

We are spending Sundays in Advent this year with the prophet Isaiah and the gospel writer Luke. Of all the prophets and gospel writers in the Bible, Isaiah and Luke are probably the most popular and well-known at this time of year. When it comes to Luke, it's probably because he provides more storyline than anyone else. This is true of Luke not only in general but also for when it comes to telling us about the birth of Jesus. In Luke, there is so much going on in so many places with so many people that it would be hard not to find yourself somewhere in the story. It could be said that Luke is the Everyman, and this makes him relatable for everyone.

When Matthew sets out to tell us about the birth of Jesus, he doesn't tell us much about Jesus himself. He hones in more on Jesus' family and their reactions to the news that Mary—young, sweet, innocent, *not yet married Mary*—is pregnant. Matthew provides us with a picture of Jesus' family tree and gives us the distinct impression that if not for immense kindness and mercy of Joseph, Mary might almost have gotten cut off the tree. For Matthew, a lot of people who shouldn't necessarily get into the story still get in, but they'll forever have a question mark next to their name.

Not so with Luke. Even before Jesus gets onto the scene, Luke aims to make clear that there will be no question marks in this story, only exclamation points. For if Luke's gospel had a subtitle it would be: Hope for the Hopeless.

Hope. It's what makes up the life story of so many of the characters Luke introduces us to. But as we saw last week with Elizabeth and Mary, hope is not anything we can come up with on our own.

I've heard people say, or I've heard it said to them, in times of utter despair, when there seems no way out, “Well, there's always hope. Whatever you do, don't lose hope.” But what if you do? It's not like hope is a lucky penny. One day it goes missing. You search high and low for it and then one day you find it again in a pile of clean laundry. Phew, now I feel better. I mean, if that's all it takes to have hope, wouldn't we all have a lucky penny in our pocket right now? This is the thing about hope, though: it's not something we can

“have.” Hope is nothing we can hold on to. Rather, hope is something that comes to us. It intrudes upon us, claims us, and takes hold of us.

I don't remember if it was something that I heard or read, but after the 12 members of the boys soccer team and their coach were rescued from a cave in Thailand this past summer (where they had been trapped for over a month), a reporter asked them all, “How did you keep your hope alive?” The coach answered that at first, they had hope of finding their own way out, but after weeks of getting nowhere, they eventually gave up hope. “We had no hope of getting out. But if we had had any hope, it was that you would get to us.”

That's a Luke story. For Luke tells us that when God sends the angel Gabriel out to find first a woman who can birth John the Baptist into the world, and then also to find a woman who can birth Jesus into the world, Gabriel arrives in a place where there is little hope of finding what is needed. Elizabeth is too old to have children, and Mary too young. Mary comes from a town whose claim to fame is to have never had anything good come from it. As women, neither she nor Elizabeth are considered a credit to their society. As Luke puts it, they are barren of everything, including hope. They are hopeless. Which, by God's standards, makes them the perfect candidates for the job! For what need do the hopeful have of hope? Among those who lack so little and have so much, what room do they have for hope? As Thomas Currie points out, we have been taught to prize self-sufficiency at such a price that we have insulated ourselves from the needs of others, and from hope.¹

The message of hope is that God will come to us this Christmas in the poverty of Mary and Joseph, and they will ask us if we have any room for them in our inn. God, of course, knows already that we won't have any room, because we never seem to have any available room in our lives anymore, but God will ask the question of us anyway: do you have any room for me? The self-sufficient will offer Mary and Joseph their charity and consolation. They'll give them a warm blanket, tell them how sorry they are for their trouble, and wish them well as they close the door and turn back to doing whatever it was that they were doing before they got interrupted.

¹ “With Head Held High: Preaching Hope in a Noisy Time.” From the Journal for Preachers, Vol. XLII, Number 1, Advent 2018, p. 3.

The insufficient and truly hopeless, though, will not be able to close the door on Mary and Joseph. They won't be able to welcome them to come inside either. If there's no room in the inn, there's no room in the inn. But their own sense of hopelessness in not being able to do a darn thing for them, will also mean they can't turn them away. So, they'll have to go with them. To help this young, terrified, migrant family find a safe, warm place to stay for the night. And that's where it will happen. That's where hope will come and break in and take hold of us; not in the inn, not in the comforts of our home, but out in the darkness of night. Out on the outskirts of Bethlehem, where the cold wind blows, where the hungry wander in search of food, where death and uncertainty loom large, where shepherds and angels gather in solidarity with Mary and Joseph around a manger, that's where the hopeless will go to fill up on hope this Christmas. And it's where we also must go.

The question is: how do we get there? Because we're not there yet. I know we might want to be there already. I know we might want it to be Christmas now. To get to stop singing Advent hymns and skip ahead to "Joy to the World" and "Away in a Manger." I know all the decorations we've put up might make us think it's Christmas already, but it's not. There's a reason Mary had to wait 9 months and carry Jesus all the way to Bethlehem before he could be born, and there's a reason we need to wait these 4 weeks of Advent before he can be born again in us. Because there are lessons about life and love that can be learned only in the preparations. Just as we can't make hope come, but must let it come to us, if we rush ahead to Bethlehem and to Christmas, we're likely to arrive there only to discover there's no baby, no presents waiting under the tree for us. But still, we want to get there, and to not take any wrong turns on the way. So, how do we get there? And what's in the preparations?

The answer is both as simple as it is difficult, and can be found in the story I read us from Luke's gospel about John the Baptist. John, the baby who was ultimately born of Elizabeth—we remember Elizabeth—barren, old Elizabeth who didn't have a hope in the world—John comes from her. And he must have known that his was the life that almost wasn't, because he grows up with quite a purpose in mind. The way Luke tells is, it was in the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea

and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, that the word of God came to John in the wilderness.

Now the first thing to notice here is the names of all the players and where they're located. The emperor is in Rome, the governor is in Judea, the king is in Galilee, his brother is ruler in Ituraea, and the priests are in the temple in Jerusalem. In case you were wondering where all the power has gone, well now you know. It's in the cities, being held by people with big sounding titles, who work in big offices and who seem to share their power only with their closest friends and family. If this all sounds familiar to you, it's because when it comes to politics and power, very little has changed since the 2nd century. Switch up a few names and places, and we're right where we are today.

John, however, is out in the wilderness, far away from it all. Out where there are no border crossings, where it's hard to tell who's who and who belongs where. Where there are no inns with signs reading, No Vacancy. Where there's plenty of room for anyone who's willing to make room. Where hope is power and power is forgiveness. That's where John is, and that's where, according to Luke, the word of God is coming. And so that's where we also must go. But to get there, we must first prepare the way. We must smooth out what is rough, bring low what is high and raise up what is low. We must straighten out what is crooked in our world and in our hearts, and make a way that is wide enough for all to travel. And it must be said, it won't be easy. Resisting power and standing up for the weak never has been. Holding out for hope can take an eternity. But hold out we must, because this much is clear: God will not settle for a world in which only the strong and powerful can get to Bethlehem. God wants for a world where nothing stands between everyone and the hope that is coming our way.

But it won't be easy, and I've been thinking all week about what I might give you to help you prepare. I've come up with a song. Music, we know, has long been the sound of the weary hopeful. I like to imagine that when John went into the wilderness to preach, it came out sounding more like singing. And that when Isaiah stood up to tell about that kingdom where the lion shall lie down with the lamb, his sermon came out sounding more like song. The song that has been with me all week is an old hymn titled, "There Shall Be Peace in the Valley." It was written back in 1937 by Tommy Dorsey and first covered by

the likes of Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash. I've asked Bill George to sing it for us this morning:

Oh well, I'm tired and so weary but I must go along
Till the Lord will come and call, call me away, oh yes
Well, the morning's bright and the lamb is the light
And the night, night is as black as the sea, oh yes

There will be peace in the valley for me, someday
There will be peace in the valley for me, oh Lord I pray
There'll be no sadness, no sorrow, oh my Lord and no trouble, I'll see
There will be peace in the valley for me

Oh well, the bear will be gentle and the wolf will be tame
And the lion shall lay down by the lamb, oh yes
And the beast from the wild will be laid by a child
And I'll be changed, changed from this creature that I am, oh yes

There will be peace in the valley for me, some day
There will be peace in the valley for me, oh Lord I pray
There'll be no sadness, no sorrow, oh my Lord and no trouble, I'll see
There'll be peace in the valley for me²

² Lyrics by Thomas Dorsey