

December 22nd, 2024

Matthew 1:18-25, Luke 1:46-55 “Hope is Worth the Risk”

Last month, Tom Shifflet and I were sitting at a table in the Fireside Room during fellowship and he asked me what the theme of Advent was going to be this year. I said, “Well, the Advent resource we’re using this year is called, ‘Words for the Beginning,’ but honestly the weekly themes all have to do with hope.” And this is right after I did a series about hope as it relates to God’s kingdom. But you know what? I don’t think that’s a bad thing at all. Because who doesn’t need an extra measure of hope these days? Traditionally, the four Sundays in Advent have their own themes. Each one of the candles that we light have specific names - hope, peace, joy, and love in that order. We used to have flags that we’d fly in the sanctuary, and each one had those words sewn into the fabric. On week one, we’d have the hope flag up here closest to the chancel, then each week, we’d add a flag until the fourth Sunday in Advent. That was back when we had more nimble people who would climb a ladder every week to place the flags in those holders. I think the other reason we stopped flying the flags is they obscured the monitors and you had people swaying back and forth in so they could see the words of the songs which wasn’t necessarily a bad thing because we had this charismatic church vibe going on. But this year, every week has something to do with hope, and again – in a world marked by so much uncertainty, hope goes a long way.

We've got to be careful though, because honestly, it's easy to give hope a bad rap. Have you ever found yourself resisting hope because you're afraid that if you get too emotionally invested in a particular outcome, you might "jinx" it and be disappointed? Yeah, I wouldn't know a thing about that. See, I've struggled with this problem most of my life. I gravitate toward being kind of a "glass half empty" guy which hasn't always worked to my benefit. People say, "You're a pastor for goodness sakes! You're supposed to be the very personification of hope! Life must seem very disappointing to you." To which I say, "No! Not at all!" My life is full of blessings! You know that old hymn, "Count your blessings, name them one by one, count your blessings see what God has done?" That's me buddy. I am so blessed. Yeah, but you just said that you're a glass half empty person and that hope is hard to come by. Yes, I did! Now -- you're going to have to work with me on this one, because some people think that what I'm about to say is kind of twisted. See, I think optimists face more disappointments in life than pessimists. If you're an optimist and something goes wrong, you're like "Aw bummer. I'm so disappointed." But if you're a pessimist, your default is to *always* expect disappointment. See where I'm going here? So when something actually goes right, it's a blessing! Right? It's like that other old hymn, "Showers of blessing, showers of blessing we need; mercy-drops round us are falling, but for the showers we plead!" Amen, can I get a witness? Mary says, "That may work for

you, but it's no fun for the people who live with you!" Yes. I see that now. Therapy is worth it.

Here's a question I want to put on the table this morning. What if hope is not a flimsy little emotion that depends on outcomes. What if it's a robust spiritual practice? What if hope is like a muscle that we can strengthen through conditioning? See, I've learned that hope *isn't* flimsy at all. Hope is a force that propels us toward God's presence. Hope is a part of God's plan to redeem all of creation. But let's be honest, hope requires vulnerability. See, it *is* true that the more we hope, the greater the chance for disappointment. How many times have we been told, "Don't get your hopes up?" How many times have we said that to others? For some reason, we adults think it's a good thing to say to kids. "Don't get your hopes up." We think we're doing them a favor. We think we're *protecting* them from disappointment. For those who've been hurt, hope can feel scary—too risky, too unrealistic. Cynicism seems like the safer path. But cynicism doesn't change the world—*hope* does. Hope challenges us to declare, "It can be better," and it empowers us to do those *little* things we talked about last week that make a big difference. Our weary world doesn't need more cynics or scoffers. What we need is hope-bearers who point us to a better way. It's far too easy to let fear and doubt have the final say. Hope is a reflection of God's plans for the world—plans for renewal and restoration in the face of despair.

Joseph and Mary hoped against hope. In the face of *impossibilities*, they believed in the possibility of a better world. They placed their trust in God alone. Their stories are testaments to the transformative power of the hope that is *still* accessible to us today. Joseph acts with hope. Mary proclaims it. And their choice to trust God has reverberations that echo into eternity itself. When an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, he is told not to be afraid to take Mary as his wife, because the child conceived in her was from the Holy Spirit. Joseph chose to embrace this divine assurance. He didn't have to. In fact, no one would have blamed him for breaking their engagement. Socially speaking, it would have benefitted him to untangle himself from his pregnant fiancée. But rather than succumbing to society's expectations, he chose a radical act of hope. Michael Curry, the first African American Bishop of the Episcopal Church once wrote, "The language of a dream is the language of hope." Joseph had a lot to lose by choosing to stay with Mary, but his dream gave him the *courage* to stand by her no matter what. Instead of living in fear of what others might have said or thought, Joseph placed his hope in something bigger than himself. Every day, we have the opportunity to choose hope. We have the chance to enter God's dream for the world. Even when — no, *especially* when it upsets our expectations.

Okay, let's talk about Mary's response to her call. It is equally revolutionary. In light of all that she's been told, she sings this hopeful song about the ways in which God will turn our world upside down and bring it right side up again

by taking down the mighty, exalting the humble, and filling the hungry. And as she sings this song, Mary weaves a vision of the world as God intends it, stitching together a pattern of justice and mercy with her words. Her hope in the promise of God transcending time and space, extends a sacred invitation for us to live out our faith in tangible and transformative ways. Walter Brueggemann, one of our greatest living theologians today writes: “The hope articulated in ancient Israel is not a vague optimism or a generic good idea about the future, but a precise and concrete confidence in and expectation for the future.” Again, hope is not just a fleeting emotion. We see that expectation of the future right here in Mary’s words.

Here are some questions I want you to reflect on over the next few days before our Christmas Eve service: How can we embody hope in these uncertain times? How can we, like Joseph, use our influence to protect and uplift? How can we, like Mary, voice a hope that challenges the status quo and sings of a reality where justice and mercy reign?

On a more personal level - When you dare to hope, what other emotions emerge? Why does hope feel so vulnerable and risky? When in your life has hope been worth it?

The church is filled with so many risk-averse narratives like, “The church is dying; no one likes us ... no one wants to come hang out with a bunch of sad old people. Oh, we don’t have enough money or people to do whatever it is we think

we're supposed to do." Are we willing to dare to live a different story? What does hopeful risk-taking look like in *our* church community?

Dana McKibben wrote a book called *Hope: A User's Manual* where she distinguishes between optimism and hope. She writes: "Optimism relies on external circumstances lining up in a certain way. Hope isn't mathematical; it's philosophical, physical, maybe even musical. True hope defies cause and effect and has impact *regardless* of outcomes." In your own life, what does it look like to put hope—instead of optimism—into practice? How do Joseph's dream and Mary's song point us to hope and not to optimism? Turn to your neighbor and say, "There is hope." Did that sound weird? Maybe. But I hope that it's exactly what you needed to hear. As we observe the light of this final Advent candle, let it symbolize the hope that Christ brings into our world. May the steady flame of hope renew your courage and inspire you to act as you enter into an extraordinary story of redemption and love. In this season of hope, may you find the courage to hold onto hope and act on it, to let the divine trust of Mary and Joseph weave through the fabric of your life.