

November 29, 2020
Hope in a Hopeless Time
Luke 1:5-25

Imagine a world without Christmas. In C.S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, an evil White Witch has the land of Narnia locked in eternal winter – always winter, but never Christmas. Imagine how horrible that would be?

Imagine Israel in the First Century, just before Jesus' birth. For generations it had seemed like it was the winter of your discontent – corrupt politicians, high taxes, racial prejudice, poverty, foreign armies occupying your homeland ... And you want hope! You want something to believe in. You want the promised Messiah to come! You want Christmas. But it's always winter and never Christmas. Imagine how they feel ...

Let's get more personal. Consider Elizabeth and Zechariah. For years – decades – they have been wanting a baby. But no baby. All their friends have kids who are now grown up, but still no baby. God did a miracle for Abraham and Sarah when they were old. But no baby for Zechariah and Elizabeth. No Christmas. Imagine how they feel ...

Our discouragement and disappointments may be different than Israel's, or Zechariah and Elizabeth's ... But our pain can be no less real. 2020 has been a difficult, difficult year for many of us. And we wonder if there's going to be a Christmas at all, for us, this year ... We don't have to imagine how that might feel. We KNOW how that might feel!

As we look begin Advent, a time to look toward Christmas, it is good to remember that we are not the first people who have been looking for hope, peace, love, and joy in a world that seems more characterized by despair, division, hatred, and fear. Perhaps for the first time in a long time, we can resonate with the feelings of hopelessness, bitterness, anger, and disappointment of Elizabeth, Zechariah, and the people of ancient Israel.

Is there any Hope?

People back in those days saw little hope. It had been years, decades, centuries, since they had seen God do much of anything. Not since the days of Judas Maccabeus, who died 160 years earlier, had the Israelites as a nation had anything much to celebrate. Since then, suffering, occupation, oppression, corruption, and hopelessness had been the norm. They were discouraged, afraid, disgusted, and profoundly sad.

Zechariah and Elizabeth had little hope. The fact that they had no children was a matter of public disgrace. If God had not blessed them with children, well, they must be terrible sinners. People would have whispered, "*What terrible thing had they done wrong that God is punishing them?*" You can imagine that years of gossip had taken its toll. They were discouraged and disappointed, to say the least.

We all get discouraged. We all get afraid. We all get anxious. We all get disgusted. We

all get sad. By month's end the bills are bigger than our bank accounts. We'd love to spend time with our family and friends, but in Covid, we can't do that. We'd love to be more "perfect" parents, but we still lose our tempers. We'd love to pray more regularly, but days go by before we realize we haven't prayed at all. We'd love to see some hope ... but we fear the light at the end of the tunnel is really just an oncoming train.

What is it that discourages you? Causes you fear? Sadness? Stress? Covid. Finances. Work. Family. Faith. Health. Temptation. Figuring out what it is that discourages us is helpful. Sometimes we KNOW our emotions are out of whack, but we haven't figured out what the problem is. We recently had a webinar on mental health, where the presenter, Dr. Hilary McBride, encouraged us to name it (the emotion you're feeling) to tame it (to deal with it). When we KNOW what the issues are, we can begin to work on them.

Hope is one of the things we may be really struggling with right now. Is there anything to look forward to? How can Advent/Christmas bring us hope in this hopeless world?

Dealing with disappointment

Sometimes we try to deal with these kinds of emotions with pious platitudes: *"God won't give you more than you can handle"* (in fact, God often DOES give us more than we can handle – on our own). Just *"wait on the Lord"* (and we keep waiting, and waiting, and waiting. *"If you want God to act, you need more faith"* – that's not helpful (or true).

Interestingly, in the Bible, all sorts of people have raw emotions. At their best, what they do is share those emotions honestly with God and with their community of support. Zechariah, for instance, has been praying in the temple (Luke 1:13) – probably baring his soul, honestly, before God. Undoubtedly, he and Elizabeth have had long heart to hearts about their grief, sadness, and disappointment.

The Bible encourages us to be honest with our emotions – our fears, anxieties, sadness, disappointments, and grief – before God. One of the most moving stories in Scripture is of Hannah, another lady unable to conceive a child: *"Hannah went over to the Tabernacle after supper to pray to the LORD. Eli the priest was sitting at his customary place beside the entrance. Hannah was in deep anguish, crying bitterly as she prayed to the LORD ... As she was praying to the LORD, Eli watched her. Seeing her lips moving but hearing no sound, he thought she had been drinking. 'Must you come here drunk?' he demanded. 'Throw away your wine!' 'Oh no, sir!' she replied, 'I'm not drunk! But I am very sad, and I was pouring out my heart to the LORD. ... I have been praying out of great anguish and sorrow.' 'In that case,' Eli said, 'cheer up! May the God of Israel grant the request you have asked of him.' 'Oh, thank you, sir!' she exclaimed. Then she went back and began to eat again, and she was no longer sad."* (1 Samuel 1:9-18).

Sometimes, like Hannah, we need to pray out of our great anguish and sorrow. We need to talk with trusted friends (in her case, Eli). The good news is that God hears those prayers, for He hears ALL our prayers.

We can pray about our struggles. We never see Jesus turning away from those who come to Him with their pain, discouragement, or grief. Instead we see Jesus reaching out to and welcoming them with love and compassion. Jesus welcomes us, no matter what.

As we make our way toward Christmas (and it will come) over the next few weeks, we can come with our burdens and problems. We can lay them before Him. No pretence. No pretty packages. No grand promises. Just ourselves. And we are welcome.

Keeping Jesus in the Centre

In Luke 1, when the angel Gabriel spoke to Zechariah, the old man couldn't trust what the angel said. He'd lost his ability to expect the unexpected. His God was too small for his problems. He had come to a place of no hope. Zechariah had forgotten what Gabriel was later to say to Mary, *"Nothing is impossible with God"* (Luke 1:37).

What the Israelites back in the First Century had forgotten – what Zechariah and Elizabeth had forgotten – is nothing is impossible with God. There is still hope. God is still with us. He is still at work in our lives and in our world.

Because of Zechariah's lack of faith, he is silenced for the duration of Elizabeth's pregnancy (lucky Elizabeth!). It may have been strangely therapeutic for Zechariah, to spend time in silence reflecting on God, on his emotions, on hope (nine months might be a bit long!). What's apparent is that after nine months, when Zechariah regains his ability to speak, he has rediscovered hope. He cries out:

"Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited his people and redeemed them. He has sent us a mighty Saviour from the royal line of his servant David, just as he promised through his holy prophets long ago. Now we will be saved from our enemies and from all who hate us ... We have been rescued from our enemies, so we can serve God without fear, in holiness and righteousness forever" (Luke 1:68-75). *"He has sent us a mighty Saviour!"* That is what Christmas is all about!

What about us? Have we forgotten that nothing is impossible with God? Have we forgotten that God is still with us? Have we lost the ability to expect the unexpected? Have we lost hope? Do we just see what we've lost? Are sure this Christmas will be so disappointing day compared to previous years? Or can we thankful for what we do have?

Maybe it would be good for us to have some time of silence (not nine long months of it!). Some time to go inside and reflect on our emotions – what are we feeling? What is going on inside? How is our mental health? Our physical health? Our spiritual health?

This season is more than just a warm family holiday. It's about Christmas finally coming in the midst of a seemingly endless winter. Christmas is about hope – nothing is impossible with God. The great God of the universe has come among us. He IS with us. God come among us to live with us and experience what we do.

It's about bringing "*the hopes and fear of all the years*" into the presence of our loving Saviour – our MIGHTY Saviour. It's about hope in the midst of discouragement. It's about peace in the midst of war. It's about love in the midst of hate. It's about joy in the midst of sorrow. It's about life in the midst of death.

In 1841, Robert Browning wrote a poem entitled "Pippa Passes," about a young woman who worked in the silk mills in a rough industrial town in Italy. On her one holiday day of the year she goes around town singing– at morning, noon, evening, and night. Unknown to herself, her songs help four important people of her city at a crisis point in each of their lives. The spirit of the poem is caught in these wonderful lines:

*The year's at the spring
And day's at the morn;
Morning's at seven;
The hillside's dew-pearled;
The lark's on the wing;
The snail's on the thorn;
God's in his heaven –
All's right with the world!*

It is easy to get mired in our problems. Sometimes we need to remember, when it seems it's always winter and never Christmas, "*God's in his heaven – all's right with the world.*" More than that, Christmas reminds us that He is WITH us, right here, right now. Jesus' promise is, "*I am with you ALWAYS, to the end of the age*" (Matthew 28:20).

Imagine for a moment, sitting or walking with God, with Jesus. You are sharing your deepest emotions with Him. God knows them all anyway. Nothing is too big for Him. He is not going anywhere. Nothing you can say will cause Him to walk away from you.

Imagine coming into Jesus' presence and laying your burdens down: "*Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest*" (Matthew 11:28). Our hope, our healing, our health is in Jesus, our mighty Saviour. You can safely – openly – honestly – share anything and everything with Him. God can hold us through everything. He never leaves us. He hears our every prayer. He hears the deep cry of our souls. He knows our emotions: our fears, our disappointments, our anxieties, and our hopes and dreams. Spend some time talking with Him. Listening to Him. Being healed by Him. Finding hope in Him.

Remind yourself, "*He has sent us a mighty Saviour.*" When we come into His presence, we come into the presence of the God of hope, peace, love, and joy, the God of beauty and power – the One who can change our lives. Your God – the almighty God, the loving God, the compassionate God, the ever-present God – is alive. And He is with you.