

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

What a wild-eyed radical John the Baptist was – and he spoke with such spiritual clarity and authority that a good many of his listeners sensed that his message was sent direct from God. Large crowds came out to hear John thunder with hard-hitting truths. "You brood of vipers!" he shouted to the gathered sinners, which was everybody.

And to those who thought that their family's genealogy made them special and immune from such criticism, he said, "Don't think your special heritage makes a difference to God. Even if Abraham is your ancestor, what difference does that make to God? If God chose to do so, he could take these stones around you and make them into children of Abraham!"

"Remember," he went on, "every tree ... that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire." John called for genuine repentance, for truly getting right with God, and for being baptized to start a new life. And many did just that.

Sensing John's passion and spiritual depth, some in his day began to wonder if he was not the long-awaited Savior. Regarding their wonderment, Luke wrote, "As the people were filled with expectation ... all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah."

But let's focus now on "The people (who) were filled with expectation ...." Considering the plight of the people of Israel in that day, this was very understandable. They needed hope. Their country, you'll recall, was under the oppressive, clenched-fisted rule of Rome.

When a Roman leader gave an order, Jews had to obey or suffer the consequences. Rows of bodies hanging on crosses spoke frighteningly of the price to be paid for disobedience or treason.

Jews were free, however, to practice their religion. The Romans left religious practices up to the Jewish religious leaders. Unfortunately, many of those leaders were rather hardhearted themselves. They developed all sorts of nitpicking rules – legalisms – which they expected ordinary people to strictly obey.

Perhaps you'll remember Jesus' condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees. Jesus said, "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them" (Matthew 23:4). Such mean-spirited practices made life miserable for ordinary Jews.

No wonder then that as the people listened to John the Baptist, they began to have a glimmer of hope. They were indeed "filled with expectation," hoping that John was the Messiah who would deliver them from the Romans and free them from their abusive religious leaders as well.

They began to ask one another, “Do you think that John might be the Messiah?”

It’s important to briefly consider what the Jews expected to happen once the Messiah came. Many believed that the Messiah would come with great spiritual and political power.

He would be the world ruler, would wipe out evil, would bring about the peaceful coexistence of all peoples. He would rebuild the temple where they could freely worship and make their lives better in every way. A whole new world would come into being.

Nothing was of more importance for the Jews than the coming of the Messiah. Still today, Orthodox Jews cling firmly to that great expectation. They take seriously the prophet Zechariah’s prediction: “The Lord will become king over all the earth; on that day the Lord will be one and his name one” (Zechariah 14:9). Many cling to that hope.

But what about us? What is the great expectation of Christians? For what do we Christians hope? Well, we don’t have to wait for the coming of the Messiah. The whole New Testament affirms that the Messiah has already come! Jesus was and is the Messiah, the Savior of the world.

The proof for us is the resurrection of Jesus from the dead.

We follow Peter’s testimony on the day of Pentecost. He said to a crowd gathered in Jerusalem, “Let the entire house of Israel (referring to all Jews) know with certainty that God has made him (Jesus) both Lord and Messiah ...” (Acts 2:36).

And since we believe that the Messiah has come, what is our hope for today? Well, we expect the hand of God to be at work in the world. We work for the spread of the kingdom of God on earth as we so often pray. Finally, we look for the ultimate victory of Christ over all.

You and I can expect to see – if we carefully use our spiritual eyes – God at work here and now. For us, God is not like a deadbeat father who helps bring children into the world, then goes off to leave them without any support, love, guidance or hope from him.

Yes, at times in the world, it seems as if the worst inmates of a criminal ward have been set free to wreak whatever havoc they choose. We see unspeakable atrocities, deeds so heinous we dare not describe them lest we all become sick at heart. We may wonder if we can ever find solutions for the world’s problems.

But at the same time, we know something for certain: We know that God is definitely at work, that God’s kingdom will come to fulfillment, and God’s victory is certain. That is Christ’s promise.

In our hymnals, we find songs filled with great expectations. Consider Martin Luther's victorious "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God." Two of his lines put us on the right track:

A mighty fortress is our God, a sword and shield  
victorious; He breaks the cruel oppressor's rod and wins  
salvation glorious.

One may wonder how Luther could ever have had such hope. He was ridiculed, belittled, hated, and repeatedly threatened. He had to be hidden to keep from being physically hurt or killed. He went into secret isolation in Wartburg Castle until it was safe for him to openly continue his work.

Still, he kept his faith in a righteous God. He translated the Bible into German, he preached, he taught, wrote wonderful hymns, and never doubted that God was at work. The last line of "A Mighty Fortress" puts it well:

Though life be wrenched away, They cannot win the day.  
The Kingdom's ours forever!

Yes, God's kingdom is indeed ours forever. Nothing can obliterate it. Even if hate-crazed people let loose weapons of mass destruction, even if evil people on earth try to bring about the end of life as we know it, we can believe that God knows his own, and God will take care of them forever.

God's kingdom is a spiritual realm. Therefore, it is indestructible and everlasting. The book of Hebrews calls it "a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (Hebrews 12:28).

The New Testament looks forward to God's ultimate victory, to the time when "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign for ever" (Revelation 11:15).

And it is Christmas that reminds us of the hope we have and the victory of God we await. Whenever we feel downhearted about the condition of the world, we should remember Christmas!

When goodness and mercy and love seem so remote, we should remember Christmas! When we feel lonely or rejected, we should remember Christmas! God has given us the birth of a special child to offer us hope, joy, and belief in God's ultimate victory.

The earliest Christians had a habit of hope, and we, too, should have this same "habit of hope." Our hope should be constant and eternal because God who invaded earth in the person of a tiny baby so long ago still comes quietly in God's own way. And the full victory over all evil will be God's in the end of time.

During World War II, Pastor Martin Niemöller, a jailed German Lutheran clergyman who opposed Adolph Hitler, was permitted to conduct a service of worship behind bars on Christmas Eve.

He began by saying, “When Christmas is celebrated in captivity, it is naturally a dismal affair.”

But then he asked his listeners to hear the prophet Isaiah’s hope about the coming Messiah. And among the words he read were these: “His name shall be called Immanuel, meaning God is with us” (Isaiah 7:14).

This hopeful pastor finally said to his fellow prisoners: “We are not alone amid the horrors of these years, cut off though we are from the outside world. We are in the hands of God – the God of Jesus Christ, who is with us in this dark and lonely place, to uphold and comfort us and keep hope alive in our hearts.”

This is our belief, our hope, our great expectation, as well. Because God came in Christ, we may believe that God will always come to be with us in our need. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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