

Now is the time
[Luke 21:25-36](#)
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When it comes to Christmas, I will admit that I can be a bit of a Grinch. I don't like Santa. I don't like Christmas lights or Christmas trees, I can't stand Rudolph. 90% of the December Holiday-season related rigamarole can go straight in the bonfire with the chestnuts, as far as I'm concerned. But I'm not a complete monster. There are some Christmas-related traditions that I grudgingly accept, mostly because my wife loves them, and there are a few principles, a very few, that I will passionately defend with my life if necessary. And one of these principles is that Christmas presents should be a surprise. When you open a Christmas present, you can have a vague idea of what might be inside the box, but there needs to be at least a little bit of mystery and uncertainty in the process. This is another area where Johanna and I disagree. If I put wrapped presents under the tree before midnight on Christmas Eve, Johanna will find them, and shake them, and poke and press at all the soft spots and decipher exactly what they are, far, far in advance of Christmas itself, so that the actual opening of the presents becomes almost irrelevant, and this drives me nuts. What's the point in wrapping them at all if you're going to unleash the deductive powers of Sherlock Holmes to figure out what's in the box ahead of time? I understand that making a specific list with exactly the presents you want makes everything very convenient and tidy – it saves you time shopping at the mall with all those miserable

twinkling lights everywhere – but when you tell people exactly what you want for Christmas and then you get exactly that, what's the point? I once told Johanna that I didn't know what to get her for Christmas, and she said that she'd just been clothes shopping, and I should just take the things she already bought for herself, and wrap them up and put them under the tree, and she could open them on Christmas Day, and I was appalled. I get a lot of flak for not being sufficiently festive, but self-purchased, self-wrapped presents, that is where I draw the line.

Because the point of giving presents isn't the presents themselves. It's the anticipation. Most of the fun of Christmas is in waiting for Christmas to come, in the preparation and the excitement and all the various things you do throughout December to get ready, counting down the days. And that means that there needs to be a bit of surprise – a little something unexpected, some uncertainty and mystery in the proceedings. A little surprise, but not too much surprise. Too much surprise is worse than not enough. You want to know the basic outline of what's going to happen on Christmas Day. You need to know what the dinner will be, the family and friends who will come over. Waiting for Christmas wouldn't be any fun at all if you had no idea what was going to happen when it came. And if you weren't certain that it was coming – if there was any chance that maybe Christmas just won't show up this year, maybe we'll just skip directly from the 24th to the 26th and carry on as if nothing had happened, then waiting for Christmas would be torture – you'd be freaking out every day,

wondering if all this preparation, all the shopping and cooking and cleaning you're doing, if there was going to be any point to it at all, or if it would just be a big waste of time. Waiting for something is only fun if you know that it's coming, and you know that it's going to be good, and there's just enough surprise and anticipation to make it worth waiting for. Today is the first Sunday in the Season of Advent, and Advent is a season of waiting. Advent is all about anticipation, preparing ourselves for what is coming, for what is about to happen. And today is the Sunday of Hope, and when we think of Hope, we usually think of uncertainty – having hope implies that there's something coming in the future and you're not entirely sure what it is. You can see that uncertainty, that anticipation in the passage we read from the gospel of Luke. Jesus is speaking to his disciples about the future, and he describes a world full of uncertainty and danger, a world that is distressed and full of fear. Every part of creation – the sky, earth, and sea, the sun, moon and stars – they are all mixed up and turned upside down, and no one seems entirely sure what to do or how to react, they are filled with fear and foreboding. And yet in the middle of that dark and uncertain world, Jesus promises that light will come. When people look up, expecting to see disaster, expecting to see destruction, instead they will see the Son of Man – they will see Jesus. Instead of destruction, they will receive redemption. Instead of war and conquest, the Kingdom of God will draw near. Instead of death, the world will know life. That's God's promise for us. That's God's promise for the world, that in the midst of our fear and foreboding, in the

midst of disaster, Christ will come to us, Jesus Christ will save us. And we know those promises. We've heard them over and over again, all through the years, Sunday by Sunday we are reminded of God's good promises to us, and yet we still have a hard time remembering. We're surrounded by so much bad news, so much trouble in this world, so much war and corruption and disease and destruction. Everywhere you look, the world seems so broken, and we don't know how to fix it, and we wonder if anyone possibly can. We start to lose hope. We start to forget that God has promised to fix what is broken in this world. We're waiting for God's promises to come true, for God's kingdom to come, but we're working so hard and worrying that it's all going to be for nothing, that all our preparation, all our prayers and worship, all this waiting is just a big waste of time.

And so we need to be reminded that what we are waiting for isn't just in the future, some day far off. The victory that Jesus is talking about in that passage when the Son of Man comes in all his glory and power, that isn't just something that will happen one day. It's already here. It's already happened. When God first entered into this world all those years ago as a child in Bethlehem, the victory was won. When Jesus gave his life on the cross, the victory was won. When Jesus rose from the dead and left the tomb empty behind him, the victory was won, and that victory is as certain as the sun rising, as certain as December 25th following December 24th, and nothing can change that, and nothing can take that away. The day of salvation that Jesus talks about isn't far off in the future. It's right here. It's

today. Jesus is here with us now, and nothing in this world can separate us from his love. The Hope we have in Jesus Christ isn't just crossing your fingers, hoping for the best, but secretly expecting the worst. The hope we have is the Hope of Christmas, it's the expectation and anticipation of what we already know is coming. We wait for the coming Kingdom of God in the same way, with the same excitement that children wait for Christmas Day – we know that it's coming, and we know that it's going to be good, and there's just enough surprise and anticipation to make it worth waiting for. So we're waiting for Christmas. We're waiting for the birth of Jesus Christ. We're waiting to celebrate the moment when God entered into this world and became part of humanity so that he can change this world, so that he can change humanity into something entirely new. We're waiting for Emmanuel, God with us. And while we wait, God is already with us, God is waiting with us. He's done everything necessary to prepare for the celebration that's coming. The gifts are wrapped and ready, the decorations are up, the food is almost perfect, the guests are on their way. The celebration is coming, and nothing can stop it, and today while we wait we gather at this table to remember what we're waiting for. Today we gather at this table to take a little peek at the gifts that are waiting for us, to take a little taste of the great banquet that is being prepared for us. Come to this table, and taste this bread and drink from this cup, and know that this is only the beginning. This is the mystery that helps us count the days until the kingdom comes. This is what we're waiting for. Amen.