doral, her hair slightly undone, expressive eyes moving from my face to Ed’s and back, her face and arms pasty with sweat. She was the most frightened person I had ever seen.

“They looked at me expectantly, but I didn’t know what to say or how to open a conversation....It was very quiet in that alcove.

What came finally was the fragment of a shared script: I said, “The Lord be with you”

To which Ed and Doral relied in unison: “And with thy spirit.”

I said, “Lift up your hearts.”

They said: “We lift them to the Lord.”

And suddenly the Lord himself became as palpable as Ed’s love for Doral. What was disheveled and panicky recomposed itself. The Lord assumed his rightful place as Lord of the Alcove, and the three of us wordlessly acknowledged his presence.”<sup>1</sup>

Christ crucified, the wisdom of God and the power of God.

That’s what we’re waiting for. **Amen.**

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Lischer, Open Secrets (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 61-63.