

Introduction: Vision 2nd Service

Growing up we had an ironclad rule in our house that presents would only be distributed twice a year: on birthdays and Christmas. I know this may sound surreal, or even like cruel parental abuse today, especially given our current one click, next day delivery shopping spree culture where every day feels like Christmas as an endless stream of packages arrive at our front doors. However, the realization of getting some loot, swag, and plunder only twice a year never stopped my three sisters and I from constantly dropping hints to our parents about the presents we wanted.

Between my 12th and 13th year on the planet, I dropped many such hints about what I wanted for Christmas and that was a Crossman 760 pump action BB/pellet gun. What better way to silence those noisy bull frogs, scare off stray dogs, and engage in a few friendly skirmishes with neighborhood friends? What could possibly go wrong? Full disclosure, I begged for this air rifle on previous Christmases, but my parents were quick to inform me that I was too young, and yes, that I, like Ralphie, would shoot my eye out, and/or probably those of my sisters. As a precocious youngster however, I found their logic quite confusing in that I had passed the State's Hunters Safety Course and, was already hunting with my dad with loaded guns and real bullets! Nevertheless, they made it clear that I wasn't getting one until I was 13. Remember the Carly Simon song "Anticipation?" Well, it was really making me wait for an entire year!

O Come O Come Emmanuel

Perhaps the best-known Advent hymn is "O Come, O Come Emmanuel." The song originated in the 8th century and was sung faithfully by the monks every year exactly seven days before Christmas. This hymn of anticipation was based on the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 which the archangel Gabriel quoted to Joseph, Jesus' stepdad, while Joseph was having a lucid dream

**The Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child
and will give birth to a son and will call him Immanuel.**

Today we won't get into the physiological mechanics of how a virgin named Mary became pregnant with God Son, nor will we do a deep dive into how the Creator broached the precipice of space-time physics to become part of his very own physical creation. Neither will we try to explicate the inexplicable integration of the two fully operational natures of the fully divine and fully human Jesus. Time forbids us of such queries however, I only want to remind us that our daily responsibility is to live in awe of this supernatural spectacle and divine mystery.

O Come O Come Emmanuel

Isaiah's prophecy came almost 800 years before the birth of Christ. Now that's a long wait! Including Isaiah 7:14, there are five major prophecies regarding Jesus' birth. The oldest is Genesis 3:15 which was written 4000 years before Jesus. It deals with Adam and Eve's tragic fall from grace and God's curse of the serpent for his role in it:

**I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head,
and you will strike his heel.**

The next oldest prediction, Genesis 12:3, was written approximately 1800 years before Jesus' birth. While making covenant with Abraham, God promises him :

**I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;
and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you.**

The other two promises of Jesus' birth were contemporary with our Isaiah promise, namely Isaiah 9:6 and Micah 5:2:

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

**But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.**

Live in Faith/Hope/Love

If you thought waiting a year in anticipation for a Christmas BB/Pellet gun was grueling, can you fathom waiting many thousands of years to receive the greatest present of all? But really, what was the present? We got two more weeks to "unwrap" that question. But we, as the new people of God are living in a similar situation as the old people of God. They lived in anticipation of the first coming of the Present, and we live in anticipation of the second coming of the Present. How do we do that? Our answer is found at the end of the famous love chapter of the Bible, 1 Corinthians 13:13. Here Paul writes to a Corinthian church that, like us, was living between the Advents.

And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.

The trinity of Christian life is faith, hope, and love. Each plays a vital role in helping us live in anticipation of Christ's Return.

Faith

The first one is faith. From the Greek word **pisteow**, to have faith means to have an unshakable confidence in someone's character. We reflect the idea of this kind of faith when we say we trust someone with our very lives. To be clear, however, faith's operation in the life of the Christ follower is to look back into the past, to celebrate God's faithfulness. It reasons that if God kept his promises in the past, he, because of his perfect character, will keep his promises in the future. Did God keep his past promise of "Giving us his only begotten Son because he loved the world" (John 3:16)? Absolutely! Will God keep his promise of sending his Son again? Absolutely! I still believe what one of my professors said,

**If you reduced the Bible down to one single phrase it would be,
"Trust God and live like it."**

Hope

The second way we live in the age of anticipation is by hope. Hal Lindsey was famous for coining the saying :

**We can live about forty days without food, about three days without water,
about eight minutes without air...but only one second without hope.**

I would add there's one thing we can't live without for any amount of time but that is for next week. If faith invites us to look back to God's past faithfulness, hope inspires us to look forward to God's future faithfulness, namely what he will do for us. Hope then, is a future faith. Like nothing else, it keeps our souls and emotions buoyant when the storms of life try sweeping over us. Hope tells us that through Christ we are victorious, and our future is secure in him.

Love

In our Trinity of Christian Life Paul calls love the "greatest" because when the Present arrives again, faith and hope will no longer be necessary. Love, however, will always be necessary because it proves we are living in faith and hope right now, that we are being continually filled with the Holy Spirit (Romans 5:5) and that we are Christ followers (John 13:35). Aren't you glad, "Love Came Down at Christmas?"

Conclusion

Living in faithful, hopeful, and loving anticipation of the return of the Present makes the Church the most joyful people on earth. And by the way, I did get that Crossman 760 pump action BB/Pellet gun on my 13th Christmas. Although it did get me into a whole lot of trouble, it was the best present my daddy ever gave me.

Let's pray.