

Christmas Eve Candlelight Service  
“Born to Set Thy People Free”  
Matthew 1:18–21  
Mr. Bruce Stallings  
December 24, 2017 • Communion Service

For each of us it seems that different things make it seem more like Christmas to each of us. For me it's just not Christmas without sweet potato casserole and it's not just any sweet potato casserole but it's an excellent wife capable making good sweet potato casserole who can find? She is more valuable than jewels. Many excellent women have made good sweet potato casserole but my wife Sonya's surpasses them all. You didn't know that was in Proverbs 31 did you? My wife makes the best sweet potato casserole on this earth and so it's not Christmas until I have that. I have been known to get somewhat moody if we get too late into Christmas and I don't get it. One of the other things for me about Christmas is this candlelight service. This is one of my favorite services of the year and that's because it joins together the birth of our Savior and why He was born, with His death and resurrection celebrate through His table, communion, by His invitation to do this in remembrance of Him. It also points us to His return. It is like the perfect context for Christ is this service where we can look back and forward.

To point us to this context I have chosen to focus this study on one of my favorite hymns by Charles Wesley. It was written in 1744 for an Advent service and its title is *Come Thou Long Expected Jesus*. The lyrics are as follows;

1. ***Come, Thou long-expected Jesus,  
Born to set Thy people free;  
From our fears and sins release us,  
Let us find our rest in Thee.  
Israel's Strength and Consolation,  
Hope of all the earth Thou art;  
Dear Desire of every nation,  
Joy of every longing heart.***
2. ***Born Thy people to deliver,  
Born a child and yet a King,  
Born to reign in us forever,  
Now Thy gracious kingdom bring.  
By Thine own eternal Spirit  
Rule in all our hearts alone;  
By Thine all sufficient merit,  
Raise us to Thy glorious throne.***

It's a beautiful rich text and I'd really just like to focus on the first four lines which make three excellent points to help us focus on Christ.

This is a prayer and when we sing 'Come, Thou long-expected Jesus' Christmas carries a sense of expectation. I would think that at Christmas underneath your tree there are gifts that you don't know what are in them and gifts that you do know. I'm more focused on the gifts that I don't know what they are, especially if they say 'Dad' or 'Bruce.' If there is a gift under the tree with my name on it then it changes my behavior. I don't just walk past our tree, I stop and

when no one is looking I shake it and start ruling things out. Once again there is nothing the size of a motorcycle but there is always next year to get that. Then there can be gifts under the tree where I'm the only one that knows what it is so there is this expectation, this longing, where I'm waiting to see them open that gift to see their response or reaction to that gift. Christmas has this secrecy, this expectation built into it.

When I was a little boy my favorite aspect of Christmas was when my grandparents would come and visit us. They would always show up on Christmas Eve and spend the night. We would have this big meal together so I would go and sit by the window as I waited for them to come. We lived on a dead end street and my mom would always get mad at me for sitting by the window as I looked out. She would say 'Bruce, get away from the window! What will our neighbors think?' I'm not sure why she didn't like me doing this but I somehow thought if I could look out any one of our front windows to the end of the street it would speed up my grandparents getting to our house. I think looking back on it I think I would be longing to see what my grandparents would bring but honestly I'm not sure I remember any gifts I received from them at Christmas. I remember them and sitting in my grandfather's lap. I thought he was the most amazing person I had ever met in my life. He was a farmer but there was that expectation that I had of them coming.

As Wesley writes this hymn clearly he is writing this as people would sing this prior to Christ's first advent, prior to His coming – Come Thou long-expected Jesus. There was those 400 years of silence. It was the waiting of the Messiah to come and not knowing who the Messiah was. That expectation would change their behavior and they had this longing to see Him come. They went through their practice of religion hoping, longing and wanting to see the coming of the Messiah.

Wesley writes this with a dual purpose – for them come Thou long expected Jesus of the first advent and for us it is the Second Advent. When Paul is giving instruction for communion he says this in I Corinthians 11:23-26, [23] *For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, [24] and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."* [25] *In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me."* [26] *For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.*

Paul knew that when we were invited to the Table we were invited in remembrance of what Christ had done – His death, resurrection – but that the Table points us to His return. We do this faithfully in remembrance of Him until He comes/returns. Do we gather here tonight as people with this longing expectation of the return of Christ? What would be the best possible thing that could take place tomorrow? Remember that it is Christmas Day and that there are gifts under the tree for you. There may also be family that you are anticipating to come tomorrow. Is the first and only thing that comes to our mind is the return of Christ or do we just kind of get lulled to sleep and assume God knows when He is coming so I guess I'll be ready?

I think Scripture points us to have an expectation, a desire when Jesus would come and that, that would be the thing that we long for. Just like our longing for other things, it does change our behavior and that longing for Jesus' return would also change our behavior, as if it would almost be a bit of disappointment at the end of each day if Christ didn't return that day. How would our behavior change if we lived with that sort of longing each and every day?

One, I think that as Scripture would instruct us we would want to personally be ready. Matthew 24:36, 42 says [36] *But concerning that day and hour no one knows, not even the*

*angels of heaven, nor the Son, but the Father only. [42] Therefore, stay awake, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. We want to be personally ready for the return of Christ. We want to be about His business and not be wrapped up in our own business or in the affairs of this world.*

I also think we would be much more intentionally about telling other people about Jesus because as much as I would long for Jesus' return, I still know people who don't know Him as their Lord and Savior. I still have friends and family that don't have a personal relationship with Him and I would long for them to know the Lord before His return. So we pray regularly for Him to come quickly.

The second and third line of Wesley's hymn declare why there should be this longing for the return of our Savior and why they would long for the Savior to come. It was because He was born to set Thy people free, free from their fears, free from the sins they were in bondage to. Some people are so uniquely gifted that you might say 'they were just born to be (whatever particular thing this is).' My dad was a born engineer. Now he just happened to eventually get educated and then employed as an engineer but he was born an engineer. If he had been born something else he would have engineered whatever that was. For instance, I was never fathered for I was just engineered into a young man. When I say he was born an engineer that is the way he worked. He took things a part and sort of put them back together in some way, shape or form so they performed some particular function, whether it be the original function or something else.

We longed for my mother to wrap our presents because it only took three seconds to unwrap the presents my mother wrapped. It would take seven minutes to open a present my father wrapped because it was an engineered thing and really not made to open. It was made to frustrate you and extend that longing. I think our pastor, Pastor Reeder, is a born pastor and if you don't believe me just try to picture him in another occupation like an accountant. I was watching a football game recently and tried to think of Pastor Reeder as a sports commentator. They would run the very first play and you would hear him say 'Let me tell you five reasons why that play didn't work – execution, extradition, evolution, he would make up the other two words and then give you a life takeaway but it would be half time by then. He is a born preacher and that is what God gifted him to do. I can't imagine him doing anything else and he can't imagine himself doing anything else.

Jesus wasn't born to set Thy people free because He was born as a person who could do that or a great prophet or a great man as such a time as that. No, it wasn't that was the way He was made and that's what He did, when Jesus was born that meant He left heaven. They only reason He left heaven was to set His people free from their sins. He was born for only one singular purpose and when He left heaven we refer to that as His humiliation because He left heaven and became a Man. He was one hundred percent God and one hundred percent Man. Because God so loved the world, He so loved all of us that He gave His only Son to come to this earth to be a Man, to live a perfect life, to die a sacrificial death, and to rise a victorious death in a resurrection to accomplish one singular purpose and that is to save His people from their sins. He faithfully accomplished that purpose, what God had called Him to do.

Romans 6:5-9, 14, 22-23 says [5] *For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. [6] We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. [7] For one who has died has been set free from sin. [8] Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. [9] We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him.*

*[14] For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.*

*[22] But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. [23] For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

In John when Jesus was speaking to those who had believed in Him and had them set free from sin, it says in John 8:31-36, *[31] So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, [32] and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."* *[33] They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham **and have never been enslaved to anyone**. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"*

*[34] Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. [35] The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. [36] So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.*

Did you catch what their response to Christ was after He said the truth would set them free? They said they had never been enslaved to anyone. Do you know what a precursor to becoming a Christian is? It is that you realize you are a slave, you are enslaved. You have to have a need for a Savior in order to want a Savior. This is the challenge for so many people when they try to consider a relationship with the Lord. They don't understand that as sinful men and women we are enslaved to sin. We are in bondage to sin and it has dominion over us. In this state we are destined to spend eternity apart from God. We cannot save ourselves and we absolutely are incompetent to even help ourselves so Christ comes and sets us free from that bondage of sin. I love the statement when He says 'If the Son has set you free then you will be free indeed.'

Have you been set free from the bondage of sin by the Son? I trust that you have but if you haven't it would be for you this day not just to celebrate this Christmas Eve the birth of Christ but to acknowledge before the Lord that you are still in the bondage of sin and the dominion of sin still has its grip upon you. By putting your faith and trust in Christ alone and what He did on the cross by His death and resurrection you truly can be set free from sin and then and only then can you experience the fourth line of the hymn Wesley wrote.

The fourth line says, ***Let us find our rest in Thee***. Matthew 11:28-30 says *[28] Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. [29] Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. [30] For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.* Many times here we take the shallowest of applications and miss the true meaning of the application of a passage. One might be reading this and say 'It's been a long year. I'm tired. Lord, give me rest.' He will for He is faithful to do that but that is not the rest He is speaking of. It is not just rest for your body or mind but He will give you rest for your soul, true peace-on-earth rest for your soul. That is the rest that we desperately need.

The Bible tells us that before we come to the Table that we are to examine ourselves. I Corinthians 11:27-32 says *[27] Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord. [28] Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup. [29] For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself. [30] That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died. [31] But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged. [32] But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.*

One question you can ask before coming to the Table is do I have rest for my soul? Is my soul at rest in the Lord and in the Lord alone? If you don't know the Lord as your Savior then there would be no rest for your soul. I pray you would have rest for your soul and it can only be found in Christ and I would hope today you would want to find that rest for your soul in Him and Him alone. The Bible also tells us that the passions of the world wage war against our soul. It's possible for a Christian to come to the Lord's Table and yet not have rest in their soul. Why? It could be unrepentant sin that we need to acknowledge and confess. He waits with expectation of forgiving us but desires for us to repent of that sin. There could be an area of our life that we simply are resisting trusting Him or depending on Him. I would encourage you to take a few moments with Him as you prepare to come to the Table.

Do you find rest this day for your soul? Is your conscience clean before the Lord? Have you acknowledged your sin and truly repented of that sin, claiming the forgiveness that only He gives? Our standing before God is based upon Jesus Christ and Him alone. Come again Thou long expected Jesus. Give me a longing expectation for Your soon return. Born, crucified and resurrected, You have set us free from our sins. May we never lose the passion for that amazing grace that God has saved us so that we might this day and for all eternity find perfect rest in Him. Let's pray.

Prayer:

Father, I thank You so much for Your Son, our Savior Jesus Christ. Lord, I pray that You would give us that longing expectation for His return and that we would each and every day fix our eyes upon our Savior. Come quickly Lord Jesus. Lord, thank You that You have done for us what we cannot do for ourselves for You have caused us to be born again. I thank You that You have come to set us free from our sins. I pray that we would have rest for our souls before You. May Your Spirit be at work within us and reveal to us our own heart – our motives, actions and responses. May we have a clean conscience before You that we might come to this Table and celebrate our Savior as we focus upon His imminent return for I pray this in Jesus Christ's Name, Amen.