

The Hope of the World • Luke 1:26-38

Around the world this weekend hundreds of millions of Christians mark the beginning of the Advent season. Many of them do so by lighting the first of four candles on the Advent Wreath. This is a tradition that goes back to the Middle Ages in Northern Europe. One candle is lighted each week leading up to Christmas. The candles have names. The first is Hope, the second is Peace, the third is Joy and the fourth is Love. They circle a fifth central candle that represents Jesus Christ as the Light of the World.

It is interesting that the first of the Advent candles is Hope. It makes me wonder what the story is behind the order. Probably it was not some comfortable well-fed Christian sitting next to a warm fire at a table full of food on a happy Christmas Eve. I rather imagine it was someone less comfortable, more desperate . . . someone who was hurting, frightened and worried. Hope came first because without hope there would be no peace, joy or love.

Hope is the expectation that things will get better. We all need hope in order to go on. Whether coping with disease, sinking in debt or struggling with a relationship gone bad, we all need hope to get through today and into tomorrow. Without hope there is no point in trying. Without hope we simply give up. Hope is a wonderful gift from God, although it is seldom simple and rarely easy. Hope is never a destination. It is always a journey. That is the way it was in the Christmas story.

For two thousand years the Hebrew people had faced the troubles of life. Four hundred of those years were spent in cruel slavery in the land of Egypt. When they finally escaped, they spent 40 years wandering in the desert. Then there were civil wars, foreign invasions, famine, poverty, droughts and even God's judgment.

Life was not easy. Every day and every place was dangerous. Cities were filled with disease,

crime and the constant fear of invasion. Those living in the countryside were especially vulnerable to bandits and to soldiers marauding from neighboring countries. Hard work didn't seem to make much difference. Women died in childbirth. Men died in war. Most people had hard lives and died young. By comparison, our modern America is safe, easy, comfortable and worry-free.

How did they make it from day to day? The answer is hope. Hope is the only way anyone makes it through the troubles of life. Hope says that tomorrow will be better. Hope tells us to hang on. Hope promises a better future.

When we stop to think about it, there need to be troubles in order to have hope. Without troubles there is nothing to hope for. If we are healthy we don't hope for healing. If we are wealthy we don't hope for money. If we are content we don't hope for happier days because we are already pleased with the way life is.

Hope is always about tomorrow. Hope is always about things being different. Hope always sees beyond our troubles. Hope always looks forward to something better.

When our troubles are small what we hope for is a change in circumstance. But when our troubles are large what we hope for is God. Some troubles are so huge that only God himself can make life better. That's the way it was for the people of Israel 2000 years ago. So they hoped that God would send someone special to chase their troubles away.

It became an obsession with them. They needed a radically different life. They constantly looked for signs that God's special person would come to earth—someone chosen; someone anointed; a Messiah; the Christ who

would fix everything, who would solve their problems, forgive their sins and chase their troubles away. He was the one great hope—and not just for them but for the whole world. If God didn't send

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someone soon they thought that the world would crumble in around them.

We know how they felt because we have bad days, too. Not that our troubles are the same, but we do have our problems. Every day seems to have new issues to face. None of us has to think very long to come up with our own list of worries. Pick any newspaper, any newscast or any news magazine to read about the troubles in our world—wars, terrorism, epidemics, economic uncertainty. Only a fool thinks that a few adjustments to circumstances will make everything better. We need divine intervention. We need hope.

Here is where hope began according to Luke 1:26-29:

In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

Four hundred years had passed since the last written word of God in the Old Testament. Six hundred years had gone by since the last recorded mission of the angel Gabriel to earth. It had been a very long time, and now God was sending hope. It was marvelous. Except, Mary was greatly troubled! That's what happens when God finally sends his word. We are troubled all the more because, like Mary, we wonder what God is going to do.

Gabriel spoke some simple words of promise in Luke 1:30-33:

"Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

This was a spectacular promise. God was going to send his Son to the rescue. He was coming

from heaven to earth. He was going to come in human skin and be one of us. He would understand our troubles and we would understand him. He would come to establish his kingdom and be the ruler of our lives. At last, a king who would be just and fair.

There is no way Mary could have understood the full meaning of Gabriel's words. I doubt that she was even literate, much less educated or sophisticated. She couldn't explain the incarnation of the invisible God into human skin and bones. She had no idea how all this was going to play out in her personal life. She was engaged. She was planning a wedding. She was anticipating a family. All in the future! What would this mean for all those plans? And so she was troubled by the angel's words. But even though she couldn't grasp the words, she could sense the hope embedded in the angel's voice and words. Here was a promise for a better future coming from God himself.

The movie *Castaway* starring Tom Hanks is about a Federal Express employee named Chuck Noland who is the sole survivor of a company plane that crashes near a South Pacific island. He is stranded for four years, hoping to be rescued. All he has beyond the few natural resources of the island are some flotsam from the plane—video tapes, a pair of ice skates, an evening gown and a volleyball he names Wilson that becomes his best friend. There is one more item, a package he never opens. It is a cardboard box wrapped in plastic with a pair of angel wings on it. He is there on the island for four years and never opens it to find out what is inside.

In a risky act of desperation he builds a raft, sails from the island and is rescued by a ship. Back in America he hand delivers the unopened box with angel wings to a Texas farmhouse. He knocks on the door but no one answers, so he leaves the box against the door and writes a note saying, "Thanks. This package saved my life." Somehow that unopened package with the angel's wings gave Chuck Noland the hope to survive in a desperate place.

That is what happened to Mary with the angel's words. She could not fully comprehend what was inside but she found hope that got her through her troubles.

Words do give us hope, especially if they are words from God. Not that we can fully unwrap them or understand them. It is just that the assurance God has promised gives us hope for a better tomorrow.

That is what I experience when it seems like the problems of life are crushing down on me and I pick up my Bible and read it. I don't always understand all that it has to say, but I can hear the tone of God's voice in the words that are written. It is a tone of hope and promise. I am blessed by what God says. But I will tell you that I find hope simply in the realization that God speaks to me. Even when I do not fully understand all that is in the book, I get hope from his words of promise.

What Mary did next is so like us all. She asked, "How will this be?"

That's what we always want to know: "Okay, God, you've made a promise to me, but how are you going to pull it off?" The world is a mess: "So, God, how are you going to fix it?" My job application is one of a thousand: "God, how are you going to get me hired?" I'm in big trouble: "God, how are you going to use this for good?"

We read in Luke 1:35 that when Mary asked how God was going to do what he promised Gabriel told her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

This wasn't totally helpful information. What Mary now knows is that she's a virgin, she's going to give birth to the Son of God and the

Holy Spirit is going to work out the details. If I were Mary I would have asked to see the business plan. I like to know all the details in advance. I read footnotes. I read the fine print in contracts before I sign them. I want to know if there is a back-up plan if Plan A doesn't work.

God doesn't want our hope to be centered in his plan. God doesn't want our hope all wrapped

up in the details of knowing how it's supposed to work out. God wants our hope centered in him. So let me tell you how I think it works. God promises help and hope to every Christian. We trust God to fulfill those promises. Then we watch as the Holy Spirit processes the plan and we see all the parts come together.

What does this look like? Sometimes we're caught by surprise. Sometimes he does it in ways that we would never have anticipated. The Holy Spirit stops a tragedy from becoming worse than it already is. The Holy Spirit defeats an enemy. The Holy Spirit provides a resource. The Holy Spirit allows a disappointment. There are times when our lives are shattered and we want God to put all the pieces back together the way they were, only to find that the Holy Spirit of God has a plan to put the pieces together in a design that is so much better than the way they were before. Admittedly, along the way it doesn't always seem to make sense. This is when we must trust God—and it is in that trust that we live out our hope.

In his book *Sabbatical Journeys* Catholic priest Henri Nouwen describes the relationship between

the "flyer" and the "catcher" in a circus trapeze performance. The flyer lets go of the trapeze and flies through the air high above the audience. During his interviews, Nouwen learned that it is important that the flyer just hold that position while making the dangerous journey through the open space to the catcher. One of

the Flying Roudellas told him, "The flyer must never try to catch the catcher." The flyer just trusts and the catcher will catch.

It is like that with us and God. It's not that we have to catch the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit will catch us.

But what about the "hang time"? How long is this going to take? It's the waiting that can get a

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little scary! That's what Mary had to face. The angel told her in Luke 1:35-37:

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God."

This was a long way of telling Mary that all this was going to take a while. First her cousin Elizabeth would have a baby. Then Mary would become pregnant by some mysterious method, followed by nine months of pregnancy. And then the hope of the world would be born. Of course, he would have to grow up first and that would take another 30 years plus or minus.

When you're troubled, when the world is a mess, when God is intervening—doesn't a year seem like a long time and don't thirty-some years seem like forever? It can be hard to keep hope high when there is a long wait time. Our hope doesn't seem to have that kind of shelf life. We want our problems solved right away. We are not a patient race and certainly not a patient generation of the human race.

Remember that our hope is not in circumstances or in calendars but in Jesus Christ. Part of this process of fulfillment of hope is the timeline God takes. He sets the schedule. We have confidence in him that his time is always the right time. And, amazingly, we may actually benefit from the wait.

Admiral James Stockdale was a prisoner of war in North Vietnam. He was the highest-ranking United States military officer in the notorious "Hanoi Hilton" prison camp for eight years, from 1965 until 1973. During those eight years he had none of the rights of a prisoner of war. He was cruelly tortured over twenty different times during an eight-year period. In fact, to this day he walks with a limp. He has never fully recovered from the physical injury inflicted upon him. He never knew if or when he would be set free.

How did he endure? How did he keep hope for so long? Jim Stockdale says:

"I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted, not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event of my life, which, in retrospect, I would not trade."

That's what Mary did. That's what Christians do. We never lose faith in the end of the story. We are absolutely convinced that the end of the story is that Jesus Christ was sent from God to chase away the troubles of the world and of our lives and to give us eternal life and he will do what he has promised. It will happen! *"He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."*

That's the Christmas story. It's all about hope! The hope of the world and the hope of our lives! So whatever your troubles are, keep the flames of hope burning and fix your hope, not on circumstances and not on calendars, but hope in the person of Jesus Christ.

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.faithmatters.fm
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