

Series: Hope is Here

Message 1: Why we lose hope

Scripture: Luke 1.5-25

Intro

If you have your bible go ahead and turn to Luke 1. The year 2020...is almost over. I think most of us will be glad in some respect or another to see 2020 in the rear view. And there is something we do at the end of each year that is a very intentional rhythm for our church. At the end of the year, whether its been a good or bad year...we orient our focus onto the hope found in the arrival of Jesus Christ. We call this season ADVENT. Which is the latin word for "arrival" and has been used for centuries as the name for the Christian celebration of Christmas. Our sermons and worship services focus on the arrival of Christ and why it matters so much for us.

We normally wait until after thanksgiving but I believe we need an extended dosage of hope right now. Our Advent theme this year is the promise that comes with the arrival of Jesus:

Hope Is Here (Series slide)

Hope is here in 2020. The arrival of Jesus isn't just an ancient story that generates warm fuzzies. It's a message that brings hope right here right now to you and I. Over the next few weeks we are talking about a **current** hope. We'll get into that in just a second.

As a part of our ADVENT season we are going to equip you with a set of resources for you and your family to celebrate Christmas with. We will have an advent calendar that will offer you a brief guided devotional for the 25 days that lead up to Christmas. We are also going to be doing something we call the Christmas Missions Offering. This is a gift our church gives together to the mission of God. We'll talk about that more next week.

Ok TODAY as we open up our series we are starting in verse 5 of Luke 1. This series will take us through Luke's account of the arrival of Jesus and it is packed with hope. We are going to see hope interrupting lives, hope redeeming lives, hope filling hearts of faith, hope that has no boundaries that can change the hearts of kings and shepherds, saints and sinners. And what makes Christmas so powerful is that the hope it brings is current. It's here. Now. For us. With the same force and effect it had 2000 years ago. And maybe the power of Christmas this year for you will be receiving Christmas not as a season of hope for the general public but as a specific current source of hope for YOU. For your situation & for your family. Hope is here.

Luke begins with God delivering hope to two people with a tired prayer. The kind of prayer that had been prayed a lot, and then the pray-er of the prayer never saw an answer to it so they just kind of filed it in the "that's never gonna happen so stop praying" category. Do you have any prayers that would fall in there?

back in March my children began praying for God to take away the Coronavirus. Ya'll...9 months is a long time for elementary aged kids to pray for something. And in my heart I'm like LORD COME ON, I don't want them to get tired of praying it and just stop and get jaded to believing in your power. I don't want the circumstances they SEE and FEEL to cause them to lose hope in an unseen God. I wonder if some of you stopped praying because you felt like, based on your circumstances either not changing or maybe getting worse, God must not have been listening. You lost hope. It hurt to hope. So to protect yourself you stopped hoping.

Today as we open the Christmas account, we open it to two people who seemed to have been in that spot. One of whom, ironically enough, was a priest. And in bringing a long awaited answer to these two people we are going to see God provide a living hope powerful enough to carry your tired prayers. We will walk through Luke 1.5-25. I'll walk you through the situation and we'll see God at work. Then after walking through it we'll zoom out and I'll show you why we lose hope why there is hope for the hope-less.

5 In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest of Abijah's division named Zechariah. His wife was from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth.

- Herod is going to be a looming figure in our series. He's a puppet king over Judea. Rome is in charge, but Herod is allowed to be called king because he was pretty shrewd & hard handed in how he dealt with Judea.
- Zechariah & Elizabeth. These are our main characters for today. They are an older married couple. Think

grandparent age. Elizabeth's ancestor Aaron is a very important priest in the old testament. And actually Aaron's wife was named Elizabeth so she's even inherited that name. Basically these are two people who should be given great respect because of their isrealite priestly heritage. Which makes them hard to relate to.

6 Both were righteous in God's sight, living without blame according to all the commands and requirements of the Lord.

These were two great people. It is rare for the bible to paint people with such a glowing brush. They were not only Israelite by blood, but they lived like God's people. Like Noah and Abraham they lived with integrity and faith. They were the model of obedience to God. Which you might think makes them harder to relate to. Until verse 7.

7 But they had no children because Elizabeth could not conceive, and both of them were well along in years.

They had no children. Now, what we know from Psalm 127.3...something these two would surely have known. I mean Zech was a priest...he knew God's word. Elizabeth was a descendant of priests & had been taught God's word. So they knew Psalm 127.3 says children are a blessing from the Lord. Offspring a reward.

And here they are...God's people by birth, by career, and by lifestyle. They honored God. And yet, God had with-held the blessing that was regarded in this day and age to be the greatest blessing God could give a couple. In fact if you weren't able to have kids...we'll see at the end of our passage

the community is going to think you've got something wrong with you.

And I wonder if anybody can relate to that. Specifically when it comes to marriage and family... When you don't follow the unspoken life path of getting married & having children...you can feel the eyes of the community around you saying "I wonder what is wrong with him?"

8 When his division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God,

There were 24 divisions. Every priest would be on duty for major holidays and then each division had 2 weeks a year where they served. So this is one of Zechariah's two weeks. He's one of many. Some say up to 1,000 priests per division were appointed because after all you were going to be slaughtering 1,000 animals in the period of a few hours.¹ And I tell you all of that to make the next verse stand out to you like it should

9 it happened that he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense.

"It happened" that he was chosen by lot. One of the bible's favorite literary tools is irony. The casting of lots is somewhat like rolling of dice. Do you think it was chance that he was the one chosen...by chance? Of course not. In fact only priests who had never burned incense on the altar were eligible to be

¹ Tractate *Ta'anit* in the Jerusalem Talmud numbers 1,000 priests per division, 24,000 total. Whether actual numbers were that high is unknown, but priestly divisions required large numbers of able-bodied men to offer

chosen. So here you have a guy whose number has not been called for years! He's been waiting. Which is his life story. Waiting on God. While younger guys keep getting their names selected by chance. But then on this day...his name is called. This is such a cool set-up by the Lord.

10 At the hour of incense the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. 11 An angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the altar of incense.

Ok an angel has shown up. THIS IS A BIG DEAL. Right side of the altar. That's the earthly equivalent of the right hand of the throne of God. This is a place of important authority.

12 When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified and overcome with fear.

Terrified – OF COURSE he's terrified. A giant warrior of light has shown up. This was NOT normal. Nothing can prepare you for this. A holy angel has just appeared in the holy temple during a holy ritual and this priest is terrified. He's humbled. He knows even though he's lived a holy life he is unworthy of the pure holiness of God. He knows the stories of Angels appearing to Gideon and Daniel in the Old Testament and certainly he doesn't think he's worthy of such status. So he doesn't know what to think. Only that he is finally in the temple and he's never heard of this happening to the other guys in his division or any division. He's confused and afraid.

the various sacrifices, which during Passover, for example, required the slaughter of no fewer than 100,000 lambs in the temple within a period of a few hours.¹

13 But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, because your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.

Ok take that in for a second. Your prayer has been heard. What prayer? Ok This is so cool. God is answering two prayers at the same time.

- Zechariah’s prayer could be his professional prayer he’s making as a priest. Which is a prayer for God to send the messianic savior to redeem Israel. Well is that the prayer God has heard? Yes. But he’s heard another prayer too.
- Zechariah’s very personal, tired prayer for a child. For years he wanted a child. And that prayer wasn’t answered. And now here in the temple God is answering the prayers Zechariah has prayed at his bedside.

And in God’s timing the son he will give to Zechariah will be bound together in the work of the messiah himself...John means “God is gracious.” This is the announcement of the arrival of the character you may know from the bible as John the Baptist. Listen to what the angel says about him:

14 There will be joy and delight for you, and many will rejoice at his birth. (He’s a miracle baby. Born to an old couple in response to old prayers)

15 For he will be great in the sight of the Lord and will never drink wine or beer. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit while still in his mother’s womb.

That’s not normal. In a couple of weeks though we will see en-utero John leap when in the presence of en-utero Jesus. He was created by God to celebrate Jesus.

16 He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 And he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the disobedient to the understanding of the righteous, to make ready for the Lord a prepared people.”

There is SO MUCH here. Elijah was a prophet in the OT & a prophet’s job was to turn rebellious Israel back to God. Nobody did that in a more prominent way than Elijah on Mt Carmel with this huge showdown where he went up alone against 450 prophets of Baal. And after showing how impotent Baal was & how powerful the one true God was...he struck down all 450 prophets. And then Israel worshipped the Lord. That dude had the Spirit of God with him and this angel is saying the same SPIRIT & POWER that Elijah had...the power to call down fire from heaven...John will have it.

18 “How can I know this? ” Zechariah asked the angel. “For I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years.”

I like how Z knew not to call his wife old. Well along in years. Like she’s achieved something. Ok. Now if you are a bible reader already you might feel like you’ve heard this before. This conversation is very similar to one Abraham had with God back in Genesis 17. He was 99 and Sarah his wife was old too and God says you are going to have a kid and he laughs and says how can this be because we are old. And God says it will happen because he is God.

Well, Z knew that story. And yet, still doesn't believe. Because the circumstances are impossible. So he expresses his doubt.

19 The angel answered him, "I am Gabriel, who stands in the presence of God, and I was sent to speak to you and tell you this good news. 20 Now listen. You will become silent and unable to speak until the day these things take place, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their proper time."

Zechariah is silenced by God. Why? God didn't silence Abraham when he questioned God. In just a few verses the same angel appears to Mary and says she's gonna have a miracle baby and the virgin Mary says "how can this be?" and God doesn't discipline her. So is Z just catch God on a bad day? No. Something very, very important is being revealed here. God is not as interested in the words you say as he is interested in the heart behind those words.

God sees unbelief in Zechariah's heart where he sees belief in Mary's. And God is after our hearts. I can't say this enough to you. God looks at the heart. And when he looks at Zechariah's heart he sees unbelief. He sees skepticism. He sees a guy who has let time and circumstances erode his belief in the God he serves as a priest for. So he publicly believes in God. So in irony...since his role as a priest is speaking on behalf of God to people...God is going to shut him up. BUT...in God's grace he still fulfills his promise to Zechariah. The Lord disciplines the one he loves.

21 Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, amazed that he stayed so long in the sanctuary. 22 When he did come out, he could not speak to them. Then they realized that he

had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He was making signs to them and remained speechless. 23 When the days of his ministry were completed, he went back home.

And then we get this beautiful quick word about Elizabeth. We will see her a lot more in two weeks but wow look at this...

24 After these days his wife Elizabeth conceived and kept herself in seclusion for five months. She said, 25 "The Lord has done this for me. He has looked with favor in these days to take away my disgrace among the people." -- Luke 1:5-25

Why hide herself for 5 months? I read one scholar from the 1500s who said it was so she could proclaim God's grace with power. Sometimes when the works of God show themselves gradually, we take less notice of them. Like when you are with a middle schooler every day you don't notice how they keep getting taller. But when a friend who lives far away sees them for the first time in a year they go WOW. Maybe Elizabeth wants to wow people with the faithfulness of God. Maybe. But...I think regardless of her motive, Luke wants us to pay attention to verse 25.

His gift to Elizabeth is to take away the disgrace people gave her. She was not disgraced before God. This is big. Remember, she was holy & upright before the Lord and was suffering no loss in the kingdom of heaven. But something is different in **these days**. She has been grafted in to the story of the coming of Jesus. and God has blessed her with a child as a part of it. And she, just like her child, will find her identity in the savior her son will prepare the way for.

At the start of Advent...the celebration of hope being here...I want to see from Zechariah's story **why we lose hope in God and his promises**. Because we have to deal with that if we are going to find hope this time around.

1. We Demand evidence from a God who doesn't owe it to us.

It is very possible to demand too much evidence from God before we are willing to trust him. See Zechariah wasn't like Mary or Abraham who believed and wanted to learn more. No his questioning was one that demanded God to PROVE himself before he would trust God. And I think this is something a lot of us do. We comb for answers and answers and explanations and we refuse to fully trust God with our lives until God delivers some sort of undeniable sign.

Ex: David Jeremiah tells story of a couple who was struggling with the idea of tithing. Weren't sure they would be able to get by without that 10%. So David Jeremiah says ok what if you write the check and I'll put it right here in my desk drawer. Won't touch it. You come back to me at the end of the month and let me know if you made it. They say "OK." And he says back to them...you are really going to put more trust in me, a sinful pastor, than in God himself?

We want proof God is going to be faithful before we trust him. And God says that's not how it works! You gotta trust me!
*Now I will say this – Next week we are going to see its acceptable to humbly seek explanation. But there is a giant difference between arrogant skepticism and humbly seeking explanation. And it all goes back to the heart.

2. We let our hope be determined by our circumstances

This is a really hard one for me because I'm not saying that circumstances aren't real. Sometimes they are real painful. And sometimes painful circumstances last for a really long time. That's why you need to share your life with other Christians. You need some people to speak hope into it. But listen Zechariah's prayer had not been answered. And so...he had managed to get to a place where he publicly served God but privately doubted him. Lemme talk to ministry leaders. To pastors who might be listening. Is it possible you've fallen into that spot? Where because your circumstances haven't changed...or maybe they got worse... you've lost hope in God?

Ya'll in a broken and fallen world we CANNOT put hope...hope reserved for God himself...into our circumstances. Because if we do, we'll start to think God

How to hope again

1. Don't Despair – Repent and press on in faith.

2. Decide to hope in Christ this Christmas