

"HOPE"

Jeremiah 29:11-14 Luke 1:39-56

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York Center Church of the Brethren

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Way back when the award-winning movie, "Titanic," was in the movie theaters, a group of friends planned to go see it. One friend dropped out, saying, he didn't need to see the movie because he knows how it ended. The ship sank. The end.

Don't you sometimes feel that way about Christmas? We have this big build-up during the four weeks of Advent. Then we have the Christmas Eve service where we light candles and act surprised that a baby is born.

But there is no surprise- we know how the story goes because we know a baby is born, and we know that baby is Jesus. The end. Right? What's the big deal?

Why do we go through this year after year? Are we expecting a different ending to the story?

Of course, we aren't expecting a different ending- but maybe each year we hear the story in a little bit different way. We aren't the same people who heard this story last year or the year before that. I know for sure that I am not the same person who preached this story a year ago. Last year at this time I didn't have a hip replacement and I had not spent over 8 hard months recovering from a fall.

How are you different this year? What has changed in your life? Or what

hasn't changed that maybe should have? I think we can all agree that the past three years have been a struggle for most of us as we dealt with the pandemic and all that entailed. What did you deal with this past year? How did you struggle?

What brought you joy this year? How has your life changed for the better?

Everything we face in our lives- joys and sorrows- change us. The way we hear the Christmas story is embodied in the lives we are living right here and right now

The context of our world, the realities we see and hear every day affect the way we understand scripture. And that is what makes the Bible the "living word" of God. Sometimes we hear things in a scripture text we never paid attention to before. Sometimes texts we thought we knew by heart suddenly take on new meaning when we see them from a new perspective.

I am certain that the people in Ukraine will cling to the Christmas story in a very different way this year. I wonder what God's children in Somalia, those who are facing extreme drought and deadly famine, need to hear from the birth story this year? How does this story sound to those who are struggling with infertility; those suffering from depression or with a serious physical illness; those who have lost a job or a home or a loved one? And how do those who are rejoicing hear this story about the birth of a miraculous child?

Our guide for Advent this year has been Jan Richardson's book, NIGHT VISIONS: SEARCHING THE SHADOWS OF ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS. The word she offers us for the fourth Sunday of Advent is: Hope. This is what she writes: *"A seed in the ground. A flame in the darkness. A hand outstretched. A child in the womb. Hope starts small and overtakes us, stretching the borders of what we have known. One "yes" to an angel, and Mary becomes a revolutionary. The child is hardly noticeable in her womb when she arrives at the home of her kinswoman Elizabeth, but the transformation is written all over her face, and Elizabeth instantly knows what has happened. She blesses Mary for her hope, for her radical belief that God will fulfill the promise made by Gabriel. Elizabeth, pregnant in her advanced years, knows the power of hope. She, too, carries it in her womb."* (1)

Hope is a feeling of expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen. Lots of people are happy to tell us what to hope for this Christmas season- extravagant gifts, the perfect family gathering, exquisite decorations, and flawless Christmas photo sessions. But scripture mentions none of that.

Christmas hope in scripture instead focuses on a pregnant teenager and her elderly pregnant cousin. If you listen closely, you will hear both of these women burst forth into song. The older woman sees her young cousin and she knows this woman has been chosen by God to do something totally outrageous. Mary doesn't even have a baby bump yet and Elizabeth knows the truth because she is filled with the Holy Spirit.

*"Blessed are you among woman, dear Mary. Blessed is the child in your womb! The moment you said hello, the child in my womb jumped for joy! How can I be so blessed that the mother of the Messiah would come to see me? Blessed are you for believing what God told you would happen!"*

In a nondescript house in an unimportant town in the Judean hill country, two ordinary women hold God's hope for the world within their own bodies. One, too old to be pregnant, is carrying God's messenger, the one who will bring the old age to a close. The other, almost too young to be pregnant, carries God's message, the invitation to the new age. This story of hope begins with two impossible, outrageous pregnancies which will produce two babies who will change the world. Elizabeth and Mary know just how impossible, how ridiculous their situations are. They know that people in their towns will talk about them.

They know many will not understand. But they don't care because they know what God is doing and they are blessed to be a part of God's crazy plan.

Mary responds to Elizabeth with a remix of the song her ancestor Hannah sang when her son, Samuel, was born after years of infertility. Mary sings a prophecy of a new world shaped by her faith tradition.

To us, it looks like a world turned upside down, but Mary has the eyes of faith to see that this great reversal is actually the power of God to turn the world right side up. Can you see how truly outrageous this scene is? A young woman and an old woman- who (literally) carried the weight of God's new revolution in their bodies. As the months passed, their bellies swelled as their sons grew within them. They alone possessed the knowledge that God was about to invade the world. To the casual observer they were just two women knitting booties and encouraging one another in their absurd pregnancies. But we know they were two God-chosen prophets carrying blessings they neither asked for nor expected- but cherished, nonetheless.

Right at the beginning, Luke sets the context of this story with just a few words that carry great meaning and great fear. "In the days of the ruler Herod..." It was a reminder that this was a dangerous time for God's people. Herod's casual brutality was backed up with the power of the Roman empire.

Corruption was the order of the day as the poor got poorer and the rich got richer. Injustice was rampant as the bullies and the power mongers spread their evil ways throughout the land. For the people of God, the world seemed hopeless.

It is into this world that Mary opens her mouth and sings, not a lullaby, but a revolutionary song of freedom. It is a song of pure joy and praise; a song of reform and upheaval. It is a song of power. Not exactly what you would expect from a pregnant teenager.

Theologian Tom Wright describes it this way: *"It is the gospel before the gospel; a fierce bright shout of triumph thirty **weeks** before (the cradle in) Bethlehem and thirty **years** before (the cross on) Calvary and the empty tomb. It's all about God, and it's all about revolution. And it's all because of Jesus."* (2)

Mary's song was all about hope. She sings on behalf of all those who, in their despair, still want to believe, deep down, that God will make a way where there is no way. She sings of deliverance from the wilderness of injustice and fear. She sings of a God who sees their pain and reaches down to comfort and to save them. She sings of a God who turns the world right side up, lifting those trapped on the bottom of the pile and tossing aside those who think they deserve to stand on top.

Nothing had changed in the world around her, but everything had already changed within her. From the moment Gabriel first announced this outrageous scheme she knew the truth of God's promises and she was never the same again. She sang as though the truth were true, as though the promises of God had already been fulfilled.

Barbara Brown Taylor says that "*Mary sang ahead of time. She sang for all who thought God had forgotten the promise to be with them forever, to love them forever, to give them fresh and endless life.*"

"You **have** scattered the proud," she sang. "You **have** deposed the mighty from their thrones, you **have** filled the hungry. It is a done deal." Mary's song is a confirmation of hope for people who had stopped being hopeful.

This was very good news for those who were oppressed. It was very bad news for their oppressors. And it still is.

Centuries before Mary sang her song, another prophet of God was speaking words of hope in hopeless times. Here is what Eugene Person wrote about Jeremiah. "*Jeremiah's life spanned one of the most troublesome periods in Hebrew history, the decades leading up to the fall of Jerusalem followed by the Babylonian exile. Everything that could go wrong did go wrong. And Jeremiah was in the middle of all of it, sticking it out, praying and preaching, suffering and striving, writing and believing. He lived through crushing storms of hostility and furies of bitter doubt.*

*In looking for a companion who has lived through catastrophic disruption and survived with grace, biblical people more often than not come upon Jeremiah and receive him as a true, honest, and God-revealing companion for the worst of times."*

Jeremiah never gave false hope to those living in exile. He spoke against the false optimism spouted by the false prophets. He encouraged the people to build their lives where they were- in exile- in Babylon. He told them to build houses, have children, plant gardens. He told them to adapt and endure and to believe that it won't be forever. Jeremiah knew the people would live in Babylon for generations. When they were finally willing to seek God with their whole hearts then a return home is a genuine possibility. He established a spiritual foundation for Jewish existence in Babylon. He helped the people to learn to find and experience their God without the structures and institutions they had always known, including their beloved Temple.

Jeremiah spoke God's words of hope and promise to the people. "*For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope.*"

Jan Richardson reminds us once again, *"Hope starts small, even as a seed in the womb, but it feeds on outrageous possibilities. It beckons us to step out with the belief that the action we take will not only bear fruit but that in taking it, we have already made a difference in the world. God invites us, like Mary, to open to God's radical leading, to step out with sometimes inexplicable faith, trusting that we will find sustenance."*

Writer W. Paul Jones wrote, *'Hope is the simple trust that God has not forgotten the recipe for manna.'*

I love that! *'Hope is the simple trust that God has not forgotten the recipe for manna.'*

Manna, you may remember, is the miraculous food God provided for the Hebrew people every single day as they wandered for forty years in the wilderness on their way to freedom.

The hope of God contains the promise that we will be fed, even if we never see the fruit of our hope-filled actions.

Barbara Kingsolver writes this about hope: *"The very least you can do in your life is figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof."*

What roof do you live under?

As we live in a world that gives us so many reasons **not** to be people of hope, we give thanks that Mary was willing to sing a dangerous song pregnant with hope. May we sing too.

*A poem by Jan Richardson:*

*This restless hope*

*is what drives me*

*beyond the weariness*

*beyond the discomfort*

*beyond every thought*

*that what I carry within me  
will never come to birth.*

*This restless hope  
beyond all reason  
flutters beneath my heart  
and grows within my soul.*

*It is beyond me,  
And it is of me,  
And it is delivering me  
Home.*

*Amen.*

*End Notes:*

- *NIGHT VISIONS: SEARCHING THE SHADOWS OF ADVENT AND CHRISTMAS, Jan L. Richardson. Wanton Gospeller Press. 1998. P. 56.*

- *LUKE FOR EVERYONE, Tom Wright, Westminster John Knox Press. 2001. P. 14.*