

Luke 1:21-25 Second Baptist Church, Lincoln
 Second Sunday of Advent (Communion) Dec. 6, 2009

A Need for Hope

²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple.

²² When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home.

²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion.

²⁵ "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

A young girl wrote a letter to a missionary. It was a prayer letter and she was trying to lend her support to the missionary. Evidently she'd been told by the adults in her life not to request a response to her letter because the missionaries were very busy. So the missionary got a kick out of her letter. It said, "Dear Mr. Missionary, we are praying for you. But we are not expecting an answer."

Last week we talked about Zechariah and the prayer he offered in the Temple as well as the lifelong prayer and longing to have a son. I talked about God's timing and how it isn't always on our time schedule. Zechariah had to wait until he was an old man before he experienced the answer to prayer for his heart's desire. We wondered if he hadn't become a little like that little girl who said, "...But we are not expecting an answer."

Do we pray with expectation? The title of my message speaks of hope. We live in a world where hope is slowly disappearing from the lives of people. Tough economic times have sucked people dry of income and livelihood. Many children growing up are the product of their hopeless environments or abuse and neglect. Still many other children have been raised in a non-Christian home where there exists no hope beyond what the world has to offer. Moral relativity has taken center stage where people believe it doesn't matter how we live because there is no supreme being and no moral code by which they should live. The lack of hope breeds this type of moral crisis. When there is no hope, there is no reason to live, no purpose for existence.

As I shared last week, this is much the same socio-political climate that existed in Palestine during the Roman rule at the time of the birth of Christ. Judea and the whole Mediterranean world had the hope sucked out of them. The PAX ROMANA was in place meaning, because of the control and power of Rome and her army of occupation, there was PEACE in the whole middle east, but it was because they were under the heavy hand of Rome. The Roman roads were lined with crosses containing rotting corpses reminding the people, “You had better remain peaceful, or you will meet the same fate.” The people had lost hope and they merely existing under the rule of a dictator.

Hope was gone. However when the angel appeared to Zechariah and told him that he and his elderly wife would conceive a child – then Elizabeth actually became pregnant, his hope was restored. A miracle took place and he had evidence of the movement and power of God.

Today, we focus on his wife Elizabeth who carried that child we know as John the Baptist. Like her husband, she had grown tired of waiting. Like Abraham’s childless wife Sarah or Elkanah’s wife Hannah, Elizabeth had likely born the public scorn and embarrassment of being childless in a society that placed great value in bearing children. She had likely become bitter and hopelessly sad at not having children. We can only assume this because women who could not conceive were considered sinners. The conventional wisdom of the time was: perhaps God had turned his back on her because of her sin.

So combine her sense of loss with a deep sense of guilt that she might be a hopeless sinner, and you can begin to imagine the pain Elizabeth might be experiencing leading up to her miraculous pregnancy. However, into this scene God brought a promise, a hope of fulfilling her deepest promise. This is the kind of hope that God extends to a world that has lost her hope. During the season of Advent, we are brought back to a state of expectation and hope.

I have always found it odd, yet poignant and powerfully significant when we celebrate the Lord’s supper during Advent. Here is why: First of all, we have to make a departure from the unexpected amazement and surprise of the coming Messiah. The cross casts its Shadow across the manger when we celebrate communion in Advent. Advent is a season of waiting, but we are suddenly reminded as we look at the communion elements that we are not waiting, but remembering.

Our vantage point is not “When will the Messiah come?” but rather, “The Messiah has come, and he gave himself so that I may have life.” Some people might see it as a disappointment like when a child finds his Christmas gift hidden away in a closet six weeks before Christmas, so on Christmas morning, he has to act surprised and excited, even though he knows what is in the package. That’s really not it, though. We are filled with joy because we DO KNOW the outcome and it has changed our lives and changed our destiny. All of the hope we have is based upon the simple fact that Jesus did not remain in the manger, but went to the cross. Yet some people are a lot more comfortable with a sweet baby Jesus than they are a wounded and broken savior on the cross.

The second reason that communion in Advent is so poignant is that it the cross is a value added fact. Let me explain. Here in Nebraska, the agricultural economy is boosted when they can produce an end product rather than a raw material. Do you understand what a “value-added product” is? Rather than shipping wheat out of the state to Duluth to be loaded on ships, if they can sell to a local mill to be made into pasta or bread, the profit is much larger. That is what a value-added product is. Sending corn to the Ethanol plant rather than shipping it out of state means higher prices because it becomes a value added product when it is produced into an end-product.

That is how I see the cross and the communion table in Advent. What is the manger without the cross? What is the message of the angels without the good news of the empty tomb at the end of the gospels? What is the message of a newborn savior if the message of redemption is not told in its entirety? The manger is a value-added fact only when the whole story is told. Keeping Jesus in the manger and not allowing him to be revealed in the message of the cross gives us a weak and impotent Savior and Advent and Christmas really means nothing. It is why so many people get more excited about Santa than they do about the incarnation and birth of the Son of God. They have a weak understanding of the manger because they have not discovered the whole diorama of the prophet’s prediction, that is: the birth, the public ministry of Jesus and his passion, his death and resurrection.

The power is in the whole story. So this morning as we go to the table, take a birds-eye view of the gospel which doesn’t merely include the manger, but also the suffering, death and resurrection of the promised messiah. That is when the meaning becomes real and hits home in the most powerful way. AMEN.