

**Christ Church Cranbrook**  
Bloomfield Hills, Michigan  
Sermon for December 15, 2013 ~ Advent 3A  
The Reverend Ronald D. Pogue

Advent is the season of anticipation! Children anticipate Christmas and presents; youth anticipate parties and good times; adults anticipate family gatherings and other festive get-togethers; students away at school anticipate getting home for the holidays; we all anticipate warm, meaningful moments in worship – the joy of singing the carols of Advent and Christmas, the emotional heights of a Christmas Eve candlelight service.

Our secular songs convey the anticipation of the season as well: “I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas”, “Santa Claus is Coming to Town”, “I’ll be Home for Christmas.”

But, then, isn’t all of life filled with anticipation? Retail merchants anticipate what will sell; fashion designers anticipate what people will wear; television programmers anticipate what people will watch; investors anticipate the stock market; athletes anticipate winning; fisherfolk anticipate their catch; sick people anticipate getting well; sailors anticipate the harbor. We anticipate our way through our days and life would lose much of its luster were it not for the capacity to anticipate what is coming.

Someone has said, “The greatest difference in people is what they anticipate.” There is truth in that statement. Some people tend to anticipate the worst and others anticipate the best. Some sick people anticipate not getting well; some students anticipate failure; some business people anticipate bankruptcy; some athletes anticipate defeat; and perhaps all of us, after the daily news reports, anticipate apocalypse. Anticipation can go either way.

The way it goes in the thirty-fifth chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah (today’s reading from the Hebrew Scriptures), is “upward and onward.” The chapter is a poem anticipating Zion’s happy future when “the wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom.” It anticipates the coming day when “the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.” It anticipates the coming realm in which God is finally and completely present, in which humanity receives its freedom in God and in which all the misery of life is overcome. It is anticipating the will be, the longed for, and “the passion of the possible,” to use Kierkegaard’s phrase.

There are several reasons why we should, as God’s own people, anticipate the best as we live our lives of faith.

**Anticipating the best will greatly improve our outlook on life.** Instead of being suspicious, fearful, anxious, judgmental, negative people, we can be givers of encouragement, optimistic, confident people, who are more concerned about what God will do with us in the future than in what God has done with us in the past. It makes a difference in our lives and in the lives of those around us whether we live expectantly anticipating the best or skeptically suspicious that the worst is likely to happen.

The Church, as the ongoing community of God’s people, should demonstrate and foster this spirit of hopeful anticipation. People have plenty of discouragement in the office, the classroom, the family, and the halls of government. When they come to church, they seek a different experience – one that restores their confidence and helps them concentrate on “whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, whatever is excellent, and whatever is worthy of praise” (Philippians 4:8). If the Church is to transform the secular culture of conflict and discouragement, then the Church must *be* the change it longs to see in the world. People are drawn to a Church that is forward-looking, where people anticipate the best, and where people are encouraged and built up. Anticipating the best greatly improves our outlook and will do the same for those who come under our roof!

**Then, anticipating the best will help us deal with difficult times.** Deutero-Isaiah preached to a people in a truly difficult time. For fifty years the people of Israel had lived in captivity in Babylon; despised, displaced,

disgruntled, and discouraged. God called Isaiah in bad times to proclaim good news and encourage the people to anticipate the best.

The hymns of Charles Wesley brought the same word of hope to a weary 18<sup>th</sup> Century England. To the poor and outcast and despised he and his brother John went, never fearing to stand in the rain or the mud or to have their own faces blackened with coal dust. Charles Wesley's great hymn, *O For a Thousand Tongues to Sing* is perhaps the most comprehensive poetic summary of the spirit of Isaiah's prophecy. "Hear him, ye deaf; ye voiceless ones, your loosened tongues employ; ye blind, behold, your Savior comes; and leap, ye lame, for joy!" He put into words and music the message of hope the people needed to embrace with their hearts so that they could persevere in spirit and emerge victorious from days of difficulty.

God's message through the prophet to us in the difficult times in our lives is always a message of hope. Countless people will tell you that living with a hopeful outlook has transformed their lives from a dumping ground for other peoples' complaints to a receiving bason for God's blessings. Such a perspective can lead us into an openness where we are able to recognize God's gifts and gratefully receive them when they come. Difficult times are transformed into periods of God's greatest opportunity to express the divine glory and love in and through us.

**And, anticipating the best can have a great effect on what actually comes to us.** We know this is true because some of our appraisals of things that happen to others show that we do. Have you ever said, "He got just what he deserved" or "She brought this on herself"? That is a colloquial way of saying, "The ideas, actions, and expectations of that person resulted in this or that." It is a simple cause and effect relationship.

If you want to be hated, hate others. If you want to be loved, love others. If you want to be judged, fine, Jesus said, but remember that you will be judged in the same manner as you judge, so watch out. If you want to be respected, respect others. If you want to be rich, give something away. It is all the same principle; you can't expect anything to come into your life unless you make room for it and usually that means getting rid of something.

Perhaps a negative example will help illustrate. A man was driving home late one night and had a flat tire. He was out in the country on a lonely dirt road and, to compound matters, he discovered that his jack was missing. Looking down the road, he made out the dark shadow of a farmhouse and, thinking he might be able to borrow a jack, he started walking toward the house. But as he walked he got to thinking, "Here it is one o'clock in the morning. I'm probably going to make the person in that house angry by knocking on the door at this hour." He kept on walking and another thought hit him. "He'll probably be so mad that even if he has a jack he won't let me use it." Finally he reached the farmhouse and knocked on the door. The farmer came to the door and opened it. The motorist, who had worked himself up into expecting the worst, blurted out, "Never mind! Keep your old jack!"

And John's disciples came to Jesus asking him if he were the long-awaited Messiah or should they expect another. He told them, "Look around you. What do you see before your very eyes? The blind see. The lame walk. The deaf hear. Are these not the tangible signs foretold by the prophet? Just look at them. See the evidence." We can get so caught up in our questions and doubts that we miss the obvious answers and the most profound evidence right under our noses. What we anticipate will largely determine what actually comes to us.

People today are still asking, "Is there any hope?" You and I, as God's chosen people, have the marvelous opportunity of saying an emphatic, "YES!" with our lives because we anticipate the best and know God is good. There is hope! And we are privileged to share that hope with the world in this church and in our day-to-day lives as we are sent out into the mission field at our doorstep.

Anticipate the best and it will improve your outlook on life. Anticipate the best and it will help you cope with difficult times. Anticipate the best and you will have it!