

The Prophets' Light

How Christmas Can Light Your Way

Isaiah 40:1-5; Luke 2:22-35

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Bethany Church

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Does Christmas get hectic for any of you? Some times the tasks in preparation for the holidays are overwhelming and must be divided up. More than once, some unsuspecting husband has been sent out to buy the family's Christmas tree and has returned with a tree that was less than awe-inspiring, even somewhat unappreciated. The famed relationship guru and marital therapist, David Letterman, offers us four warnings about buying Christmas trees. Men, we're not to bring home a tree that is *two feet tall and forty feet wide*. Letterman doesn't explain why, but we can trust him. If the family requests a small tree, he suggests that we pass on *one that can be hung and has "air freshener" stamped on it*. If it looks suspiciously like a broom handle with a lot of coat hangers, we better keep looking. Finally, he recommends that you move on to a new lot *when the salesman's opening line is, "You're not a cop, are you?"*

I don't know how much light about Christmas trees you gained today. I don't think a lot; but we'll do better, much better as we look at the Bible. We all need light. There is light that comes from a candle or an incandescent bulb. Such light illumines our surroundings and offers us direction. There is also a light that comes in words of truth. Truth illuminates and exposes our surroundings. Truth offers us direction. Today we began lighting candles about an Advent Wreath. I believe that these candles offer us more than a nice custom. They, along with the Scriptures they celebrate, can provide an invaluable perspective.

The first candle of the wreath is the Prophecy Candle. It tells you and me something awesome. God wants you and me to know some things that won't be discerned by observation. There is more to life than what we can understand with our senses and reason. There are things that God alerts us to by speaking prophetically.

Dr. Robert Tuttle is one of the United Methodist Church's greatest scholars and leaders; and I'm grateful to have him as a friend. Eight years ago I brought him to Tracy. He

shared with my congregation a personal experience. Bob shared about a flight to Detroit where words kept reverberating through his mind: *"If you will commit your work to me, I will enlarge your ministry."* He felt that it was a message from God for his seat-mate. He fought that notion for awhile, but finally struck up a conversation with the passenger next to him and chatted for a spell. In time, Bob mustered up enough courage to say something like this:

I'm a Christian and feel like God has something he wants you to hear. It goes like this: "If you will commit your work to me, I will enlarge your ministry." Does that mean anything to you?

The man broke down and cried. For a time he just sat there and wept. Then he explained that he had been trying to hang onto his business, and through Bob's words, God gave him some specific direction and reassurance.

I remember one of my parishioners, who was disturbed by this story, questioned Dr. Tuttle. He asked, *"What is it about you that is different from me? Why does God speak to you in such clear and dramatic ways and not me?"* Bob's response was short and profound. He said, **"IT'S ALL A MATTER OF EXPECTATIONS!"**

That's what prophecy is all about. It's about changing our expectations. We know that expectations dominate what we experience. Have you ever seen a shark in an aquarium? You can find these predators swimming around with other fish that normally serve as their food, and yet they won't touch them. Do you know why? They place a transparent insert in the tank and every time those sharks go after a fish, they hit the insert. Soon they won't chase the fish, and the insert is removed. In the same way, fleas are trained not to jump out of a jar. For a time the fleas try, but they keep hitting a lid. Soon they learn that they can not jump out, and the lid is removed. What is being shaped and trained are the expectations of these creatures. So that in a circus, even a powerful elephant can be held in place by a tiny rope and a single stake.

For Bob Tuttle and everyone of us, hearing God is all a matter of expectations. Do we expect to hear? Do we expect to minister? Or have we become like the sharks in an aquarium, fleas in a jar or an elephant held by a single stake? Have we become people whose expectations are more defined by disappointment than truth, by lack of experience than the promises of Scripture? What shapes your expectations?

In the gospel of Luke, Simeon recognized Jesus because of his expectations. The Bible says that he was *"waiting for the consolation of Israel."* Prophecies, given hundreds of years earlier, spoke of a coming child. Those prophecies were candlelight to Simeon. Simeon was alert because of prophecy. He was looking for the Messiah because of the candlelight of prophecies given centuries before and because of a personal prophecy he had recently received. The Bible explains that the Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that

he would not die before he himself had seen the Messiah. What has the Holy Spirit revealed to you? What are you looking for? What are you expecting?

Prophecy changes our expectations; it also alters our interpretation of what we see. Prophecy reveals an unfolding plan. Seemingly random events fit a pattern when seen through the light of prophecy. A birth in Bethlehem takes on meaning in the light of prophecy. An infant dedicated in Jerusalem evokes awe in light of prophecy. Prophecy changes our interpretation of what we experience. In view of prophecies, we discover that we are players, not pawns. We discover that we make a difference.

Consequently, prophecy also changes our actions. Because this new candlelight reveals that we are no longer separated by an insert, trapped by a lid, or need be intimidated by a single stake, we act in a wholly different manner.

Jesus's reaction to his opponents was utterly different than one would expect. Do you know why? He viewed it all in the light of prophecy. Paul summarized Jesus's life in this way:

"For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3-4, NIV).

Jesus's life, death and resurrection were in accord with prophetic Scriptures that were written centuries before his arrival. In light of those, Christ predicted, or at the least, understood much of what happened to him. His expectations, interpretations and actions were all formed in the light of prophecy.

Every time we celebrate Christmas in the light of prophecy, we both *remember* and *look* forward. We remember how God's plan has already been fulfilled, and we look forward to what is to come. The prophecy candle reminds us that there are tremendous promises yet to be fulfilled. Christmas points to them.

The prophecy that we read from Isaiah illustrates this. It both is a promise and a call. It is a prophecy that has been fulfilled and is yet to be fulfilled. John the Baptist came as a voice in the desert. He prepared the way of the Lord. People who heeded him, welcomed Jesus. People who dismissed him, rejected the Christ. Nevertheless, the prophecy is yet to be fulfilled. God's glory has yet to be seen by all humanity.

God calls us to the desert. God calls us to the desert, to the place where people feel alienated from God and His love. We are to go where people can't see God for whatever the reason. We're to prepare the way for their salvation. We're road building in the desert. We're working together on a highway for God to come and be seen. We raise the valleys of discouragement. We level the mountains of bitterness. We surface the pathway for

God that his approach may not be delayed, but that his love and power might be witnessed.

Do you see your life in that context? If not, you've missed the precious gift of light that comes from God's prophecies about us. You are to be like Simeon. You are to be one who sees the hand of God and helps others see. We're to be people like Simeon.

I believe that Christmas can light your way. Let the prophecies fulfilled in Christmas encourage you; let those unfulfilled alert you. Let this candle of prophecy, not your lack of experience, shape what you expect, what you understand and what you do.