

Advent Week 1

Sunday 11/30

The theme for this week is *hope*.

The scriptures for the week are Luke 1: 5-25.

God of hope, as we begin this Advent journey, we come seeking the light that shines in the darkness. Open our hearts to receive the hope that only you can give—hope that sustains us through uncertainty, hope that anchors us in your promises, hope that reminds us Emmanuel is coming. Walk with us this week as we wait with expectation. Amen.

Monday 12/1

Luke 1: 5-7

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

In the days of King Herod...

Our faith story, while always growing and changing, sometimes sets a fixed time in our memories. King Herod might not elicit much from us in the way of memories, but this phrase alerts the original hearers of the birth story about the dangerous times in which Jesus' birth took place. Think about how the phrase "In the days of Covid-19" might spark a visceral response in us as to how we lived our faith during that time.

In these opening verses, we meet Zechariah and Elizabeth, who were both very faithful to God, but they did not have a child. In their time and culture, this was a problem. Even though they both lived very faithful lives, not having a child was seen as God's disfavor upon them. This was a personal hurt that was displayed very publicly within their community. Our Advent devotional begins with Elizabeth and Zechariah- in the days of King Herod. a time long ago superimposed upon our modern lives today.

Our Advent journey to the manger starts here, in the days of King Herod, as we experience our own turbulent political times nationally and internationally. Ancient and modern times meet as we begin our journey to Christmas Eve and the birth of our Savior.

How is this year different for you as you prepare for Christmas? What remains the same, no matter what happens, year to year? How will you share your faith through this story, from one generation to the next?

Loving God, no matter the state of the world or our lives, you are present with us. Help us to see you in the ordinary and the sacred during this Advent season. Amen.

Tuesday 12/2

Luke 1: 8-17

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, Zechariah was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Zechariah was doing his job, as he was trained to do. His job just happened to be a priest, a special order of men chosen by bloodline and trained from an early age. As we learned in our scripture reading from yesterday, he is righteous, blameless before God, and getting on in years. His opportunity to enter the sanctuary of the Lord was probably a once-in-a-lifetime event. This was Zechariah's moment.

However, this moment was about to go horribly wrong and wonderfully right all at the same time. The Angel Gabriel shows up, telling Zechariah that he and Elizabeth will have a son named John. This baby will be celebrated, bringing joy and happiness, as babies so often do. They symbolize *hope* for us. John, however, is more than a long-expected baby for a childless couple. He is a baby that will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth, and *will prepare a way for the Lord*. We will pick up the rest of the conversation between Zechariah and the Angel Gabriel tomorrow.

How has God shown up in your life in unexpected ways, at unexpected times and through unexpected people? Have you ever had a moment in your life that you have prepared for, trained for, hoped and wished for all rolled into one? On your Advent journey, what are you doing to prepare a way for the Lord?

God of grace, open our hearts to recognize your presence in the unexpected moments of our days. When you appear in ways we do not anticipate, give us courage to receive your good news with hope and trust. Amen.

Wednesday 12/3

Luke 1: 18-23

Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.” Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

Yesterday we left Zechariah in the sanctuary, face to face with the Angel Gabriel, as Gabriel is sharing some incredible news with Zechariah. Not only are Zechariah and Elizabeth going to have a child- something they thought was impossible- but this child is God-sent to prepare for the way of the Lord.

We know that phrase is “code” for “Jesus is coming,” but Zechariah doesn’t know any of this yet. Despite being devoutly faithful all of his life, this is, after all, his first encounter with an angel. Zechariah asked, “How will I know this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.” It seems a reasonable question to ask. However, Gabriel seems piqued that Zechariah did not accept and believe this good news right away. He makes Zechariah unable to speak until Gabriel’s words to him come true.

When Zechariah emerged from the sanctuary, the people praying outside knew that something had happened. He was unable to share Gabriel’s visit or message with them. The unusual moment passes, even though he still cannot speak. We are told, “When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.” Life returned to normal, or so he thought. The changes in Zechariah’s and Elizabeth’s lives were already set in motion- they are now in the process of catching up to the Angel Gabriel’s words.

Divine encounters don’t last, and they raise a myriad of questions that tap into fear and doubt. Have you encountered the divine in a way that seemed impossible to explain? Were you able to connect events together later in an “aha” moment?

What would your response be if an angel of the Lord showed up and shared seemingly impossible news? Would you have believed Gabriel right away or would you have questioned him, too?

Gracious God, we confess that like Zechariah, we sometimes struggle to believe your impossible promises. Meet us in our questions and doubts and help us with our unbelief. Show us the next faithful step we need to take. Amen

Thursday 12/4

Luke 1: 24-25

After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

Zechariah returned home and Elizabeth did indeed become pregnant. Oftentimes, women won't share their pregnancy news until they are around three months pregnant. Elizabeth stayed in seclusion- a sort of self-imposed quarantine- for 5 months. People in their village certainly must have wondered what was going on with them. Zechariah was unable to speak, and Elizabeth refused to be seen in public.

Elizabeth says this one sentence that clues us in to how she may have been feeling: "This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people." Elizabeth is surprised, excited, and maybe even relieved at becoming pregnant, but her grief is also tangible. All those years she longed to be pregnant and wasn't. In their culture, a woman who was not able to bear a child, especially a male child, was considered to have been cursed by God. Elizabeth was a religious woman, married to a priest, and both of them came from priestly families. This must have weighed heavily on her throughout her life. Did she at some point believe that she had displeased God in some way to bear such a humiliating stigma?

As we come to the end of the first week of the Advent season, we should remember that grief isn't an "either/or" proposition. Sometimes you can be happy and still grieve what is lost. During the Christmas season, we think we must banish grief and unhappiness, or we have in some way failed to celebrate Christmas. Instead, maybe we should invite our grief to the celebration- not to take over, but to simply recognize that our lives consist of both great joy and profound sadness. In nature, the mountains sit next to the valleys. Why do we not recognize that our lives consist of highs and lows, often side by side, as well, and that one experience does not diminish the other? They are both part of who we are.

Do you grieve for someone or something during this season? How might you "invite grief to the celebration" of Advent this year?

Compassionate God, you see the burdens we carry and the grief we hold, even in seasons of joy. Teach us to hold space for both sorrow and celebration, trusting that you are present in all of it. May we honor our whole selves as we wait for the coming of Christ child. Amen.

Friday 12/5 and Saturday 12/6

How will you Sabbath with Hope this weekend?

In the busyness of the season, take time to rest and reflect on hope.

God of Sabbath rest, you invite us to pause and be still in your presence. As we rest this weekend, may hope take root in our weary hearts. Refresh us with the assurance that you are always at work, even when we are not. Help us to trust that in our resting, we are preparing room for the hope of Christ to be born anew in us. Amen.

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