



Sunday, Nov. 29, 2020
Sermon Series: Do Not be Afraid

Do Not Be Afraid to Hold Hope
Pastor Vern Christopherson

Luke 1:5-25 NRSV

⁵In 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. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But 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. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for 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. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With 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."

¹⁸Zechariah 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." ¹⁹The 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. ²⁰But 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."

²¹Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When 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. ²³When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵"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."

Do you have days when you've all but given up hope? Even if you're a glass-is-half-full sort of person, my hunch is yes, and not just for yourself but for the world in which we're living. In the midst of a pandemic, are we going to have enough hospital beds and health care workers until a vaccine gets here? In the midst of a struggling economy, are people going to have enough to eat, be able to hang on to their jobs, and not go crazy juggling work and school and parenting? In the midst of our partisan political divide, are we going to be able to put aside our differences and recover a concern for the common good? And, in the midst of an upended church life, will we finally get our building reopened and be able to gather again for in-person worship – figuring out, of course, just where we're going to sit in this new worship space? Considering all these questions and more, there are bound to be any number of times when it feels like we've all but given up hope.

Walter Bruggemann wrote a prayer in September of 1994. It speaks to our hope or the lack thereof. It's entitled, "While the world says 'not possible.'" The prayer is just as relevant today as it was back then: "God of all newness," Brueggemann implores, "we come to you this day in daring hope, for transformations and healings and reconciliations we want yet to receive, believing in them, while the world says 'not possible!'"

We know that feeling, don't we? *Not possible!* So do Zechariah and Elizabeth. Like many a childless couple, they've gotten their hopes up month after month, and year after year, but nothing has come of it. So, what do you do when you've all but given up hope? Keep moving, I suppose, don't dwell on your problems, try not to feel sorry for yourself.

Zechariah and Elizabeth are plain, ordinary people. They come from the hill country of Judea. Zechariah is a priest, and for two weeks a year he's on duty at the Jerusalem temple. One day he's chosen by lot to burn incense on the altar within the Holy Place. As the prayers rise up to heaven like incense, people wait outside for the priest to complete his assignment, and then to bless them.

Zechariah is alone in the Holy Place when a surprise comes. It's the angel Gabriel. Angels were considered messengers, and like dreams and visions, they were a way for God to connect with God's people. Zechariah is afraid. But Gabriel reassures him, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah. God has heard your prayers. Elizabeth is going to have a baby, a very special baby named John. This baby will turn the hearts of the people back to God."

So, if you had all but given up hope, would you have believed Gabriel? I don't think I would have. And neither did Zechariah, "I'm an old man and my wife is getting on in years. All due respect, Gabriel, but it's *not possible!*" For his all-

too-understandable doubt, Zechariah will spend the next several months mute. Those waiting outside for a blessing won't get one. They figure Zechariah must have seen a vision. He packs up and heads home. His work is done. I don't know how he communicates anything to Elizabeth, but he does. She conceives, even in her old age. And Luke's story of Jesus has begun.

Luke takes more time getting started than the other gospel writers. He includes prayers and poems and songs, all to create a sense of expectation for us. Not only is one baby coming, but two. Luke does much of his storytelling by weaving the sacred past into the sacred present. Over and over we'll get a sense of "Haven't we heard this before?" And if you know your Bible, the answer is yes. In the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth, we've heard this story before.

Basically it's the story of Abraham and Sarah, and the beginning of God's covenant people. Sarah, too, was long past childbearing years. But one day three visitors arrived. Sarah found out she was pregnant. Suddenly God was making promises that sounded too good to be true: God would start a relationship with them. Abraham and Sarah's descendants would be as numerous as the stars in the sky. They would have a homeland, and God would work through them - through these plain, ordinary people - to love and bless the whole world.

Pull up a chair, invites Luke, you've heard this old and comfortable story before. God is not starting over again, but instead making good on the promises of old. You can trust this God. But pay attention: now God is using those promises to do something new.

We've attempted to tie the "old" into something new as we've gone through our building renovation at Zumbro. Chairs from the chapel have been moved to the choir loft. Flashes of the red band of reconciliation now appear in the blue baptismal cross. Woodworkers have taken the old pews and turned them into everything from table-top Christmas trees, to festive tree ornaments, to a bench in someone's home. And a dining room table is on the way. And that is just the beginning.

Pull up a chair, people of Zumbro. You may have heard this story before, but God is up to something new. And who knows what this will mean going forward?

Zechariah and Elizabeth are not at the beginning, mind you, but rather at the fulfillment, of God's promises. It will take imagination to see what this fulfillment looks like. So far, we've only got a baby on the way. But you know how a baby can be. Change is coming.

Walter Brueggemann's prayer continues: "God of all newness, while the world says *not possible*, we dare to imagine...trustfulness close between conservatives and liberals, caring between those who have so little and those who have too much, healings that can happen only by your [gracious hand]."

Israel has been waiting a painfully long time for the fulfillment of God's promises. War, captivity, exile, domination by foreign rulers, and in Luke's time, Israel has been crushed by the Romans. The people have all but given up hope.

Here's the truth: like Israel, we too have times when it seems as though hope has reached a dead end. But in the Bible, we're encountered by a God for whom there are no dead ends - detours, perhaps - but no dead ends. This is a God who works for good even when we mess things up, a God who specializes in making a way in the wilderness, a God who opens a crack into the future when none seems possible.

Can the words of Gabriel be trusted? Can a little baby boy grow up and begin to turn the hearts of the people back to God? It is possible? Elizabeth spends five months in seclusion thinking about it, daring to hope that the Lord has looked favorably upon her and has far greater plans than she or anyone could have ever imagined.

Isn't that the way God often works, creating surprises and generating a way forward when all we seem to know are the detours? Gary Doherty died last month. His cancer finally caught up with him. I was able to visit Gary a few times toward the end. Even while lying in bed, he was asking about the church renovation project. He told me he'd been on the Facilities Team for a number of years. He'd been really hoping we could make some improvements to the place.

I showed Gary pictures of the progress on my phone. He got excited. He wanted to come by and see it, but he didn't have the strength. On two of the pictures, a wall had come down and the library had been moved to a new location. A space was opened up to look out the window. There was the Cross of Reconciliation above the parking lot, a new residential building across the street, and beyond that, the city of Rochester. Without missing a beat, Gary exclaimed, "We are a downtown church!" Of all the things a dying man could say, that comment made my day. After all, we've been a downtown church ever since the beginning in 1865. Now the old was becoming new yet again.

So, what do you do when you've all but given up hope? Keep moving? Don't dwell on your problems? Try not to feel sorry for yourself? "Don't be afraid," says Gabriel. "Don't be afraid," says Zechariah and Elizabeth too. God is at

work, doing things beyond our wildest imaging. The sacred past is being woven into the sacred present. The old is becoming new. There might be detours along the way, but no dead ends. We might be tempted to say *not possible*. But take heart: we believe in a God of possibilities.

The story of God's covenant relationship with Israel, beginning with the promise to Abraham and Sarah, is coming to fulfillment in the Gospel of Luke. It's a story that begins with a promise and a birth against all odds. We've heard this story before. Often we don't understand God's ways or God's timing. Often we are filled with doubt and despair. Yet the journey reminds us that God always proves faithful in the end, turning despair into hope, doubt into faith, sorrow into laughter and joy. God proves faithful by working in unexpected ways and through plain, ordinary people, even people like you and me.

God works against all odds - despite our weaknesses, our doubts, our resistance. God works to create faith in us and to accomplish God's purposes. Friends, whatever you are facing this day, do not be afraid to hold hope! After all, like Abraham and Sarah, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, God wants to use you and me to love and bless the whole world.

Brueggeman concludes his prayer: "Dear God, we risk uttering the groanings of our hearts. There are so many things we yearn for, but do not think possible, *not possible* to move past our fear and brokenness, *not possible* to move beyond our weariness, *not possible* to be innocently alive with all the burdens we must keep hidden, but we pray for your impossibility.

"O God of the Exodus and [the Manger] and Easter, we are finally driven to *your* miracles. This day hear our urgency and do among us what none of us can do. Do your Friday to Sunday act yet again and make us new. We pray out of the shattering death and the shimmering new life of Jesus, whose name we bear. Amen."