

**Sermon for Sunday, December 19, 2010**  
**Dr. Dan Doriani**  
**Long Expectation and Jesus:**  
**Dwelling with Us in Grace and Truth**  
**John 1:10-14, Romans 13:11-14**

**Expectation, Longing**

In 1908, Teddy Roosevelt ended his second term, as popular and beloved as any president since George Washington. A third term was his for the asking. But he honored America's anti-monarchical tradition and stepped down. He handed the Republican Party to his chosen successor, William Taft. But Taft disappointed Roosevelt and he decided, four years later, to reclaim the presidency. Rejected by the Republican Party, Roosevelt started the Progressive or Bull Moose Party.

He attracted adoring crowds and crazed assassins. Right before one speech, a man shot a bullet at Roosevelt's chest. The bullet broke through his coat, through a folded 50 page manuscript, through a steel case for his glasses, and through five inches of his massive chest before it lodged against his rib cage. He still gave the speech. And he still lost the election.

A skeptic might think Roosevelt lived a charmed life. Born to a prominent and wealthy family, blessed with a brilliant mind, a Harvard graduate, he was one of America's foremost field zoologists and genuine war hero, a colonel in his own war brigade – one known for dashing triumphs.

But there was more – or perhaps less. Roosevelt was a sickly, asthmatic child who beat his body and made it a suitable instrument for his will. In one forty-eight hour span, he became a father and watched both his wife and his mother die. His beloved brother, an alcoholic and morphine addict, died a little later.

Thirty years later, when Roosevelt lost that devastating election, his political allies repudiated him, his fans fell silent, his family kept still. He said, "Don't tell me about my future. My future is in the past." Roosevelt despaired and began a dangerous quest to find meaning in adventure and nearly died in the Amazon.

If this hero – warrior, scientist, explorer and president – could long for more, for meaning, who is immune? We feel this longing for more, for meaning, peace, and wholeness at Christmas, as much as ever. There is a long list of people who ache at Christmas. Let's start small:

- Everyone whose birthday is December 15-31 aches at Christmas.
- Everyone who lives far from home and can't make the trip aches at Christmas.
- Everyone who has no family, or a shattered family, suffers at memories past.
- If a family member died in this season, you may ache at Christmas.
- If your marriage and family is ruined, you suffer at Christmas.
- If you lost a job, if you lost a child, if you lost a dream, it hurts at Christmas.

Most of our heartaches make sense, but some pain is self-imposed. When we speak of *Christmas spirit*, some of us mean little more than sentimental *jolliness*, fueled by expensive *purchases*, choice food and alcohol. Let's not mistake food, consumption and time relaxing with the real spirit of Christmas. The real spirit of Christmas includes longing.

When Paul urged the church at Corinth to give to relieve a famine in Jerusalem, he urged meditation on Incarnation: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

Longing is a normal part of the spirit of Christmas. It's *normal*. There is the longing of the lonely, the wounded, and the bereaved. But even those who have experienced substantial healing can, should long for more. Some of us grew up in homes where Christmas was the *strangest* day of the year. In some homes a "strange" Christmas was good because a bad Christmas was truly disastrous.

Some of us married well or found good friends, and a better way to celebrate. Or to our surprise our family changed and life is now better. It's beautiful, but even in the Christmas most filled with love and laughter, we may ache for more. Even if we're perfectly content, we know it won't endure, so we long for more.

In this broken world, it's normal to experience longing. The opposite of longing isn't contentment, its apathy. But let's watch and pray that we long for the right things. John's gospel understands that longing, even in the Incarnation.

### John 1

John's gospel presents a theological account, a serious reflection, on the Incarnation. We don't use John so much at Christmas. It doesn't lend itself to Christmas pageants: no manger, no Joseph, no Mary, shepherds, angels or wise men, no friendly beasts. But Jesus is there. His star shines brightly, even if it's partially hidden by moon clouds. For John says the good news is partially obscured from the start.

John 1:10: "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not know [recognize] him." *Jesus created* the world and *sustains* it daily. Yet when he entered his world, his people didn't welcome him. They said "Who are *you*? Who gave *you* authority?"

John 1:11: "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him." In the original, the two words "his own" are slightly different the two times they appear. We can express it like this: Jesus came to his own creation/home, but his own people, especially the sons of Abraham, did not receive him. This whole world and especially the people of Israel, belongs to Jesus, but most of them did not receive him – not initially anyway.

Imagine: a man has vacation home. He falls ill and lets a succession of friends use his home. Finally healthy, he returns to this second home. His guests greet him at door, hands on hips, "Who are *you*? Jesus' people, with all the promises, should have been first to receive him, but no....

Not that *everyone* rejected him. John 1:12: "To all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God." If we know Jesus' name - his character, claims and promises - and trust him, we gain the right to become God's children. Not just his *creatures*, more than his image. His *children*, under his Fatherly care.

The climax of John's meditation on the Incarnation comes in John 1:14: "The Word became flesh and *made his dwelling* among us."

The word became flesh. Not "he assumed human form" – the Greco-Roman had myths of the gods briefly taking human form. They would have accepted that. They had ideas that the gods *spoke* in certain places, such as sacred hills, that is oracle at Delphi. For millennia, people believed that gods inhabited temples, their houses on earth. People presented gifts and sacrifices there. They believed their god could exercise his power there, to help them.

But no one believed gods really take flesh. Apparitions, houses that contain the god's presence of power – yes. But incarnation as a real man? That's new.

Our translation says Jesus "made his dwelling among us." Literally, John says he "tented, or pitched his tent, or tabernacled among us - and we beheld his glory." This marked the fulfillment of a long-standing hope.

### **The Expectation of Jesus: God dwelling with us**

In the beginning, when God created mankind, Adam and Eve walked with God. They communed freely. They knew God's personal presence and peace.

When Adam and Eve rebelled, they hid from God. They were no longer at ease in his presence. His gaze was painful. For a time, described in Genesis 5-11, humans multiplied, spread out, forgot God, did as they pleased, and sank into evil. God was present to all peoples, in all places, but he didn't focus on one people or place. In Genesis 12, that changed.

In Genesis 12 the Lord began a new approach to humanity. He called Abraham, gave him and his wife Sarah a family that grew, over centuries, until it became a nation. They saw God deliver them from bondage in Egypt. They heard his promises and laws and lived in his land. The tabernacle was part of that.

### **The tabernacle**

From the beginning, we see hints of the local in God's dealings with humanity. God's garden, the home of Adam and Eve, was in a place with a name – Eden.

When Israel became a nation, God's nation, he localized himself far more. He lived in the land of Canaan, in a tent. Most nations had temples, often many temples, but Israel had a tent for hundreds of years. It was a beautiful tent, to be sure, but a mere tent – a humble dwelling. It cried out for more. It moved at times, suggesting that God is not under human control, in one place, versus the idea "God is in this place – not in others."

The tabernacle had many roles and it pointed to Jesus in many ways. We'll see that the tabernacle points first to the life of Christ, and then to the future presence of Christ – for the best is yet to come. So: Jesus pitched his tent; he tabernacled with us, at the Incarnation. What does that teach us?

### **Tabernacle says: God dwells with humanity**

First, the tabernacle was a temporary dwelling, a tent. Jesus lived with his family for thirty years and with his disciples for three years. It was *temporary*. He told them "In a little while, you will see me no more" (John 16:16). He left them once, when he died on the cross. The Father soon raised him back to life and he spent several more weeks with his disciples, but then he left again. Jesus took human flesh and life, but as "pitching his tent" suggests, it was for a while.

In the present, Jesus often feels distant. People ask, "If Jesus is still present, why don't we see it, feel it more?" We have his Spirit, who comforts us. We want more than, but we're doing better than we realize. Still, we long for more. No matter how much things improve, we long for more.

Spiritually, we still have sleepless nights – even though life is much better now that Jesus has come. Again life is better, but we long for more – more of Jesus. And we shall receive more. When Jesus returns, he will dwell with us a second time, and it will be permanent. The "new Jerusalem" will come down "from heaven, from God."

Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away (Rev. 21:3-4).

### **Tabernacle says: Beautiful, but not splendid**

Again, Jesus pitched his tent or tabernacled and that illumines Christmas. How? Second, the tabernacle was beautiful but not splendid, grandiose. The gospels have no physical description of Jesus. The Bible says Joseph and David were handsome, that Rachel and Esther were beautiful, but there is no hint that Jesus looked special. Isaiah 53:2 says, "He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." Jesus was a real man, and real men don't have halos of glowing light over their heads.

Yet one day, Jesus will shine in all his glory. In Rev. 1:16, John shares his vision of Christ in glory, "his face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance."

Revelation ends with another vision of Jesus in his splendor. It says God's servants will worship him and the Lamb – Jesus: "They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever" (Rev. 22:4-5).

The beauty of this is that Jesus will not be a distant king. He will be our friend. We will see him clearly "face to face" in all his splendor (1 Cor 13:12).

### **Tabernacle says: We meet with God**

The tabernacle presents a third aspect of the incarnation and our hope for more. In the tabernacle God met his people. There were actually two tents where this happened in the Old Testament. The tent of meeting, mentioned less often, illustrates the point too. In Exodus 33:7-11, we read:

"Now Moses used to take a tent and pitch it outside the camp some distance away, calling it the 'tent of meeting.' Anyone inquiring of the LORD would go to the tent of meeting outside the camp." Moses used to go to that tent and when he did, the people rose and watched and the Lord "would come down" and speak with Moses. "The LORD would speak to Moses *face to face*, as a man speaks with his friend." We long to speak to God face to face, without fear.

The Incarnation gave a strong taste of this to the disciples. The gospels suggest that Peter, James and John were his best friends, especially beloved. The gospels let us experience this as *we meet Jesus* in the stories from his life, in accounts of his sermons and conversations. Right now we can see God in Scripture and meet him in prayer, but we do long for more, to be God's friend and have conversation face-to-face. But we long for more – and we shall have it. We will see him face-to-face.

### **Tabernacle says: worship and sacrifice**

The fourth lesson from the tent of God and Jesus pitching his tent is the greatest. The tabernacle was a place for sacrifices. There were sacrifices that celebrated God's provision, but the main sacrifice was for sin. See it this way: The sacrifices made God's presence possible. The tabernacle presented this in many ways:

White linen curtains were prominent in tabernacle. White is the color of purity; God is pure and holy; all that stands in his presence must be holy. Purple fabrics signified God's royalty. Accents of silver and

gold presented his lordship of all and his power to bless. The blue possibly signified his transcendence. Above all the white linens lead to the red, for blood must be shed to atone for human sin.

That's why Jesus came and pitched his tent with us. Matt 20:28 says, he "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Hebrews 10:12 says Jesus, "offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God." In the tabernacle, the priests placed blood on the "mercy seat" to show they had covered the sins of the people, at God's command. But since Jesus chose to dwell with us, there is *no more sacrifice*.

Yet there is more to come – a day when there will be no need of sacrifice. Jesus will dwell with us again. Then all that we taste in part will be ours in full. 1 John 3:2 says, "We are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" and that includes holiness.

### **Tabernacle: A place of worship**

Because Jesus pitched his tent with us, we can worship him. After the resurrection, Thomas saw Jesus, it drove his doubts away and he worshipped. We worship, often joyfully. But not always. Some songs, some sermons don't resonate. We long for more. But one day our worship will be joyful and effortless. With one difference – no more confessions of sin. We long for that!

Longing is part of the human condition. We long for healing of brokenness. We want everything that's good to go deeper, last longer. Yet there is more. As John says, still in 1:14, "We have seen his glory, the glory of the only begotten, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." To grace and truth we turn.

### **Grace and Truth**

*Joy to the World* is a classic advent hymn. It's filled with longing – "Let earth receive her king." It calls for the end of sin and sorrow; it declares what is not yet true "He rules the world." Because it focuses on the rule of Christ it can put truth before grace, in the line "He rules the world with truth and grace." But we need grace to come first. John says Jesus is full of grace and truth. How so?

### **The provision of grace in space and time**

Jesus became flesh in the right place at the right time. He accomplished everything necessary for our redemption and restoration.

- He lived righteously and gave, imputed, his righteousness to us.
- He is God's Son and granted us the right to become God's sons and daughters.
- He died to sin that we might die to sin. He was raised so he can raise us to live as citizens of his kingdom forever.

### **How shall we live in the time of longing?**

Our theme is longing, yet we need to consider how we can claim it now. Romans 13 says, "The hour has come for you to wake up from your slumber, because our salvation is nearer now than when we first believed" (13:11). Hear Paul: We live in this age of longing, but Jesus has inaugurated the age to come. We see glimmers of the future, the reign of Christ, but it is not yet here in full.

The believer therefore lives between the time when sin reigns and the time when the reign of Christ breaks through in full. It's no time for complacency, no time to return to the former life of darkness. We must wake up (13:11a). Our salvation draws near (13:11b). The night, the darkness of this age is yielding

to the day of Christ (13:12a). We ought to live that way. We must live in the light, in the daytime, dressed in "the armor of light" so we can live like heirs of the age to come (13:12b).

Paul says Christians shun an immoral lifestyle. He mentions drunkenness, debauchery, and dissension (13:13). Sometime Christians long to sin, to go back to old ways. But we should guide and control our longings. We should long to live like the people we are – recipients of grace and truth, headed for the day when we will dwell with Jesus forever.

David Wilcox is a songwriter who understands longing. In 1993 he wrote about loneliness. "When I get lonely ah, that's only a sign. If I feel hollow - that's just my proof that there's more." In 2003, he wrote *Ask for More*: Something is wrong, but it's impossible to label. Life is good, it's fine, no reason to complain. The days are good, but "you lie awake at night." What's missing? Even though "you're not alone, you wake up lonely. You felt this way before" and the time is past to dismiss it. Evanescent fragrances hint at another world. Your beautiful dreams make the day feel empty. It's time to "ask for more."

**Christmas is the season for longing:** Kids for presents – toys, games, sports, and electronics. Often filled, though sometimes they get too many sweaters. Adults get too many sweaters too, but our longings are more complicated:

- We may hope to recapture, recreate sweet innocence and joy of youth.
- We may hope to create the traditional Christmas we never knew.
- We may long to recapture happiness we had five, ten, fifteen years ago.

For some of us Christmas is the happiest time of year. For others it is the saddest. But we all long for more and rightly so, because there is more. We will be with Jesus longer, with more glory, with no more sacrifices for sin. We will experience the full healing of the new creation.

From 1700 to 1850 England had a windows tax, a tax on light and air, some called it. It compromised the freedom of the poor to enjoy light and air. How people must have longed for windows, for free light and air. One day it returned. So it is with us. Enjoy Christmas, but evaluate your longings. Long for the right things – for more of the presence and the abiding work of the Lord in your life.