

Providence Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. David Pettit
December 5th, 2021
Luke 1: 57-80

We began Advent last week talking about hope. Now, this week, the advent candle and its theme is peace, but to be honest, I am still unpacking last week's theme of hope. What does it mean to hope? I am hoping, for example, to retire as soon as possible. Now don't get me wrong, I enjoy working with you all. But I spend my weeks hanging out with many of you who are retired, and I'm thinking that you have a good thing going on there, and I'm eager to get in on this. I find myself grappling with whether my hope to retire is a steadfast commitment to what is possible, and therefore, I should trust even though I can't see when or how it will come together. Or whether I am living in a delusional denial of our financial realities. And in all truth, I go back and forth on the question.

What does it mean to maintain hope, to live in hope, in ever-changing times? I visited with Dennis, Evan, and Carl this week for a few minutes as we talked about Providence. We essentially talked about how we maintain or renew our hopes and plans for the church during changing circumstances. These gentlemen have many years in this church, Dennis being around since the beginning. And then I was thinking about people in this church like Bob Hampel, Donna Beilenburg, and Almira Collier who have been on a faith journey for over ninety years, just about double my own. They have been following Christ and lighting the candles of advent hope and peace down through the years in ever-changing times.

Now I suggested two poles of the spectrum concerning the hope of my retirement. The first is maintaining an ideal and a vision that will come together in enough time, keeping that hope alive. The other end of the spectrum is clinging to an idea that may not be realistic, but we won't let go of, and there is a difficulty in knowing whether we are being faithful or stubbornly belligerent. But as I've been thinking about hope, perhaps there is a third and more complex path. Perhaps hope involves some old conviction or dream that survives, it also involves certain expectations have to be let go of rather than clinging to, and in their place some new unanticipated aspect grows up that we must become open to.

As I consider Zechariah and Elizabeth's journey, and this burgeoning life of their son, John the Baptist, the forbearer of Christ, we can see these three dynamics are at work for them. There are old hopes that are living, there are old dreams that are going by the wayside, and new ones rising in their place. And so I wonder if the figures of Zechariah and Elizabeth might provide some sort of example as we consider how hope and expectation are taking shape in us. What hope persists for

you? What expectations need to be let go of, and what new possibilities are emerging?

In some ways, Zechariah and Elizabeth maintain hope out of a need and a desire. They hope God will intervene in their lives and in the life of Israel. The whole path of their common life is not how Zechariah and Elizabeth envisioned their life going, and they keep hoping that God will put it back on track. When they married, they likely had a clear vision of things. Zechariah would be a priest, just as his father was, his father's father was, his cousins, uncles, and so on. And Elizabeth would bear them children. They would bring honor to their families. But things have not gone that way, not precisely; they have lived their many years childless, without that joy, without that symbol of God's favor and blessing.

This path they have been on is not the journey they expected. And the problem with unexpected journeys is that we often compare them to the ones we did expect. And like the aging Abraham in the book of Genesis, by the time the angel comes to Zechariah, he has lost a degree of hope, not able to see how having a child could be possible anymore.

But let us consider first what it is for Zechariah and Elizabeth that is living, the old hope still alive. The clearest answer is the age-old hope and promise of a savior, a messiah. It is the old expectation that God would send a messiah to save them and bring God's peace and justice. There is much in Zechariah and Elizabeth's life and much in the national life of Israel that have not gone as it was hoped or planned. But even amidst changes and uncertainty, the hope of God's salvation persists. Zechariah's prophetic song, coming off of a tongue stilled for months and newly freed to speak is a beautiful articulation of this old hope:

“Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
69 He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
70 as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
71 that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate
us.
72 Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
73 the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.

Despite the years, doubts, waiting, tears, and longings, this old promise still lives. It is an old hope that likely felt delusional at times. Yet they persisted.

But even while this old hope lives, certain expectations and old patterns are dying, meaning they have to be let go of. Some expectations will not be fulfilled or will not be fulfilled in the way they were once dreamed of. Zechariah, who carries an ancestral name, who finds himself in the line of priests, and who grew up in and around it; he no doubt dreamed of having a son who too would follow in those footsteps. As every father does, he dreamed of what this son will be like; of teaching him what he knows, of taking him fishing, teaching him how to build things, and so on. But when custom came for this baby boy to be taken to the temple, circumcised, and named, this changing reality came clear. Zechariah motions wildly, Elizabeth speaks, that his name is to be John. The priest reacts, no one in your family is named John. This is not a name for a child who will carry on the family business and carry on the family name and prestige. No, this child has a wholly other name. There is a break. His journey will be different.

And that last sentence of our passage. “The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.” He will not grow up at his father’s side, it seems, nor build a room onto the family house. He will not grow up as a priest. He will be, in the words of Zechariah’s song, “a prophet.” The descriptions of John are reminiscent of the prophet Elisha. Elisha too lived for some time out beyond the Jordan in the wilderness waiting for the time when the Lord would call him to speak. The hope lives, but Zechariah and Elizabeth will still live with no children in the house, no one to pass on the priesthood to, no one to care for them in old age. They will still get scoffs and snickers from others in the community. God is moving, but some of those old hopes and expectations have to be let go of so they might embrace how God *is* working.

And so, amid these shattered expectations and a journey that does not match early expectations, new paths are emerging. Zechariah had always dreamed of a son, mostly for his own honor and that of his family. But now, this son will honor far more than he and his family; This son will honor all Israel. This son of his will serve the Lord in a special way.

Zechariah’s prayers offered to the point of numbness had been finally answered, but in such a way that God was fulfilling much more than Zechariah had the vision to pray for. God was preparing the way for the messiah, using an old couple and their long awaited son to point to the one who would come; the Christ.

Now it is a little more complex than what I've highlighted so far. For even within the persistent hope of God's messiah coming to save lives, within this live expectation, there are aspects that are dying and new ones rising. You see, it was hard for them not to imagine the messiah having some kind of political aspect; that to "save" the people meant to rise up against Rome. But as Jesus grows and begins his ministry, Jesus will map new, emerging ways that this messiah would bring peace, and salvation, and the forgiveness of sins.

These emerging aspects were unanticipated and took on a shape they didn't fully recognize. In fact, John the Baptist, when he is imprisoned near the end of his life, will write to Jesus and ask a question sparked by the discrepancy between what John expected the messiah to look and act like, and what Jesus actually looks and acts like. He asks Jesus (Luke 7:19), "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" Even within the living hope of God's messiah, old expectations have to be let go of to discern emerging realities.

For Zechariah, it is a moving landscape; one where old hopes, rhythms, and possibilities still persist, still claim his commitment and allegiance. It is a landscape where old hopes, dreams and expectations have died though; And yet, new expressions of God's love are emerging, of God's peace in a violent world, of God's hope in the despair of waiting, of God's love prevailing over hatred and bitterness and resentment; these are growing in new ways. And those trying to discern these things will have to learn this dance, because the Lord's messiah comes, but not in the way they expect. He will come as a babe, born quietly in small house to a couple, the woman of which has become pregnant under questionable circumstances.

Yes, the problem with unexpected journeys is that we always compare them to the ones we did expect. But perhaps Zechariah and Elizabeth in old age, and their prophet son living out in the wilderness of the Jordan can be examples for us, and invite us to consider how hope is both persisting and taking new shape in us. But there is an additional aspect, that we can't know the full shape of these things until we invest in it and give ourselves to it.

Denise Levertov's poem beautifully expresses this aspect. Peace, like a poem, is not there ahead of itself, can't be imagined before it is made, can't be known except in the words of its making. It is an expression that comes about as we give ourselves to it, if we are willing to restructure the sentence our lives are making.

Peace, Shalom, is more than the absence of conflict or war, it is about well-being and wholeness, it is about the fabric of lives and communities. In a broken world,

we hold the hope of God's peace, but we also give ourselves to it, but we do so with an openness to how God leads, to how this peace emerges.

Levertov's vision of peace is that the ideal and potential expression transcends what we can conceive of, and so for one, our imagination will be an important part of us conceiving of and living into a vision of peace. And two, it only happens as we give ourselves to it, and we can only know it by giving ourselves to it, one step of faith at a time.

In Advent, we tap into old hopes. But hope is the not the belligerent commitment to a certain set of circumstances. So we try to hope and we try to anticipate in such a way that we might participate and be open to God's Spirit moving in the present. As we do so, I wonder how your hope is doing? Have you lost hope? What old hopes persist, and within those old hopes, what expectations are falling away and what new possibilities are emerging?

And God's people said...

The Birth of John the Baptist

⁵⁷ Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. ⁵⁸ Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

⁵⁹ On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. ⁶⁰ But his mother said, “No; he is to be called John.” ⁶¹ They said to her, “None of your relatives has this name.” ⁶² Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. ⁶³ He asked for a writing tablet and wrote, “His name is John.” And all of them were amazed. ⁶⁴ Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. ⁶⁵ Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. ⁶⁶ All who heard them pondered them and said, “What then will this child become?” For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Zechariah's Prophecy

⁶⁷ Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

⁶⁸ “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.
⁶⁹ He has raised up a mighty savior for us
in the house of his servant David,
⁷⁰ as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,
⁷¹ that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate
us.
⁷² Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,
and has remembered his holy covenant,
⁷³ the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,
to grant us ⁷⁴ that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,
might serve him without fear, ⁷⁵ in holiness and righteousness
before him all our days.
⁷⁶ And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,
⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people
by the forgiveness of their sins.
⁷⁸ By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

⁸⁰The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.