

# *Wading River Congregational Church*

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## SERMONS IN PRINT

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Luke 1:67-79

"Hope"

The season of Advent was once considered a time of penitence in preparation for the Feast of the Nativity. But in recent years, even in liturgical churches, it has become more a time of joyful anticipation of Christmas. You could say that today, people can't wait to get started on Christmas! Even the liturgical colors that some churches use have changed from penitential purple to bright blue, and colored candles have been adopted for Advent wreaths - now often blue and sometimes also pink, with white at the center to indicate the coming of Jesus, the Light of the World.

The four Sundays of Advent are now often associated with themes like hope, peace, love and joy; and we are going to look at some of them ourselves this month. Today I want to talk a little about hope, and how the Christmas narrative speaks of hope. What is hope, anyway? Webster's Dictionary says it is "a cherished desire with expectation of its fulfillment," or briefly, "to expect with desire." Hope is more than wishful thinking: there are many things I might wish for but have no hope of getting! Hope means a wish that has some reasonable expectation of fulfillment.

### 1) *The Hope of Israel*

It is no coincidence that Luke's narrative of the Nativity of Jesus begins with a long chapter on the hope of Israel. Although Luke was a Gentile and a physician by profession, he was a good enough historian and student of the Hebrew Bible to know that it ends (Mal 3) with a promise that God will send an Elijah-figure to prepare his people for "the day of the LORD" (Elijah because the greatest of the prophets had never died but had gone to heaven in a "chariot of fire").

But that promise has been followed by 400 years of prophetic silence; no "word from the LORD" is heard. Following their Babylonian Exile, Israel has suffered centuries of occupation by Persians, Greeks, Syrians, Egyptians and then Romans. It's hard for those of us who live in a country that has not been occupied by a foreign power (except the Colonies prior to 1776) to grasp what that feels like. If you had lived in Europe during and after WWII, or India or Africa in the early 20<sup>th</sup> C., or in Afghanistan or Iraq for most of the past 70 years, you would know that yearning for freedom and independence, for renewal of your own culture, for the disappearance of foreign troops from your streets, that occupation brings.

So of course Jews of the 1<sup>st</sup> C. longed to see the re-establishment of the Israel of old, however impoverished and weak, rather than to remain a province of somebody else's empire. Of course their hopes were political, as well as social, cultural and spiritual. They longed to see God deliver them; for were they not his people? So Luke grasps the significance of the appearing of John "the Baptist." He is the Elijah-figure who was prophesied, a fact revealed to his own father Zechariah by an angel.

So when John is born, Zechariah praises God as he too is enabled to grasp the meaning of the events that have now begun. "The Lord God of Israel has come to redeem his people..." and to "save them from their enemies." God has "remembered his covenant that he swore on oath to our father Abraham." When we are rescued, we will again be able to "serve the Lord without fear, in holiness and righteousness." And the sign of this is found in his own newborn son, who has been called to "go on before the Lord" - God's Messiah - "to prepare the way," and to bring to God's people "a knowledge of salvation" that will include God's merciful forgiveness of sins, his light to show them the way and guide their feet.

It is a wonderful vision, based on remembering God's promises of old, interpreted in terms of the events unfolding in that day. The hope of Israel is now being fulfilled; God's faithfulness has been vindicated. Little did Zechariah, or anyone else at this moment, understand in detail how this hope was to be fulfilled in the next few years. It would prove to be at the same time more puzzling, more disappointing, more painful, and yet also more wonderful, more life-changing, affecting more people, than they could possibly have guessed. Zechariah's son would do all that an Elijah-figure could do, but then would be brutally killed for his truth-telling. The Lord for

whom he prepared the way would leave even John perplexed at times. But Israel's hope would be fulfilled in ways that would still resound around the globe and change people's lives 2000 years later.

## 2) *Our Hopes*

What about our hopes? What do we "cherish a desire for" that we have expectations will be fulfilled?

If we were Christians in many parts of the world today, we might still long for rescue and deliverance as much as 1<sup>st</sup> C. Jews did. But for most of us, I suspect our hopes are rather different. Not rescue and deliverance, but guidance and protection for ourselves and our loved ones - in this life and the next - and reassurance that lives will not be lived in vain or lost to folly or danger. A hope, a longing to see goodness and peace prevail over evil and strife, in our own families, in our own communities, in our cities, in the world of nations. A hope, a yearning that in the future all that is good and true and beautiful will be preserved and not lost - both for the sake of the generations who come after us, and because these things, we believe, have value in themselves and reflect the skill and devotion that people have invested in them.

Of course we have other less lofty hopes: that our pension will be there when we need it and that it will last our lifetime; that we will have adequate health and strength to enjoy rather than just endure however many years we are given to live. That our children will get an education that fits them for life, that they will be happy and well married and well employed, and become balanced and good and fruitful people. The wish-list is endless! But which of them have a reasonable chance of being fulfilled?

Hope must be based on some evidence, some level of assurance, and not be only a wish. What can we expect? The story of Jesus is there to tell us that in the character and providence of God, some things are certain, and we can build our hopes on them. For example, God is now, as he always has been, calling out a "people for himself." When he calls them, and sets them on the path of truth and righteousness through faith in Jesus, he promises never to abandon them, never to let them wander so far off the path that there is no way back. "No-one can snatch them out of my hand," says Jesus (Jn 10:28).

God is now, and always has been, planning to "bring all things - on earth and in heaven - under one head, Jesus Christ" (Eph 1:10). No part of creation, no culture, no person, is outside his reach. God is now, and always has been, moving in his world towards the triumph of peace, justice and goodness and away from violence, depravity and fallenness. One day "they will beat their swords into plowshares," as Isaiah said.

As we pray for God's plans and promises to be fulfilled, we are in the meantime assured that "those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength; they will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint" (Is 40:31). In every Biblical mention of hope, there is a constant reminder that it requires patience, that it is a confident *waiting* on God.

Hope is always a blend of trust and expectation. But hope in God is well-founded, because we know that his character is love, goodness, wisdom, power, and faithfulness. That is a combination that ensures good outcomes. Only a supremely wise and good and powerful God can ensure that "all things are worked together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose" (Rom 8:28). Our

hope is based on the character of God as it is revealed in Jesus. Our hope is based on the fact that in Jesus, the Father has started "the great reversal" of the world's fallen ways. Our hope is based on what Jesus has done, once for all, to redeem his people and make them citizens of his kingdom, and put his Spirit in and among them.

Whatever we are hoping for, if our hopes are shaped by the revelation of God in Jesus, we know that we can leave them in his hands for fulfillment. If we desire to serve him, we will be given opportunities. If we desire to glorify him in the way we live, we will get opportunities. If we place our children in his hands, we may be sure he will call them to himself, out of the same grace he has shown to us. If we place our own employment, our own health, our own retirement, our own aging, our own dying, in his hands, we can be sure he will take them and use them and make all stages of our lives part of his plan to "unite all things under one head, Jesus Christ."

If we commit ourselves to him, we can be sure he will receive us and make us part of the people he is gathering. If we desire to be peacemakers and not trouble-makers in our homes, our workplaces, our communities, he will bless us and give us the tools we need to do it. If we hope for goodness and truth and beauty to flourish in our lives, in our families, in our churches, he will give us the chance to make those things happen.

"O Israel," says the Psalmist, "put your hope in the LORD" (Ps 130). It's a reminder that hope is not just a noun - and therefore a gift from God, an internal confidence that we can trust the future to him - and also a verb: something we do, something we can be commanded to do, a virtue that we should cultivate, an act of confidence in God.

May the Lord be pleased to offer us new hope this Advent season, as we anticipate the feast of his Son's Nativity, and look for his work in our lives and our culture in all the years that he will give us in this world - and then may we at last enjoy the fulfillment of *the* Christian hope, to spend our lives forever in the presence of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

Let us pray...