

**The Gift of Hope**  
**Luke 1:5-25**

*Hope: a feeling of expectation or desire for something to happen*

After yesterday's conference championships, many of us are celebrating realized hopes...and still hoping for more good things to come. The announcement of a new baby is another situation that brings with it a great sense of hope. New parents and grandparents eagerly anticipate the arrival of a child into the family. You have probably seen some creative pregnancy announcements. About a year and a half ago, we dressed our then 2-year-old in a T-shirt that said "Big Brother" and brought him to church, and then we waited to see who would notice and what you would say. I've seen other announcements where people line up their shoes with an empty pair of baby shoes to indicate someone is on the way to fill those shoes soon. I had one friend who emailed a picture of her taking a pan out of the oven with the caption "we have a bun in the oven!" I do feel like I should stop here to clarify that I am not making any sort of personal announcement today; rather, I want to draw our attention to our Scripture from this morning, in which we heard an announcement about a baby on the way.

On the first Sunday of Advent, you are probably not surprised to hear a Scripture passage announcing a baby, but this might not have been the one you were expecting. During this season of the year, we often hear the words "not yet." It is "not yet" Christmas day. It is "not yet" time to open presents. It is "not yet" time for a treat or party or celebration. In that same Christmas pattern of "not yet", this is "not yet" the story about Jesus. This is a baby who came before Jesus, a baby whose story and whose life helps prepare the way and helps prepare us to receive and understand and follow Jesus.

Here in Luke chapter 1 verse 5 we are introduced to Zechariah and Elizabeth. Zechariah is a priest, and you may notice that the text identifies Elizabeth as being a descendant of Aaron, which means she was part of the priestly lineage of Israel as well. Verse 6 says both of them were righteous and lived blamelessly before God.

Yet, in verse 7, we discover they have no children. Elizabeth was barren. This puts them in good company, as far as Scripture goes. You probably remember the stories of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, Elkanah and Hannah – couples who longed and hoped and prayed for a child but who experienced emptiness instead.

In addition, Elizabeth and Zechariah, much like the story of Abraham and Sarah from the book of Genesis, are both “getting on in years,” the text tells us. They are running out of hope that they will ever have a child. Hope is expectation and desire, so perhaps it is more accurate to say they were running out of half of hope. They are reaching the point, or are perhaps already there, where they no longer expect it to happen, but I imagine the desire is still strong.

In Biblical times, having children was considered a great blessing. It was important for carrying on not only the family name, but also God’s covenant with Israel. Barrenness was seen as a great misfortune, a shameful condition, and perhaps even evidence of God’s punishment. Women tended to bear that blame more so than men. Not having a child was seen as a failure or shortcoming on the part of the woman.

But the gospel of Luke says Elizabeth and Zechariah were faithful and righteous. They have done nothing wrong. Their infertility is not a punishment. Luke’s gospel challenges the cultural norms of the day.

Sometimes we may feel that because our family does not look like our image of what the perfect family is supposed to be, with a mom, a dad, 2.5 children, a dog and a cat – then there must be something wrong with us.

But this story reminds us that God is a God of hope and surprises. Elizabeth and Zechariah did not experience what many considered to be a sign of blessing, and so they may have wondered if they were overlooked by God. But just as hope is waning, God shows up with surprising good news.

I have usually assumed that in this story, Zechariah is going about his typical duties as a priest. But actually, his role in the temple on the day he received the divine announcement would have been a unique experience, even before the angel appeared. According to ancient rabbinic records, the priests were so numerous that they were divided into groups, and the groups served on a rotating basis. Each group served twice a year for a week at a time. Each day of service, priests who had never offered incense before would cast lots to see which of them would offer the incense that day. Since the lot fell on Zechariah, this suggests he had never offered incense as a priest before. In fact, it is possible he has been waiting for years for the lot to fall on him, much like he and Elizabeth had been waiting for years in hopes of one day having a child. How ironic, or perhaps appropriate it is that as he performs this long awaited priestly function, he is informed about another instance in which a long-held desire will be fulfilled – the desire for a child.

Verse 12 tells us that when Zechariah first saw the angel of the Lord, “he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him.” In Luke’s gospel, sometimes fear is regarded as a negative emotion, such as when Jesus calmed the storm and the disciples were afraid, and Jesus asked them,

“Where is your faith?” In that instance, fear seems to be the opposite of faith. But Luke does not always portray fear that way. In Luke chapter 7, when Jesus raises the dead, verse 16 records the response of the crowd: *Fear seized all of them; and they glorified God, saying, “A great prophet has risen among us!” and “God has looked favorably on his people!”*

Zechariah’s fear does not automatically make him more or less faithful. Fear is a common and even appropriate response to an encounter with the divine. In fact, throughout Scripture, angels often begin their announcements with the words “do not be afraid,” which is how Gabriel begins his message to Zechariah in Luke chapter 1.

The angel goes on to tell Zechariah the good news. His prayer has been heard. His wife will conceive and bear a son. This son will bring great joy. He will be full of the Holy Spirit and will play an important role in leading people to follow God.

Zechariah’s response to this good news is to ask for evidence. “How will I know this is so?” He asks. This seems to be an odd question. First of all, an angel has just told him this news. If the appearance of an angel is not enough to convince him, what other sign would he find more compelling? Also, if he were to go home and wait a few months, it seems the evidence would make itself apparent in due time. This reminds me of a church I heard of who had a maternity leave policy that required the maternity leave to be “doctor certified.” It seems that the birth of a baby should be evidence enough that maternity leave is warranted. I am not sure what exactly a doctor’s not would add to that. I am also not sure what kind of sign Zechariah is looking for, but I am pretty sure that the sign the angel gave him is not the one he hoped to receive. Because he did not believe the words of the angel, he will not be able to speak his own words until the angel’s words come to pass.

To the truth, I have always felt a bit sorry for Zechariah. It does not seem that his request for a sign is all that difference from other Bible heroes, such as Moses for instance, who had a burning bush and God's voice but kept asking for more miracles, and yet Zechariah seems to be judged more harshly than some of the other Bible heroes. Zechariah seems to get the raw end of the deal, in some ways.

New Testament scholar Richard Vinson suggests that Zechariah could be put in the category of "good people who say they want to serve God but balk at God's good news." If we are honest, that is probably not all that different from where we find ourselves, on many days - "good people who say we want to serve God but balk at God's good news."

Like Zechariah and Elizabeth, we may be described as righteous and blameless, or to use more quotidian language, good folk. But we also, like Zechariah, sometimes struggle to believe and accept the challenging call of Christ. "Love your enemies," Jesus said. "Give to those who ask. Lend, expecting nothing in return." Surely, God does not mean for us to actually do those things?

The priest Zechariah prays faithfully, but he does not seem prepared for his prayers to be answered. He hopes for a child, but does not seem to have much confidence that this hope may actually be realized. Perhaps after years of empty arms, it just became too painful to have real expectations. But the angel Gabriel offers Zechariah the news that what he has longed for will indeed happen. His response reveals, I think, how close he has been to losing hope.

On this first Sunday of Advent, may Zechariah's story remind us to hold on to Hope – the desire or expectation for something to happen. God is at work in the world; God is at work in us.