

## **“John the Baptist: Prepared to Hope Again”**

Luke 1:5-13 (Advent 1)

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Advent calls us to prepare the way of the Lord in our lives and in our world. For thousands of years, Christians have turned to the story and message of John the Baptist in these weeks leading up to Christmas. No other figure in scripture is more closely associated with this idea of making people ready for the coming of Christ, than John. During this year's Advent Series we will explore the Advent themes of John's life and ministry, and how John calls all followers of Jesus to prepare our hearts for Christ's coming.

Advent helps us to prepare to celebrate Christ's coming at Christmas. Advent also orients us toward that day when the risen Christ will return, so that we live in such a way that we are found ready on that day. One of the marks of such Christian readiness is hope—something that can seem in short supply these days.

As pandemic restrictions lifted our hopes rose for a vibrant new beginning. We re-kindled in-person relationships, returned to in-person gathering and the economy took off like a shot. Yet this new beginning has proven more challenging than imagined. Pandemic polarizations have hung on, war in Europe continues, inflation has soared, food prices have climbed, interest rates have risen and the economy sputters. And just when COVID seemed more contained we find ourselves in an unprecedented flu season with respiratory illnesses that are jamming our ERs and Children's Hospitals. Add in a recent provincial strike, the implications of a climate emergency, a growing mental health epidemic, drug overdoses, unprecedented homelessness, and it can seem hard to hope.

This is why Advent is so important. At a time like this, some will cancel the paper, stop watching the news and social media, and try to turn up the Christmas Music or paste on a holiday smile. But Advent is a time for telling the truth—the truth of our weariness, worry and anxiety—and most importantly the truth of God's goodness and abundance that opens up futures that seem shutdown.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are a bit of a hopeless case. They are aging out and childless. Although this might be considered the perfect life by a growing number of Millennials—in that day being childless was a source of stigma and shame, especially for Elizabeth. Whether it was a physical issue with the man or the woman, the blame always was assigned to the woman. To make it worse, such failure was interpreted as a judgement from God against her, whereby she also brought shame to her husband. Zechariah had prayed and prayed, but to no avail. As some of you know first-hand, the heartfelt pains of not being able to have children leaves deep scars. The disappointment had formed a callous around Zechariah's heart.

Then something totally astounding happens as Zechariah is carrying out his priestly duties and making his incense offering in the closed inner sanctuary of the temple. This is the

very pinnacle of a priest's life and vocation which might only happen once in a lifetime. And as he gives the usual invitation, "May the God of mercy come into the sanctuary and accept with pleasure the sacrifice of his people." Obviously, God powerfully came.

Suddenly the angel Gabriel stands before Zechariah who is paralyzed in fear. "Don't be afraid," the angel says, "your prayer has been heard. You and Elizabeth are going to have a baby whom you'll name John. Joy and gladness are coming your way, and God will do great things through him; helping many come home to God, reconciling the generations and getting people ready for the coming of the Lord—the very best news of all."

Now, I'd have thought that Zechariah would have been the perfect candidate for hope. He and Elizabeth are an impeccable couple, the picture of faithful piety: devoted, descended from Aaron (Moses' assistant), righteous, blameless. With a pedigree like that they seem on the "winning side of history" and the perfect candidates for welcoming hope? Not quite.

When the good news of hope comes knocking Zechariah leaves hope standing on the step. In the Message paraphrase Zechariah answers, "Do you expect me to believe this? I'm an old man and my wife is an old woman." Zechariah, like others today, shows up for worship every week, is faithful, but he has forgotten how to hope again. Disappointment has formed a callous around Zechariah's heart. For him, the rich tradition of Old Testament childless women who were given hope—Sarah, Rebekah, Rachael, Hannah—are just stories from the past.

Maybe you know what it's like to have prayed too many unanswered prayers. It can create in us a closed-ness that just can't bear to be disappointed again—and therefore finds it hard to hope again. When God shows up Zechariah is taken by complete surprise. His prayer is answered. The day of salvation is at hand. Yet Zechariah will not open the door to hope again. And for his unbelief he is stricken speechless. But that won't prevent God from acting. John Calvin wrote: "It was a great relief to (Zachariah) to hear this, to know that the faithfulness of God is not (rendered ineffective because of) his (own) short-coming, but indeed (takes shape) all the greater at last. It happens sometimes, that the Lord offers and fulfils what He has promised to the unbelieving in spite of their resistance."

The old will usher in the new. God's Spirit seems to hover over places that are humanly-hopeless. Such empty voids seem to draw God's attention in ways where he speaks and announces something new, filling emptiness with promise. Advent prepares us to hope again.

For even when things are at their worst—when all human possibility and potential has been expended— God has a plan. Chaos and tragedy shall not have the last word and shall not ultimately define God's people. God's will and way will not be turned back by a bad economy, unemployment, disease, poverty or war. God's gracious set of promises will be fulfilled.

There are plenty of things in life that legitimately break our hearts and break God's

heart. Yet we can adopt an attitude toward life and its circumstances that neither denies reality nor is tossed about by outside circumstances. Everything in life truly depends on inner realities and attitudes with which we face the daunting things of life: The trustworthiness of God; the nearness of Christ; on these we can build our lives and count on. To do so is to open ourselves to receive the power of God that is the antidote to our fatigue and cynicism and to replace anxiety and fear with hope and possibility—until Jesus comes again.

Hope is the antidote to despair. Despair leads to paralysis. But hope is the precondition for new thinking and new beginnings. We will never have a better world if we lose hope that there can be a better world. We will never have a better church if we lose hope that there can be a better church. Hope is the light that allows us to stand in those dark uncertain places. God is in the business of new life—Christ was dead and is now alive and is Lord over all. Because he is, I am able to lean fully on the reality of his kingdom and its possibility.

“We’re sending you to this old inner city church,” said the bishop. “Some wonderful people there. Yet they’re old, and it’s been in decline for 20 years; just a handful of them left.” She gulped—her first congregation was to be like this. At her first meeting with the elders she saw what had been described: mostly older white-haired women. “I have previously thought that I had a gift for working with children,” she told them when they inquired about her interests. “Well, you’re in the wrong church then, honey,” said one of the women bluntly.

Yet in the days following, the new minister noticed children outside her study window—children on their way home. They weren’t the congregation’s children, but they were children. One afternoon while visiting, a parishioner was telling the new minister about her earlier life as a Broadway pianist. The young minister got an idea. She asked the woman if she’d play at church the next Wednesday afternoon, two others were asked to bake chocolate chip cookies. On Wednesday, the four of them rolled the piano out the old double doors of the church hall onto a step and the retired Broadway pianist began to play. By 3:30 a crowd of children had gathered. The cookies were served, then the minister told a story about a guy named Jesus. They promised to come back next week.

Within a year 100 children were crowding that church every Wednesday afternoon. On Sundays, the church school rooms were soon full—taught by a group of older, white-haired women—who had previously said that they’d thought that they were too old to do much anymore. Those children brought their parents.

Hope, for us, is not the last resort, the thing to hold to when everything else has failed. Hope, for us, is the first resort—what we begin with—which changes the way that we approach everything. Advent reminds us that we serve a Lord who comes; and when there is God there is always hope.