

Luke 1:26–38

## “Unexpected Hope”

1. We begin this Sunday the Christian Liturgical year with the season of Advent, a four-week journey preparing us for the celebration of the arrival of Jesus at Christmas
  - a. The themes for these four Sundays are: Hope, Peace, Joy, Love (we sometimes switch their order around a bit)
  - b. They offer us emotional mile markers, as it were, along our spiritual journey to Bethlehem, echoing perhaps some of the feelings Mary and Joseph had on that journey (along with likely many other feelings too!)
  - c. We begin the season with the story of Mary when she was visited by the angel, and there is a series of emotions she displays
    - i. She was at first troubled or even afraid by the encounter (so the angel thought), then shocked or concerned by the angel’s news about the birth of the child, and finally accepting of the call from God
    - ii. Professor Leah D. Schade offers Mary’s progression with this alliteration: Perplexity, pondering, probing, permission-giving (arguing, with that last one that Mary’s statement “let it be with me according to your word” signals her agency, her ability to act and decide for herself to participate in God’s plan which the angel told her about.) <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/jesus-birth-announced-2/commentary-on-luke-126-45-46-56-3>
2. As we imagine how Mary felt, we can picture how difficult it is at times to feel the feelings of the season: Hope, Peace, Joy and Love
  - a. There are just times when those feelings appear to be in low supply.
  - b. Consider this passage from Romans 5:1-5 (Contemporary English Version), which isn’t normally an Advent passage, but listen for the Advent themes, and also an underlying conflict
  - c. *By faith we have been made acceptable to God. And now, thanks to our Lord Jesus Christ, we have peace with God. Christ has also introduced us to God’s gift of undeserved grace on which we now take our stand. So we are happy, as we look forward to sharing in the glory of God. But that’s not all! We gladly suffer, because we know that suffering helps us to endure. And endurance builds character, which gives us a hope that will never disappoint us. All of this happens because God has given us the Holy Spirit, who fills our hearts with [God’s] love.*
  - d. To sit where we are, or to ponder where Mary may have been, if we faithfully follow and trust that progression, we have to honestly acknowledge it’s hard to look ahead to hope while we are in the midst of suffering.
3. We think about Mary experiencing the presence of God’s messenger, this angel, charting out for her not just an unexpected pregnancy, but also the unexpected earthshaking turn of events destined for her child, the Son of God
  - a. We pause here to acknowledge that we enter the realm of faith with stories like this one.

- b. We recognize it's hard for us to wrap our heads around stories of angels and a child conceived by the Spirit of God.
  - c. This is a story which has been near and dear to the church for two thousand years, offering the backstory to who Jesus was
    - i. But it's not present in every gospel, which means that at some point the narrative of the his birth wasn't a concern.
    - ii. The Gospel of Mark, the earliest gospel, begins with Jesus being baptized by John the Baptist – there is no mention of the circumstances around his birth
    - iii. Then this retelling of the virgin birth is in the Gospel of Luke and with some different details in the Gospel of Matthew
    - iv. The Gospel of John starts instead at the beginning of creation, “In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God,” and doesn't explain Jesus' birth
  - d. And while it could be easy to dismiss the narrative wholesale on the grounds of science or simply skepticism, <https://chqdaily.com/2016/06/john-shelby-spong-questions-the-virgin-birth/>
    - i. I urge you to stay in the tension of hearing an unbelievable story to let in the news of the unbelievable truth deep at its core:
    - ii. that God is up to something which brings unexpected hope.
4. In the midst of life in these United States, which feel more divided than united at this moment, we as followers of Jesus play a role in the way in which God delivers hope to the world. An Unexpected type of Hope.
- a. No, we are not necessarily talking about miracles, signs and wonders worthy of a Gospel passage
  - b. But we are talking about the resilient faith and witness of a congregation, of congregations, of faithful followers, who, in the midst of suffering (their own or the suffering of others), simply refuse to stand passively as a tidal wave of challenging circumstances overwhelm us
  - c. We, as Christians, respond.
    - i. When there is someone who is hungry, or in need of shelter, we respond, not only with the needed food and shelter,
      - 1. but questioning and challenging the systems which push people to the edge of hunger and homelessness (as we are doing with Hot Meals, and our push for affordable housing in the 1980s and today)
    - ii. When people are targeted for abuse because of the color of their skin, the faith of their hearts, the country of their birth, or who it is they love
      - 1. We respond, accompanying and supporting those who are feeling this harsh intimidation, advocating for people of all races to get a mortgage (as this church did in the 1970s) resettling immigrants in our midst (as we did in the 70's and just a few years ago), promoting the local civil rights ordinance to protect LGBTQ people in the 2000s
      - 2. And we call out the White Nationalism which underlies a fear mentality about us as a nation and makes a perversion of defining who is an American (as we did when we spoke out against the White

Nationalist group which vandalized the outside of the church right before Easter during the pandemic)

5. The story of the birth of Jesus is one of unexpected hope to a world that was clamoring for grace.
  - a. It is the story of God hearing us and acting in our lives.
  - b. And it is a pattern which we use as a guiding principle, so that
    - i. in the midst of fear or shock,
    - ii. or of enduring suffering,
    - iii. you and I can be messengers from God to all around us, working together to embrace unbelievable news of love, and walk undeterred towards unexpected hope.