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First Presbyterian Church
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Advent 3 Year C
Luke 1: 67-79

“Congratulations! You’re Going To Be a Father?”

Someone asked me last week if I was almost done with my Christmas shopping. Truth was, I hadn’t even started. I can’t recall a time in recent years when I’ve started my shopping so late, but this year a combination of being busy and confidence in Amazon Prime shipping has prompted my late start.

My guess is even for those of you who have started your shopping, or maybe even completed your shopping, you still have things left to do, too. So I’d like to start this sermon with a request. I want you to take about 30 seconds or so to write down on your bulletin what you still need to get done before Christmas Day.

Next, I want you to write down what you hope Christmas will be like for you. What kind of day do you hope to have? Thinking more broadly, what kind of relationships do you hope to be a part of? And thinking even more broadly, what kind of world do you want to live in this Christmas and beyond? As the old hymn sings: *The hopes and fears of all the years, are met in thee tonight.* What are your hopes, both personally and communally, for Christmas and beyond? Write those down.

Today, Luke paints a picture for us of what he hopes and believes the world will one day look like when he writes:

“Bless the Lord God of Israel
because he has come to help and has delivered his people.
He has brought salvation from our enemies
and from the power of all those who hate us.
He has granted that we would be rescued
from the power of our enemies . . .
By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,

to give light to those who sit in darkness
to guide our feet into the way of peace."

This is Zechariah's song, and it's sung by an old man who is holding his infant son – a son he never thought he'd have. Zechariah, who is John the Baptist's father, had long given up hope of ever having a child because he and his wife Elizabeth had "gotten on in years", which is the Bible's gentle way of saying that they'd gotten too old to have any children. But here's Zechariah, filled with the kind of hope that only a newborn baby can bring.

But it wasn't always that way. There was a time in the not-so-distant past that Zechariah totally dismissed the idea of ever having a child.

Zechariah, for those of you who don't know him or need a refresher, was a priest at the time of King Herod. Well, one day Zechariah was asked to perform the most sacred duty any priest could be asked to perform: the special duty of making an incense offering to God. It's the honor of a lifetime. But while he's in the holy chamber, something happens: a vision, a mystical experience, an angel appears. The angel has a command and an announcement. Zechariah is terrified, of course. "Do not be afraid," the angel commands. "Elizabeth will conceive and bear a son; name him John."

"How in the world is that supposed to happen?" Zechariah says. "We're both old; we're beyond that."

And the angel, who identifies himself as Gabriel, says, "I've been sent by God to tell you this extraordinarily good news. But because you apparently have an imagination deficit, not to mention a lack of confidence and trust, you're not going to speak again until the baby is born." Bam. And renders him mute. Yeah! The angel lost it a little bit, pointed the angelic remote at Zechariah, and hit the "mute" button.

Now if you're a religious professional, a preacher, and you can't talk, you have a big problem here. I suppose every professional has a recurring nightmare of some sort, but for preachers being rendered mute is about the worst. My recurring nightmare is showing up late for worship, in ragtag clothes, without my sermon. And it's Easter and the place is packed.

So here's old Zechariah, rendered mute while his congregation is waiting for him outside. And when he finally goes back outside to greet them, all he can do is make some hand gestures. It's a nightmare for any preacher.

But I suspect there's a little bit of Zechariah in all of us. Not in the sense that we've been rendered mute, but like Zechariah, we've talked ourselves into a state of unbelief. We no longer expect God to work any miracles. We might think we, too, are getting on in years, getting too old for God to do anything useful with us. Or maybe we've lowered our expectations for what is possible with God; maybe we're grumpy-Zechariah was grumpy. "How in the world is that supposed to happen?" Zechariah says. "We're both old; we're beyond that." Or maybe we pray, but we no longer expect God to answer our prayers. Maybe we go through the motions of worship and prayer but no longer expect to meet God in our daily lives. Or maybe, when we hear horrific news, we think God long ago left the world and has left it up to us to clean up the mess people make.

I suspect at some point or another in all of our lives, we've been Zechariah. We have talked ourselves into believing that for God, some things are impossible.

And yet, Elizabeth does conceive. God did do the impossible. Which left Zechariah alone with his thoughts for 9 long months. Maybe during that time he re-read the prophets, but this time he read them with renewed hope. Maybe, in his 9 month silence, he meditated on how God has turned around many dire situations.

One thing is for certain, Zechariah changed during his 9 month time-out; his personality changed and his faith changed. When Elizabeth gave birth to John, joy burst forth from Zechariah, the sort of joy that only a new father can feel when he first sees his child.

Bless be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant.

God remembered. God had not left them alone to their own devices. God was faithful after all.

And so here is Zechariah, brimming over with renewed hope and challenging anyone who despairs to believe that it is never too late to wait upon the Lord; that indeed nothing is impossible for God.

These were very important words for Luke's audience to hear, because they were living with the presence of war, the destruction of the temple and the daily indignities of living under occupied rule; it sure didn't feel as if the promises of God had been fulfilled. The people who first heard Luke's book knew many Jews who died in the Roman war, and their temple was in ruins. And yet, at a time when hopes are at low ebb and people are particularly in need, Zechariah's song announces that God is trustworthy, and the promises of God will be fulfilled. He will be a beacon guiding them into "peace"; into wholeness, harmony, well-being, prosperity and security. God will break through the darkness, Zechariah claims. You can count on it. "God's compassion WILL give light to those who are sitting in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide us on the path of peace." (Luke 1:78-79 CEB)

That's what Zechariah declared to the people thousands of years ago, and it's what he proclaims to us today. His song may stand in stark contrast to the darkness that pervades our world, but I hear in his words a deep and persistent human hope for peace and justice, and the promise of a Messiah who will deliver it.

That's what I hear. And no matter how crazy the words may sound, I believe them.

I believe them because I've seen possibilities emerge from what appeared to be impossible situations. What seemed like the end of everything, what seemed hopeless, is transformed into something new and life giving. I've seen families pick-up the pieces after a loss and find joy again; I've seen people find love again; I've seen parents work through painful times with their children; I've seen people who thought they would never have a child have one; and I've seen people who thought cancer would kill them live another 10 years to tell about it.

I believe Zechariah's words because I've seen hope burst forth from hopeless situations; I've seen people become pregnant with possibilities again; and I've seen dead areas come back to life.

I believe his words because I've seen life come from that which appears lifeless.

And that, my friends, is how hope gets its start-it emerges as a tiny sign of life in an unexpected place. These tiny signs long to break through the hardness of our disbelief, the times where we want to laugh out loud at such crazy words about old men and women becoming parents; these signs are small yet tenacious; and they encourage us to believe even when it is impossible to do so.

Which is what Advent is all about. Advent has the courage to believe that with God, all things are possible. Advent encourages us to believe that no matter what happens, no matter what bleak, miserable stuff life and the world throws at us, that God is coming. And not only is God coming, but God is coming for you.

This is the beauty of the God Zechariah proclaims, and I believe him.

I believe him because this is the promise of Advent. That the God who set the world in motion at the very beginning, is also the God who raised up a Savior for us, who came to us, who lived among us, and who was born among us.

That despite the shadow of death and despair that at times looms large over our world, in the midst of darkness a baby is born.

“For unto you is born this day, a Savior.”

I have held many babies. Friends’ babies; church members’ babies; babies at their baptisms; my own four babies. Countless times I have held a baby in my arms, and looked down and wondered, “What will this child be?” I can think of no act in life that is more full of hope than holding a baby. I held each of my children within moments of their birth. Each time I was filled with awe and wonder. Each time was a holy moment beyond explanation.

Friends, the promise of Advent is that Hope is coming for you, and for me, and for this world God so deeply loves.

At the beginning of this sermon, I asked you to write down your Christmas to-do list and then your Christmas hopes. Today, I encourage you to find a few minutes to review your list and work backwards, circling the tasks that contribute directly to your own hopes and longings for your life and the world. My guess is there are things on your to-do list that are important in the short run but in the long run don’t contribute to your larger vision and hopes.

So let me suggest that this Advent and Christmas, you have as many things on your to-do list that contribute to your hopes and longings, as you do stuff that simply needs to get done.

During this season of Advent, I invite each of us to be peace and light so that the world may be calm and bright.

Amen.