

Are You Ready?

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Preached at the Lower Merion Baptist Church

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Hebrews 10:5-10

"...we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all"

4th Sunday of Advent

Movement 1 – We are almost there!

We are almost there! We're down to the wire! We are a mere hours from the very moment, from the time that we have all been waiting for with expectation, with anticipation and with bated breath. We are almost there! Maybe some of you are giddy, some of you are excited, some of you are frazzled, and some of you are waiting for that moment when the big day is past and you can start to clean up the decorations, stop listening to "Jingle Bell Rock" and return to the hustle and bustle of daily life. We are so close, we can taste it, and we can feel it! We're almost there, we're almost at Christmas!

We're almost there. We are checking our lists, we are cleaning our homes, we are wrapping those last presents, and we are full of those final moments of planning, preparation and celebration. We are getting ready to travel to see family or waiting for family to arrive. We are frantically looking over the store shelves for that one last present we forgot to buy; we are trying to wrap that final box with the inches of wrapping paper we have left. We are almost there.

It is exciting to be this close to Christmas. You can feel the energy in the room, like we are children strung up on sugar, or like an elementary school class the week before summer vacation. It's hard to sit and concentrate on the sermon. It's hard to get our minds through the hymns. We have been waiting and preparing for this day for more than a month, and here we are, so close. It reminds me of cliché husband/father when his first child is born. This is someone who has planned, and prepared for the moment when the child will be born down to the final detail. He has mapped out three different routes, he has programmed four different phones with their doctor's number, the pediatrician's number, the hospital's number, and his mother-in-law's number. There is always sitting next to the door the bag of clothes, waiting to go into the car. He won't let the car have less than a half of a tank of gas. He has even run through drills for when that moment happens and the baby arrives. Yet when that moment does occur, the husband and father to be is a bumbling idiot, running around frantically trying to remember to grab everything. The father runs to the car and puts the bag in the car, and runs back into the house. Then the father runs to the car and puts the car seat for the soon to be born child in the car and runs back into the house. Then the father runs to the car and puts the keys in the car and runs back into the house. He looks at his wife, and asks "what am I forgetting?" picks up a map, runs to the car and pulls out of the driveway. Two minutes later, he pulls back into the driveway, runs into the house, grabs his wife, and back to the car and to the hospital.

Is this how you feel, so close to Christmas? This frantic, giddy, breakneck kind of pace, trying to make sure that everything is prepared and ready? This loss of control and reason? You should feel this way, because we are down to the wire. We are in our final moments. We are almost there.

Movement 2 – Loosing Sight of the Goal (God)

Do you remember what it is that we are waiting for? Do you remember why we have been waiting in the first place? Advent is to be a time of waiting, but do we remember for what we wait? Maybe it is the festivities themselves. A recent Gallup pole suggested that what the majority of Americans enjoy the most about Christmas is getting together with family. Or maybe it is the presents, or the well cooked food, or the day off from the normal rush of our lives. But is this what we are truly waiting for? Here, as people gathered proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ, are we just waiting for a day of presents, a day of family gathering, and

a day of cooking? It sounds enticing, it sounds good, but there must be something more. Do you remember what it is that we are waiting for?

It is easy to lose sight of the goal. It is easy to get so excited, to get so caught up in the hustle and bustle of the season's celebrations that one can lose sight of that which we are waiting for. It often feels like our culture has taken the room that holds everything about Christmas, and put up a new covering of wallpaper. Wallpaper of presents, trees, lights and carols, and it is easy to see only what society has plastered for us to see. When we spend time searching for presents, when we spend time finding the perfect tree, when we spend time getting worked up over creating the perfect batch of Christmas cookies, it is easy to lose sight of the goal. We have papered the Christmas that we as Christians are waiting for with a Christmas the world is waiting for, and we may forget why we are waiting.

It reminds me of the famed and infamous Hatfield and McCoy feud. This was a feud that lasted for years and years. Two families that were once at peace with each other were taught to hate each other, to kill each other and at a point the different families forgot why they were feuding for the first place. They forgot why they had so much hate and so much resentment. All they knew was they were supposed to hate each other; they lost sight of the reason, they lost sight of why. They were just wired to hate. Now we aren't involved in a feud, we aren't trying to kill each other, but we are wired to look for presents, to look for cheer and decorations, and do we remember why? Can we see what is behind the world's wallpaper in the room of Christmas? Do we remember why we are so excited, do we remember why we are so frantic, or are we just following what we have been wired to do? Are we just doing what we are taught to do? Have we lost sight of the goal, the reason, and what it is that we are waiting for?

When this epistle, the letter to the Hebrews, was written, it was written to a community that was struggling to remember, embrace, and live as a people proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It was a community that formed only 50 to 60 years after Christ, but they were already trying to remind themselves exactly why they should be excited about Christ. Were they excited because Christ was another prophet? Were they following Christ because he was fully God and fully human? Were they following Christ because he healed some people? What about the cross, what about the resurrection? What did these events mean to their faith? In the midst of their questions, this letter reminds them, calls them, and turns their vision to look again at what Christ does, and why it is that we are excited about Christ. This letter takes the room of faith and of Christianity, and puts up paper that speaks to the life, the struggles, the power and the grace of Jesus Christ for all to see. It reminds us.

We need to remind ourselves again and again what it is that we are excited about. We need to stop for a moment, and look up at the cross and remember why it is that we are so excited about Christmas. I recently looked up on the internet quotes about Christmas. I found quotes about "good cheer," quotes about "friendship" quotes about "being nice to each other, humanity shining for a moment, good feelings and warmth." These are nice ideas, these are good sentiments, but these ideals and sentiments do not reach to what it is that we truly are waiting for. The scripture from Hebrews does not point to just good cheer, and happy holiday feelings, but goes deeper. I found very few quotes about Jesus. I did not find much that mentioned how we are waiting, longing, looking, and expecting the birth of Christ. Have we lost sight of the goal?

We need to tear down the wallpaper of the world, and see the wallpaper of the Lord. We need to see again the story of the birth, the life, and the resurrection of our savior, to remember what it is that we are waiting for, and how our lives are changed because of Christmas. Have we lost sight of the goal? Do we remember what it is we are waiting for?

Movement 3 – Why We are Waiting

We are waiting for redemption. We are waiting for forgiveness, we are waiting for sanctification, and we are waiting for salvation. This may not be something we want to focus on in this time of year, but we all

need to be forgiven. We would rather focus on whether or not our lives merited a good gift or a lump of coal. We would rather consider our lives based on merit and a list that a certain someone is checking. But when we step out of that story, and into the story of the Lord, we think about our lives in a deeper, more profound way. We think about redemption, sanctification, and salvation. We are waiting for redemption.

The early Christians were reminded why they were waiting for redemption. Often they wondered if they were right in the eyes of the Lord. Often they wondered if they were redeemed. The author of Hebrews reminded them of the way things used to be in the Jewish culture. He reminded them of the priest who would go to the temple every year, every month, every week, and every day, and would offer a sacrifice on behalf of the people. This was the assurance given to the people that they were probably justified in the eyes of the Lord. The priest would tell the people that they could live today without the weight of yesterday's sin, the sacrifice had been made. Yet today the people could still fall, the people could still hesitate to do God's will, the people could still hold back in helping others. Questions would linger in their minds, "What if the priest's sacrifice was not enough? What if their sin was too much? How could they know if they were free?" Many focused on the ritual. Maybe they looked for the priest who would say the nicest liturgy. Maybe they would look for the prettiest temples and hope those would appease God more. Imagine living with this weight, with this burden, trying to always please God to avoid punishment. They were waiting, daily, for redemption.

We need to be redeemed. This is a basic human condition; it is a basic part of who we are, and we desire to be forgiven. The majority of the characters in the movie *All About Eve* are flawed, selfish and despicable. Especially the seemingly innocent Eve. Eve initially portrays herself as someone who is pure and naive, but in the end of the movie we see her as someone who manipulates and twists her way to stardom. These characters are all flawed, they are all selfish, and they are all human. A compelling part of the movie is when we realize that these characters are not far from you and me. We have moments of selfishness, we have moments of anger, we have moments of hatred, we have moments of despair. We have our moments of fallenness, and we want to be free from our own fears, of our own shortcomings, and our own failings. Yet we can find ourselves with the early Christians wondering what ritual do we need to perform, what animal do we need to sacrifice, what kind of gift do we need to give to pay for our debts.

And maybe we are afraid of really living, because we are afraid of failing. Maybe we are afraid of truly following God, of fully living into the life that God has given us, because we are afraid of not living to the fullest. Maybe we find ourselves paralyzed to walk the way that God calls us to walk because we are afraid that we will fail, we are afraid that we will be rejected, we are afraid that we are not worthy. Paul Tillich said it is because the basic human condition is to be limited, to be aware of our limitations, and to allow those limitations to hold us back. Karl Rahner said it was because we are separated from God, and we make life choices to continue in our separation from God. Karl Barth said it was because we are not free to say no to sin, that we are compelled by the world to sin, and we cannot find ourselves saying yes to God. We are compelled; we are stuck in a life of sin with little hope, because the call of the world is so strong, and it is hard to resist that call.

It is like we imagine God with a list, checking it twice and noting how much we neglect to follow God's way and we are afraid. Maybe we are afraid of a punishment; maybe we are afraid of breaking our relationship with God. Maybe we are afraid of letting God, our neighbor, and ourselves down. We can buy presents to pay God off, but we know we can't get a nice enough present. Even the sacrifice will only give us peace of mind for a while. We want to know that we are worthy; we want to know that we can be sanctified. We are waiting for our redemption.

Movement 4 – The Actions that Change Everything

But we need to remember what it is that Christ is going to do in his life. We need to remember what Christ does for you and for me in our lives. This letter to the Hebrews reminds the community why Christ is important, why Christ is necessary for their lives. It reminds us as well, why Christ is important and why Christ

is necessary. Christ came to a people trapped, caught in a cycle of sacrifice, of offering “sorry” gifts to God on an almost daily basis, but not living into the life that God gave them. Christ came and reminded them, and reminds us of the words from the Psalm (40:6-9),

Sacrifice and offering you do not desire,
But you have given me an open ear.
Burnt offering and sin offering
You have not required.
Then I said, “Here I am;
In the scroll of the book it is written of me.
I delight to do you will, O my God;
Your law is within my heart.

Christ invoked these words, and then lived them out. The author of Hebrews places these words on Christ’s lips as an explanation for Christ’s life. He offered his life as a life of perfect obedience to God. He showed a way that goes beyond the sacrifice of animals. He showed the way that goes beyond ritual and offerings. The offering that Christ gave to God was an offering of his life, of his obedience, and of his love. His obedience to God’s will led to suffering, but Christ did not waver. The waves of the world beat against him, pulling at him, but Christ did not turn or fall. His obedience to God’s will led to death, but Christ did not waver. He was mocked, he was ridiculed, he was crucified, but Christ stayed true to the life that God called him to live. Even now, we need to remember that this is the life that Christ will live; we need to remember what Christ is going to do.

We need to remember the obedience and the purity of Christ’s life. He held to his relationship with God, even when others try to set him apart. I think of the movie, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*. In the beginning of the movie, Alec Guinness’ character, Col. Nicholson, endured several days of beating and imprisonment because he believed in a strict adherence to the Geneva Convention. His obedience to a code and to his troops led to his suffering, yet he did not waver.

In a similar way, Christ’s obedience led to his suffering. This is what Christ is going to do, to be obedient to God, to the point of suffering, to the point of death. We need to remember this as we prepare for this evening. We need to remember this as we rush to finalize the preparations. We need to remember how Christ will be the one to speak truth to the power of the temple. How Christ will be the one to give sight to a blind man. How Christ will be the one to defend an adulterous woman. How Christ will be the one to call the people to love, to peace, to mercy, and to kindness. We need to remember how Christ will be the one to raise Lazarus from the dead, to be so bold as to speak the Word of God to the people, and to accept their angry reaction with love and kindness. We need to remember the way in which Christ is going to walk and the life that Christ is going to live. As we wait these last couple of hours, we need to remember who Christ is going to be and what Christ is going to do in his life.

Movement 5 – Sanctification Offered

And we need to remember how our lives are changed because of Christ. We need to remember that because of the baby whose birth we celebrate tomorrow, we have been redeemed and we will be redeemed. We need to remember that because of the baby, we have been forgiven and we will be forgiven. We need to remember that our lives are changed and freed because of who Christ is and what Christ does in his life.

This is exactly what the author of Hebrews is doing. He is reminding the early Christians of what Christ has done, and how their lives have changed. He is reminding the early Christians that through Christ a new time has been brought in, a second order which abolishes the first order. The first order was one of sacrifice, of payment, and of ritual. He is reminding the early Christians that through the actions of Christ, we no longer need to sacrifice, we no longer need to be afraid, and we no longer need to doubt ourselves. This is the second

order, an order that is not married to the law, but that rests on grace. In his commentary on this letter, Thomas Long, suggests that the author of Hebrews was claiming that because of Christ, we are forgiven and sacrifice is no longer needed. Through the actions of Christ, sanctification, holiness, is offered. Through Christ, people are redeemed.

This is for us as well. We are sanctified, we are made holy, and we are made righteous through the obedience of Christ. We are given a “get out of jail free” card that we can use for the rest of our lives. We are shown the right way to live, the right path to walk, and when we stumble, we don’t have to go back to the beginning, we don’t have to pay another sacrifice to start over, but instead we can get up and continue to walk the path before us, set by Christ. Our lives are changed because of Christ, through Christ and in Christ.

Have you ever felt that pull from God to do something but you were afraid to try? Maybe you saw someone who looked alone, who looked scared, and who looked like they needed the grace of Jesus Christ in their life. Yet you held back because you didn’t know the right words to say. Or you didn’t think you would be the best messenger for God. You held back because you didn’t think you were worthwhile and you were afraid. Christ casts out this fear. Christ shows us a new way of trusting, and taking a chance. Trust that God will work with you, that God will be with you and take a chance in your life. You are freed from your fear, you are freed from you guilt because of Jesus Christ.

This new order that Hebrews talks about reminds us that we are children of God, called by God and blessed by God. You can live without fear. You can serve God without fear. You can walk with Christ without fear, because Christ has already made you holy through what he has done. This we need to remember. This we need to celebrate. When we gather around the manger, when we gather around the cross, we need to remember how our lives have been changed through Christ.

Movement 6 – What we really are waiting for

It begins with the birth of the child. This new order, this redemption, this sanctification, begins with the birth of the child. That is what we are waiting for.

We are waiting for Christ to be born, to come into the world, to walk among us, and to show us this new path, this new way of living. That is what we are waiting for.

We are waiting for the moment when we can walk with Christ, and live his obedience with him. When we can, without fear or shame say that we are a child of God, loved and blessed. That is what we are waiting for.

We are waiting for the moment when we can fully embrace the power, the miracle and the majesty of Christmas. That God, becoming a human, is born. That God, becoming human, will redeem. When we can humbly creep up to the manger, and look at the wood, and remember what someone once said that the wood from the manger and the wood from the cross are cut from the same tree. That is what we are waiting for.

We are waiting for the moment to reach in and hold the child that is the Son of God, the redeemer of us all and realize what the birth of Christ means – our salvation. That is what we are waiting for.

We are waiting for the moment when we can say the words of the song by Mark Lowry and Buddy Green, “Mary Did You Know?”

Mary, did you know
That your baby boy will one day walk on water?
Did you know
That your baby boy will save our sons and daughters?
Did you know
That your baby boy has come to make you new?
This child that youve delivered
Will soon deliver you

Mary, did you know
That your baby boy will give sight to a blind man?
Did you know
That your baby boy will calm a storm with his hand?
Did you know
That your baby boy has walked where angels trod?
And when you kiss your little boy
Youve kissed the face of god

Mary, did you know?
The blind will see
The deaf will hear
And the dead will live again
The lame will leap
The dumb will speak
The praises of the lamb

Mary, did you know
That your baby boy is lord of all creation?
Did you know
That your baby boy will one day rules the nations?
Did you know
That your baby boy is heavens perfect lamb?
This sleeping child youre holding
Is the great I am

We are waiting for the birth of our savior. We are waiting for the birth of our king. Are you ready for that moment, for that power, for that birth which is upon us? For that is what we are waiting for.

AMEN