

Series: Advent 2025

Hope in Unlikely Places

Luke 1:5-17, Romans 15:13

Sermon by Lead Pastor Paul Joslin

Waterstone Community Church, Littleton, Colorado

Sunday morning, November 30, 2025

Erica: As we enter into the story of Advent together this weekend, we accept a sacred invitation to slow down, to look up, and to wait with expectation. We are reminded that even in silence, God does a work of redemption. We recall God's faithfulness to keep His promises and that He works even in hidden and ordinary spaces. A reading from Luke one, verses 5 through 17: "In the time of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly, but they were childless, because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. When Zechariah's division was on duty, and he was serving as a priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense, and when the time for burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zachariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear, but the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zachariah. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife, Elizabeth, will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and a delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth. For he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit before he is even born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to their God, and he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.'" We light a candle today as an act of remembrance of God's plan to redeem his people. We meditate on the restoration of hope through the promised birth of John, the forerunner of Christ Jesus, the Messiah. Now, we will continue on in worship, and as we start the Advent season, we are going to start with a message of hope. We get to hear a story from our friend Hannah about how she maintained hope through some really difficult losses, losses of babies. So please direct your attention to the screens as we get to share in hearing her story.

Hannah: Hope has been difficult to have a relationship with. I feel like in my younger days, hope was just there, present. My life was out in front of me, but as life has progressed, hope has gotten more difficult to hold. God has made me to be a mom. God has made me to be somebody that loves children and wants to care for children, and the hope that He was going to bring that result was easy. Yeah, getting married, just decided we were going to start a family, and no reason to have any thoughts that anything would be wrong or would go wrong. We had J.J. It was a wonderful pregnancy, no issues. When we decided it was time to have another, that was when things started to go wrong. Jeremiah was our second baby. Again, no reason to think anything was going bad, going wrong, until about fifteen weeks, when we went in and discovered that he did not have a heartbeat anymore.

I just remember Josh always saying, ‘We do, we have hope. We have hope, and our hope is that Jesus will come back and make things right one day, and that that is where our hope lies,’ and I do not know that I, at that time, really felt that. I just knew that I was, I felt the grief heavy. We went on to decide that we still felt like God was calling us to have children and that He wanted that for us, and we wanted that, and so we got pregnant with Eli, and they watched extra carefully and caught that there was an issue, and they were able to save Eli’s pregnancy, and Eli was wonderful, born strong, healthy, really a miracle. They had determined that I had something called incompetent cervix, and knowing that, they did lots of different interventions to hopefully help, and so we decided we were going to try again, knowing hopefully that they would be able to catch the issue and fix the issue, and we were hopeful at the beginning that they did. However, something unexpected that was not known happened, and the day after I had seen the doctor, I went into pre-term labor and went in and delivered Rachel Hope at twenty weeks and one day. She lived for about thirty minutes. She was breathing, but because my body just, I could not hold on to her anymore, she passed as well. That was a really hard loss, because I had made it past the point that I did with Jeremiah, and twenty weeks is a big deal when you are pregnant, because it feels like you make it to twenty weeks and you are just going to sail smoothly. I remember too, when it came time to name her, I said to Josh that her name needed to be Hope, because my hope was going with her. It was dying with her. In my journal, I would write, ‘If this is not what you want, then you have to take away the desire in my heart, because I can’t. I can’t just keep having a desire that you are not going to fulfill.’”

With the last pregnancy, Eden, we tried something different, and going forward with that, and again, it not working, and again, my body failing. In different ways, I have had people say like, “At what point will you be satisfied?” and I won’t. I won’t. There is no satisfaction, because I have three babies that are not here, and that is a longing that I can’t ever, I’m not trying to replace them. I am not trying to replace them. I will always have a longing. I always will long for heaven. I think that God has created in me maybe stubbornness towards my desires, but I also look, and I say, He has brought me through all these things, maybe to just be strong for now. For this moment, there is something, there is still something that I have had to endure these times, because of what is next.”

Paul: I can’t thank Hannah enough for just being willing to share her story with us. It is one of vulnerability and heartache, and what you will notice over the next few weeks as we walk through this season of Advent together, as we focus on these words like joy and love and peace and hope, is that there is a tension we sit in during Advent, and you saw that tension displayed so eloquently by Hannah in that these words that we have for Advent call us to something more. They call us to something that our hearts are longing for, and yet they also remind us that in this life, there is a gap, and that we experience hardship. We experience these words in ways that are incomplete, and as we hold on to things like hope, we are doing so in a world that is very broken, and so I am just so grateful for Hannah being willing to share that story, and you are going to hear a few other stories in the coming weeks about this tension that we hold onto in the midst of Advent, in the season. When Hannah was sharing her story, there was a moment that really stood out to me where they named their daughter Rachel Hope, and as she named the daughter, she said that her hope has gone with her. Her hope is dying with her, and I wonder if you have ever felt that moment before, that moment where you have been holding onto something, you have been longing for

something, and it feels like it is the last draw, where it feels like the hope that you have held onto or the expectation you have had, the desire you have had, it just feels like it is no more, that hope is gone.

I think that is a very relatable experience for many of us, and as I have been wrestling with Advent and praying and preparing for this season that we find ourselves in, I think one of the challenges of Advent is how do you say the things that have always been said around this time of year in a way that people are unfamiliar with, or maybe even in the familiarity we begin to tune out the message? As I was thinking about that, I came to this place, and I do not know if you have been there before, but I was thinking about Advent, and I was questioning, and I was wondering, why does Advent begin with hope? Like, why not love or joy or peace? Why is hope the first week of Advent? Why is that the tradition that we have fallen into? After all, I have preached on Advent before. I have preached these terms. I have never questioned the order, but this year I found myself asking, why does Advent start with hope?

As I asked myself that, I do not know if you have ever had these moments before, but it came to this place where I did not just begin questioning the order. I just began thinking about the word, hope, and I began wondering, okay, what even is hope? Like, what does hope mean in the day-to-day? Because I think it sounds nice in theory. It feels a little abstract. It is one of those words that I think we all think as Christians, we are supposed to know what it is and know what it means, and then when you actually sit down and think about it, or at least when I did, I thought, what does it matter in my daily life? What difference does hope make in my day-to-day? How does hope help me through the chaos of my week? What does hope mean when I sit down with someone who is hurting so deeply that as I talk with them, and I hear their story, and I hear the brokenness in their lives, how does hope meet me in that space, when I do not even have words to express to them?

I think many times we have this idea of hope that we know it is so beautiful in theory. We know it is something that we are supposed to believe in and something we are supposed to have as Christians and followers of Jesus, but if we actually pause to think about it for a moment, I am not sure that we have an understanding of what hope is, and not the churchy version, not the Hallmark Channel version, not the version of hope where it is just, stay positive, but the gritty hope, the concrete, everyday version of hope. Where does that matter?

I know that some of you came in today, and I know because I know your stories, that some of you came in today, and your hope feels threadbare. Some of you are in seasons where you are struggling with your children, whether they are young or adult, and you are seeing them make choices. You are seeing them act in certain ways. You are seeing them take on wounds through the way that they are living in their life, and you are holding on to hope, but it feels like it is getting a little thin. How long will they be on this path? For some of you, it is your marriage, and this place that used to feel warm and special and effortless now feels distant and cold and difficult, and you are just wondering, what hope is there in this? Will this ever change? Will my spouse ever fix this? For some of you, it is the diagnosis, it is the chronic pain, it is the financial strains, the mental health issues that nobody else sees, and you are wondering, what good is hope in that space? For some of you, it is maybe a sin that you just feel like you will never get over. You are struggling with it, and there is no hope of change. What does hope have to say in those spaces?

Since I have been reflecting on hope, and you are getting a very vivid picture into my mind and the way it works sometimes and the skeptic within, for me, I think sometimes hope feels more like a bruise

than a blessing. A bruise, it is that spot where if someone pushes it again, it is already wounded, it is a little tender, and the pain is a little more intense. Hope is like that. It is those situations in life where I want to hope for something more, but often it feels like it is just exposing me to more pain. To maybe bring a little levity to the moment, as I was reflecting on hope, one of the areas that came up in my life where I think hope is actually playing a weekly role for me, is in the Dallas Cowboys, and I assure you, I have actually been convicted. I do not know if it is the Holy Spirit or your e-mails, but I really think I need to start moving away from Dallas Cowboys illustrations. I think it is becoming a crutch, but if you will permit me one more, and then my New Year's resolution will be no more Cowboys talk in 2026, all right? Go Broncos. Yeah, I think I made that same resolution this year, and it did not last very long, but that is how resolutions go, but here is the thing with hope in the Dallas Cowboys, all right? If you are an outsider watching me as a Dallas Cowboys fan, you understand what I mean, and it is this, that every year Jerry, he is a master. Jerry Jones is a master of selling you on hope, and the belief that this is your year. You are going to make the Super Bowl, and you start out with a lot of hope, and then somewhere along the way, hope dies, and for me, that was about a month and a half ago, when the Broncos beat down the Cowboys like 44 to 10 or something like that, and I was like, okay, we are two and five, we are in one, we tied someone somehow, and I was just like, all right, season is over. Next year, maybe it will be different, but I can just resign myself to not caring about this team anymore. We are not any good. It is fine, I do not care, I do not like them anyways, right?

That is where I got to, and then the Cowboys went on a bye, and they rolled off three straight victories against the Raiders, the Eagles, and the Chiefs. I know that helped you guys out as Broncos fans, so you are welcome. Yeah, we are here for you, and suddenly, I have hope again, and I am thinking, okay, now we are six and five. We just beat the two teams that were in the Super Bowl last year. Do you know what that means? Super Bowl, baby. That is where we are headed, and we are terrible, that is not going to happen. What is going to happen is they are going to rip my heart out in traumatic fashion and lose to the Giants on the eighteenth week of the season and miss the playoffs. Or they will make the playoffs, and then they will be destroyed by the Green Bay Packers or something, and then it got me thinking, okay, is hope good for anything other than setting you up for disappointment? Because that is what I feel about the Cowboys, and I think that is often what we feel about hope in real life. If we bring it back to center, what we often feel in real life is that we have these hopes, these expectations, these desires. We want these circumstances to change, but will they ever, or will we just leave more disappointed? So why even bother with hope? Because we are just going to have our heart ripped out, or be disappointed, or things are not going to get better like we want, I think that is the reality that we feel about hope, is what is it actually good for? Does it just lead to disappointment? Is it really just nothing more than emotional bait pulling you in and trying to say like, hey, this is going to work out? And then things feeling unresolved or getting worse, and if hope is that, why does Advent begin with hope?

So, if we are going to understand today in this season why Advent starts with hope, we have to talk about this version of hope that I have been talking about that is actually more cultural than Biblical. It is this understanding of hope that whether we realize it or not, the hope we have inherited from our culture is basically optimism dressed up in religious language, and if you look at how we understand hope in everyday conversation, we usually say something like this. "I really hope things get better. I hope this

works out for you. I hope this situation changes for you,” and the thing about cultural hope is all of it, all of those hopes that I just mentioned, they have one thing in common, and they are rooted in circumstances. They depend on something out there getting fixed, improving, or turning around, and hope becomes this emotional forecasting. It is just trying to predict that things will get better or make a better future, even when we can't control any of it, and some of you have been in those seasons before where someone has offered you that kind of hope. You are struggling in a certain area of your life, and someone says, just, “Hey, be positive. It will work out in the end.” It is the kind of thing where I know people mean well, and they are trying to pull from scripture to encourage you, but they say things like, “God just won't give you more than you can handle, so it has got to turn the corner somehow. Like, this is a lot. Maybe it will just get better from here. You have hit rock bottom. It can only go up from here.”

The problem with that is, what if that is not true? That is a very fragile hope. What if your marriage does not get better? What if cancer wins? What if the child that you have been on your knees praying for never comes home again? Then hope is based on the circumstances improving, getting better, and if that does not happen, or if, God forbid, things get worse, then suddenly hope crumbles, and it does not have any strength left to it, because it was based all on your circumstances improving or getting better. What our culture offers us when it talks about things like hope, the problem with the cultural understanding of hope is that it is circumstantial, and the problem with circumstantial hope is that it rises and falls with our circumstances of our lives, and if cultural hope is all we have got, and hope really does not feel like the first word we need during Advent. It feels like the last thing we need, because then it becomes this promise of, “Oh yeah, something in the future will be better, but right now it is going to really be awful,” and that is not actually hope. That is not hope at all.

If you understand the Biblical definitions of the words for hope, they define hope completely differently than our culture does. I mean, they are not the same at all. In fact, I think if the Biblical writers could have a conversation with us about how we tend to understand hope, they would say, “You know what? That is not hope. That is just wishful thinking.” That is just positive thinking or hoping that things will get better. That is not actually hope, because what you see in scripture is that hope is actually not about our circumstances at all. It is about God. When you see the word “hope” coming up, to understand what the word means and the way that it shows up in the scriptures, it is that it really doesn't have anything to do with what is going on in our lives. It has everything to do with what God is doing, and so there are two words that I want to look through today. One is a Hebrew word that means “to wait,” and then another is a Hebrew word that means ‘hope.’

This is the first word that I want you to look at. It is *yakal*. Can everybody say *yakal*? Did you get the “ch,” like the sounds like you are about to spit? That is really important. If you did, you were a Hebrew scholar. If you did not, keep working at it. This basically just it is a word that we would understand as “to wait,” and so you see this word pop up. So, like in the story of Genesis with Noah, he is waiting. He is calling for God to show up and for the waters to recede. He is just standing on the boat, passively waiting for God to do something, and he is waiting. He is hoping that God will show up and that the situation will change, but it is this image of actively standing at your post as like a soldier and looking out and waiting for something to take place.

So that is one way you can wait on God. It is you are waiting for Him to show up, but there is a second word, and this one is a little easier to say, and this word is kavah, but it is also a little more vivid. Kavah is the feeling of tension and expectation while you wait for something to happen. That might feel a little wordy, but it is really practical. Have you ever had an expectation of what something should be or what something should look like and the tension of not having that thing happen yet? That is this kind of hope. That is kavah. To help illustrate that, I actually need a volunteer to come up and do something with me. All right, Chris, you just got pointed at. I'm so sorry. Liam's coming up, because he volunteered you, so Liam, you come on up, buddy. I love having the students in the first section, because I can always find one of them who is willing to come up. All right, Liam, I am so sorry. I think the last time you were up here, we played Jenga together, and that did not go very well, so this will go a little better. We are playing tug-of-war. All right? Now, you are probably stronger than I, so do not pull too hard, okay? He's probably the only one here who is stronger than I am, by the way. No, I am just kidding. That does not matter at all. All right, so Liam, here is what we're going to do. I just need you to pull on the rope, give it a little tension. We are playing tug-of-war. All right? You see this tension in the rope? You see how it is pulled taut, like it can be slack, but it is tight. There is a tension here that we are pulling between the expectation and the reality, the hope of something happening and the tension of it not happening yet. That is kavah, and the illustration in scripture is that you are waiting for something to happen. You are waiting for God to show up. You hang onto hope. You hold onto hope because you believe that God will move in some sort of way. You do not know what way He will move, but you are not letting go of the rope. You are holding on and holding on in the tension. Thank you so much, Liam. You did a great job. Thank you. Can we give it up for Liam? He did a good job holding that rope. He is like, "That is the easiest thing I have ever had to do in church."

Here is the thing about kavah. It actually has this root word, kav, which is "cord." It is rope, and when you pull a cord tight, you feel the tension. You are feeling the stretch, the strain. You are holding on. You are waiting for the tension to release. That is what kavah looks like. You are in the tension. Here is the important thing; the Biblical authors understand that kavah is the decision to hold onto God in the midst of the struggle. It is holding onto hope, not predicting a happy outcome, but it is trusting God's character while the outcome is still unknown. It is trusting God and holding onto God when the outcome is still unknown. You hear this word used a lot in the prophets, where they are sitting in this tension. They are living in exile. Their land has been taken from them. God seems silent. He seems absent, and they kavah. They are going to hold onto the tension. They are going to hold onto the rope and hold onto hope, because they know God will show up. The first shock of Biblical hope is that it is not based on promising circumstances, but on a God who keeps his promises. It is a very different offering than what our culture gives us, where it says, "Yeah, you just have to hold on and just wait for things to get better," but scripture, what scripture says is you are waiting for God to fulfill his promises, and you can trust that.

It is like the difference. Cultural hope is a little bit like buying a scratch-off lottery ticket, and you just hope you are going to win. There is no certainty. It is a complete unknown. You have no idea whether or not you will actually win the lottery. Biblical hope is like having a signed check from a billionaire and saying, "I do not know when this is going to be cashed, but I know the person who has given it to me is good for it," and it is not saying that every circumstance will be tied up with a bow and made perfect and

that you will get everything you want. It is not at all the prosperity gospel. For scripture, it is saying that hope is not positivity. It is not positive thinking. It is not looking on the bright side. Hope is a willingness to stay in the tension because you trust the one that you are waiting for. That is the image of Biblical hope, and it is so important for us to understand these words that we use, because they are the catch-all words, hope, love, peace, joy. They are those words that lose meaning at a certain point, because we have heard them so much, but hope is this idea that we are holding onto God, which I think is why Advent begins with hope, because Advent invites us to trade our thin, circumstantial optimism for a gritty, ancient, unshakable hope that is rooted in God's character, and when we understand that, I think we are ready for the Advent story, which begins with people living in the tension.

So, there is the passage that Erica read earlier. It is Luke chapter 1, starting in verse 5. It begins this way: "In the time of Herod, king of Judah." Now pause. This is really important. Luke does not start his Advent story with angels or shepherds or announcements. He starts with this phrase that was loaded with meaning, "In the time of King Herod of Judah." There is a lot of meaning packed into that. First of all, what he is saying is in the time when Israel or Judea was ruled by a puppet king, that Rome had just placed a puppet king, not a king from the line of David, but just this puppet political figure who was overseeing the nation, and to make matters worse, it was not that he was a good or righteous ruler. He was a fairly evil man, who oppressed the people, who had all sorts of paranoia. In fact, that is the king that we see who kills all of the babies born around Jesus' time in Bethlehem, this is that king. It is a way of saying that in the time when we had no hope, when we were ruled by Rome, when God had not spoken for 400 years, and we had lived in silence, in the time when we had an oppressive puppet king, who kept placing certain people in power who were corrupt and were just there to do his agenda, and they were placed in places like the temple, worship had become corrupt. It was all of these places that he is pointing to that is saying when things were not the way that they were supposed to be. When it looked like we had no hope, when it looked like all the promises of the kingdom of God had died and been buried and gone out the door, in that day, when people's prayers seemed to bounce off the ceiling, and they were just simply asking, God, are you still there? Luke says, in that day, when things looked hopeless, God began to move.

So, it goes on, and it says, "In that time of King Herod of Judea," when there was no hope, "there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah, and his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron." Now this is a way of saying these people were of the right people of Israel. She is related to Aaron, the brother of Moses. He is of the right tribe to be a priest. These are godly people, both by heritage and by the way they lived their lives. Verse 6: "Both of them were righteous." They lived well with others and with God in the sight of God, "observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly." These people understood scripture. They lived the scriptures out. They understood what God was asking of them. They were living holy and blameless and righteous lives. They were the kind of people who would lead a small group at Waterstone or who would show up first for the Day to Serve. They were the kind of people who showed up to worship. They prayed. They understood what it meant to live a righteous life, which makes the next sentence even more shocking, "but they were childless, because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old." They were old, they were barren, they could not have any children, and in that day, that statement was a statement on their character. People would have seen that as a disgrace.

People would have thought that the reason they were not able to conceive, and we do this to people all of the time, if something does not go right in our lives, it might be you. Maybe it is not just that life is broken and hard, and terrible things happen, but maybe you are doing something wrong, and that is the reason that your life is the way it is. That is the stigma that they lived under, but scripture tells us that that was not true, that they were righteous, they were blameless. They had not done anything wrong to deserve this. What is it saying? That they had no hope because life sometimes is without hope. It feels broken, and we experience that brokenness. That is their story, and I wonder if you have been there before, where you feel like you were following all of the things God has told you to do. You have lived life correctly. You followed scripture, you grew up, you went to church, you did all of the things that you were supposed to do. You followed all of the rules, and then you find yourself somewhere in life where life has not gone the way you expected. The marriage that you thought God promised you is hard. The life that you thought would happen, if you followed God, you would get the career you always desired, and you find yourself struggling and not sure that you even like what you do. It is those places in life where you feel like you have even followed God, and you have raised your children correctly, and you follow the scriptures that said if you raise them on the path they should go, they won't depart from it, only to find out that they hit 18, 19, 20, and they start departing from the path you raised them in, and you wonder, and you question, "God, where are you? I did everything you asked. I did everything you wanted, and still, I am experiencing this brokenness. I do not feel like I have any hope."

That is Elizabeth and Zechariah. They are living in the space where they have done everything they were supposed to do, and they feel like God is not there, and it is in that space, not just in this geopolitical space of no hope, but this very personal space of no hope. They were barren. They were aging. They were living with this quiet ache of the life that had settled into their bones, which I think makes them the perfect candidates to begin Advent, because they are like you and me. They are faithful people living in the tension between promise and fulfillment. They represent every person who has ever prayed for something beautiful and watched the calendar pages turn with no answer, and it is in that space that we see God show up and begin to move.

Verse 11 and 13: An angel appears to Zechariah. He has given this opportunity to go into the temple to burn incense. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, and we are told that he was chosen by a lot. It was just this random chance. God calls him into this space, "and an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense, and when Zechariah saw him, he was startled, and he was gripped with fear, but the angel of the Lord said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard.'" What prayer? The prayer for a son, for a child. This prayer that they had been holding onto for ages, longing for something to happen in their life where they could experience the gift of childbirth and raising a child. That prayer that they had prayed for decades has been heard and is being answered in this moment. What a beautiful thing that God shows up in this space, and he says that your prayer has been answered. You will have a son, and he goes on to tell them about all of the things this son, John the Baptist, will do. He will be the precursor to the Messiah. He will be the one who makes a way for the Messiah, the king, to return and set all things right. In this barren womb, in this aging couple, in this day and age with King Herod, where evil and corruption reigned, God chose to move and to act.

I think what the story is telling us is that hope, and this is an important thing about hope, is that God's hope, it does not just happen in changed circumstances. God's hope loves to spring up in the unlikeliest of places. What we see is that He brings the forerunner of Christ, John the Baptist, out of a barren, elderly couple. He launches the mission of the Messiah in a sleepy town called Bethlehem. He announces the good news to shepherds, whose testimony was not even admissible in court. Hope starts in the unlikeliest of places, but I think if you are like me, I am not sure that we like that. We do not like the silent, quiet hope. We want something to show up and for our circumstances to change. We want God to move in power. We want things to be fixed. We do not want to experience the same thing, and so we can react sometimes to hope and to the small hope, the little changes, and we wonder, "Is this really God? Is God showing up in this?"

That is exactly what Zechariah does. He hears this announcement from the angel, and in verse 18, he says this, "How can I be sure of this?" I mean, are you sure? Do you know my story? Are you sure that this is what is happening in my life? I am an old man, and men, listen to this. He changes the language for his wife. "She is well along in years." Well along in years. You do not have to say, "old." There is something here for each and every one of us. You can soften it for them, okay? "I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years. How could this be?" How could we be expected to have a child? I think Zechariah in this moment, because in a second you will see that because of his question, he is given nine months of silence, and he is not allowed to speak, and so we see this as, "Oh man, Zechariah, he just missed it. He is a buffoon, or he does not understand. There is an angel standing in front of him. That should be a pretty clear sign that God is doing something."

I am not sure, though, if Zechariah is totally cynical. I think he is probably exhausted. I think he has been praying for decades for this moment, and if you just think about it practically, an angel shows up and says, "Your dream is going to come true," I mean, you might start to think like, "Is this even real? How do I know this is from God? How do I know that this thing I have just been praying for my whole life is not just like suddenly playing tricks on me in this space? There is incense being burned. Lots of things can happen," right?

It is in that space that God begins to move, and I think that is like us too. There are times in our lives where God begins to move, and it is not so much that we are skeptical. It is just simply that we are exhausted, and so God gives Zechariah the gift of silence for nine months so he can just reflect, and it might be a punishment. It might just be, "Hey, Zechariah, you need to just spend some time listening to me," and when Zechariah is finally able to speak again, it is profound joy at what God has done, but I think a lot of us experience that kind of skepticism or that kind of exhaustion, but I want you to notice what his wife says in verse 25: "The Lord has done this for me in these days," in these days of King Herod and the Roman Empire, and when there was no hope, "He has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people." They will now see that there was not something wrong with me, that it was not my fault that I had been experiencing this affliction, and it is this moment when she turns this moment of hopelessness and recognizes that God is moving even in the hopelessness. I think part of the story is that if God can grow hope there under Herod's rule in a barren womb through an aging priest, then God can grow hope anywhere. Advent begins with hope, because hope begins in the most unlikely places, and unlikely places leave no doubt that God is at work.

Now, you might be thinking, though, of course, Elizabeth can have hope, and she can say, “Yeah, God showed up, and He moved. God has done this for me,” because her circumstances changed. After all, she had wanted a baby, and now she is getting the baby. Her circumstances are improving, and yeah, sort of, absolutely that had been the thing that they had hoped for, but they are still living under the days of King Herod. They are still living in a broken world of Roman occupation, and if you really follow the story through to its conclusion, this son that God gives them grows up to be martyred by that king’s son. So yeah, the circumstance changed somewhat, but they are still living in the tension.

What we see is hope, and often we get these small blessings, these gifts, these circumstances might change some ways, but it does not lead to the perfect happy fairy tale ending. God’s hope is much different than that. It is holding onto the tension until Christ returns. It is the tension between his first coming and his second coming. In the in-between, we will feel blessing, and we will feel bruised, but can we remain holding on to God in that tension? Can we hold onto his hope in that space? The beauty of Advent is that it does not deny the darkness, but it says God has entered into it, and that is why we hold onto hope.

Hope is not some kind of optimism. It is not emotional forecasting that your world will improve, or things will get better. It is not just crossing your fingers and praying, asking God to show up. Hope is a gritty, resilient trust that shows God works in the dark places. Hope grows in the unlikeliest places. It is not fragile. It is not sentimental. It is the Spirit. It is not the spiritual equivalent of just cheering yourself up. Biblical hope is a steady, stubborn refusal to give up on God, because God does not give up on us.

I think one of the beauties of hope, and if you understand it in the Biblical sense, if you understand the Advent story, this is what I think Biblical hope in Christmas means. Biblical hope is a posture of defiance in a disappointing world. It is recognizing the tension. It is understanding that things will not always have a happy ending. It is understanding that sometimes you get the child that you have been praying for, and then that child grows up to be martyred. It is understanding that sometimes the things that you hope for may happen, but you are still going to be existing and living in the tension between Christ’s first coming and his second coming, and will you hold onto hope, even when your circumstances do not change?

I think what hope gives us is a perseverance for the journey, because God knows that in our journey, we are going to experience disappointment. He is not sugarcoating it. He is not saying that if you follow Him, your life will be perfect. He is saying, “There will be disappointment, there will be hardship, but I am not done,” and so it produces this perseverance in this where we do not stop praying, we do not give up, we do not stop moving, because hope is this gritty, stubborn determination to stay faithful even when our circumstances do not change, and hope gives us an anchor for our souls. This is not based on a perfect outcome, but on a perfect Savior, and so when the waves rise, when the future feels unpredictable, when your circumstances feel too much, and it feels like everything is shifting, Jesus does not.

The story of Advent begins with hope in the unlikeliest of places, because hope grows in the unlikeliest of places. It begins in people like you and me, Elizabeth and Zechariah, tired, stretched, waiting for God to do something only God can do, and if God can plant hope in the days of Herod, then He can plant hope now, and if God can breathe hope into Zechariah and Elizabeth, He can breathe hope into you, and if God could turn a barren womb into a birthplace, and a manger into a throne room, and a cross into resurrection, then there is no place in your life too unlikely for hope to grow, so no matter what your

circumstances are, pull the cord tight, remain in the tension, stand in the tension, and hold onto God, because He is faithful, and He is true. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, God, as we begin this journey of Advent, and Lord, as we come into the space where so many different stories, so many different people, so many different realities that they are facing, where they are hoping for things to get better, for things to change, God, I pray they would be reminded of the beauty of Hannah's story, to the brokenness that she shared with us, and yet, even at the end, she proclaims, "Maybe God is working in even this." That is the tension, so God, I pray wherever we are today, whatever tension we are living in, I pray that we would not let go of hope, that we would pray expectantly, that we would long to see you move in our days like you did in the days of King Herod, that God, even when our circumstances do not change, when we do not have the fairy tale ending, when we live in the tension all of our days, that we still trust in the God who keeps his promises, as the God who came 2,000 years ago in a manger and entered into our world, as the God who will return in glory to set all things right. May that be the foundation of our hope. It is in Christ's name that we pray, amen.

Today I want to leave you with a simple prayer from the book of Romans about hope, and in this prayer, it talks about our trust being in God, not our circumstances, to the point where hope can be overflowing within us. That is my prayer for you as we begin this Advent journey together: "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit," amen. You may go in peace.

46:15 minutes

Edited by Tom Kenaston

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