

Change at Christmas

II Peter 3:3-13

Nothing much seems to change at Christmas, does it? And in our increasingly chaotic world, that can be quite comforting. We read the same story of the Babe in the Manger, and in the same King James Version, published about the same time that the first English settlers came to America. We sing the same carols, many of them now centuries old – and all the folks in the nursing home and the hip-hop-loving youngsters join in. We hang the same ornaments on the tree that our children and grandchildren made years ago. We do our best to bake Grandma's cake or mama's cookie recipe: no matter how many times we've enjoyed them, they are always just as good. And the children's pageant in Port Gibson was first performed, as best we can tell, way back in 1919, asking God to forgive the "blindness and the slaughter" of the First World War.

But that's just the problem, isn't it? For while generations of Presbyterians have continued to participate in and enjoy that pageant, the blindness and the slaughter has ground on, in the Second World War, and then in Korea, and in Vietnam, in Central America and Afghanistan and Iraq, and now in Ukraine and Israel and Gaza. Even as we celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace, the One Whom our responsive reading told us would reign as a king, executing justice and righteousness so that His people might live in safety and security, we still wait and long for peace. Yes, Christ has come, but the age-old human desire to kill one another endures.

And there are so many other things that don't change just because Christmas shows up again on the calendar, right? Those who wrestle with loneliness and addiction find their struggles even more daunting at a time when everyone else seems to be surrounded by loving, supportive families. Those who have trouble making ends meet only run up more credit card debt as they try to find a way to put a Christmas feast on the table and even a few presents under the tree for their loved ones. Those who are sick or in pain find their disabilities all the more discouraging as the swirl of parties and concerts and parades passes them by. And the only reason we struggle to recreate mama's and grandma's recipes is because they're not in the kitchen anymore: just because it's Christmas doesn't mean all the chairs at the family table are filled once again.

And so maybe you are desperate for some things to change this Christmas. Maybe you're tired of waiting for the peace or the prosperity that never seems to come. Maybe the hope and joy and wonder of the season simply eludes you in the face of the guilt or grief, the fear or fatigue that just won't go away. Maybe you're watching and waiting for God to break into your life, to break through the barriers that seem to block your path in every direction.

If so, you can understand how the Jewish people felt at the time Jesus was born. After all, they had been reading and hearing and memorizing the promises of our responsive reading for hundreds of years: Isaiah and Jeremiah had received their prophecies from God some seven hundred years earlier. And it had been four hundred years since Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets, gave his message to God's people.

Yes, God's people had been waiting for the Sun of Righteousness to rise as long as we've been reading the King James Bible, as long as English-speaking people have lived in America. But instead of seeing God's deliverer, all during that time God's people had endured a parade of persecuting oppressors: first the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then the Persians, then Alexander the Great and his Greek-speaking successors. And after only a hundred years of political independence under the Maccabees, the Romans had taken over, propping up Herod the Great on his throne in Jerusalem. No, no matter what God may have promised His people, nothing ever seemed to change for them.

And Peter reminds us that the same lack of change will continue until the very last days: “Ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.” In spite of our faith in the promises of Christ, that’s how we sometimes feel. But that’s also the cynical creed of so many modern people, those who focus only on how they can gain or keep or redistribute the material things of this world. Yes, because they only believe what their physical senses can perceive, and because they only look to their reason or their experience when they make decisions, they deny the possibility that real change, personal change is possible. As a result, is it any wonder that more and more people define themselves solely by their feelings and attractions? Is it any wonder that the cycle of lust and hate and violence just rolls on and on?

But the sobering truth, as Peter warns us, is that sometimes things do change, and change in a big way. For Genesis chapter 6 reminds us that there was another time in history when the wickedness of man was great on the earth. There was another time in human history when every intent of the thoughts of man’s heart was only evil all the time. And in those days God did indeed break into human history. Yes, God broke through all the pain and all the violence, all the grief and all the misery that our sin had caused: He wiped it all away with the waters of the Great Flood.

And in those days, God vindicated Noah for his faithful obedience. For who knows how long it took Noah to build that ark, that huge, watertight box on dry land, a three-decked wooden container big enough to hold two of every kind of air-breathing animal? And all during that time, how many people must have mocked Noah for his insanity, ignoring his earnest warnings of the coming disaster? After all, any of them could have built a much smaller ark, one just big enough for themselves and their families and the food they would need. But as Peter tells us, none of them trusted what God told Noah. Instead, they all continued to deny the possibility of real change, living only according to what made sense to them, only according to their own experience and tradition, only for their own lustful pleasures.

But God kept His promise to Noah, didn’t He? God broke into human history and changed everything, destroying the whole world with a flood. And when Jesus was born, God did the same kind of thing. Once again, He kept His ancient promises, breaking into human history and changing everything. Just so, regardless of our own reason or experience, regardless of how sturdy our traditions may be or how stubborn our problems may be, regardless of how helpless we may feel or how pressing and urgent our desires may be, because Christ has come, we can be sure He will keep His promise to come again, His promise to change everything one last time.

But why is the Lord taking so long? Well, Peter gives us two explanations. In the first place, he reminds us that God just doesn’t perceive time in the same way that we do. Now, as hard it might be for us to wrap our brains around this, it really does make sense. After all, because God created time, He is outside of it, detached from it in much the same way that we are from our history books. After all, we can pick up Homer’s *Iliad* or Josephus’ *History of the Jewish War* or Winston Churchill’s *History of the English Speaking Peoples* from our bookshelves. And we can read about the Trojan War or the Roman destruction of Jerusalem or Nelson’s victory at Trafalgar. But all of those wars, even though they were separated in time by thousands of years, are all the same sort of history to us: all fights that took place in the distant past that none of us personally experienced.

Maybe that helps us to understand how what Peter says in verse 9 can be true: since God stands outside of history’s timeline, all of it – the past, present, and the future – is in a sense all the same to Him. Moreover, since God was present at Creation, and at the Fall of Man, and at the Cross of Christ, and since God will be present on the Day that Christ returns, well, we shouldn’t be surprised that

He thinks of a thousand years in the same way that we think of a day. And according to that kind of math, it's only been a couple of days since Jesus ascended into Heaven, right?

But there's another, much more important reason that Jesus didn't return within His first disciples' lifetimes, as they so desperately wanted Him to. For if He had, none of us would ever have been born, so none of us would ever have been saved. In fact, none of the billions of people who have come to faith over the last 2000 years would have had a chance to participate in the great heavenly choir, singing the Lord's praise on the day that He comes again.

No, there's a very good reason that Jesus hasn't yet kept His promise to return: as Peter tells us in verse 9, His heart's desire is for all to come to repentance. So as long as there is one more person yet to be saved who will in fact be saved, Jesus will remain in Heaven, praying for that person in just the same way that He prays for all of us. By the power of His Holy Spirit, He'll keep opening the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf. He'll keep replacing hearts of stone with hearts of flesh. He'll keep drawing people to Himself, bringing more and more lost people into His kingdom.

So, if we're glad that Jesus waited long enough for us to be born and to come to faith, how can we begrudge Him delaying His return so that even more people might be saved? Even if we have to keep enduring the same sort of suffering and sorrow that He experienced on that first Christmas, can't we wait just a few more days – even if those days might last a little longer than we reckon them?

And if Christmas reminds us of how little things change, and if Christmas makes us long for Christ to return and to put an end to all of our sufferings and sorrows, maybe Christmas can also remind us of the great, undeniable change that has already come into the lives of everyone who has already come to faith in Christ: because the Babe in the Manger came not only to live with us but to live within all who trust in Him, we can be sure that we will be saved on the day that He returns to judge the world. So maybe, no matter what is going on in our lives, the fact that Jesus waited for us can give us hope that, after He has waited for others to be saved, He will keep His promise to return.

And even if our waiting means we have to go on suffering in this world, maybe the reason Jesus is waiting can motivate us to share the good news with others. For no matter how great the wickedness in the world may grow, the good news is that Christ has come to save us. And Christ has died to save us. And Christ has risen to save us. And Christ will come again to save us. And the sooner everyone hears that good news, the sooner He will return to make a whole new earth in which only righteousness dwells.

So, let's take advantage of all those things that never seem to change at Christmas. Let's sing the age-old carols that are even on the lips of unbelievers. Let's tell the story of Jesus' birth that even the unbelievers have heard so many times. Let's sympathize with others who suffer in the same way that we do, pointing them to the same hope that we have. And let's rejoice. For no matter how long we have to go on waiting, and no matter how great our longing for Christ's return may be, the undeniable good news is that the Lord has in fact come to us. And He has come to change everything – in His way and in His time.