

Luke 1:5-25

All I Want for Christmas is...HOPE

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There is something about this season that makes even the least sentimental among us long for tradition, even the traditions that, in the past, haven't seemed like a big deal. Like, you must graduate from high school before you can move to the grown-up table at Christmas dinner. The tree must have colored lights...or white lights. The Nativity always goes on the table in front of that window. The following movies must be watched in the month of December: *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*, *The Muppets Christmas Carol*, *White Christmas*, *The Christmas Story*, and of course, *Charlie Brown Christmas*.

I've been thinking a lot about traditions lately, especially as I realize that, because of COVID-19, some of the traditions we look forward to just won't work. Not everything works through Zoom and Facebook LIVE. Thankfully, there are some that actually translate pretty well virtually and I am finding myself enjoying those even more intensely this year.

So, I was super excited when I read the headline: The Rockefeller Christmas Tree is in New York City! Yes, 2020 will not thwart this tradition, I thought as I read the article. Every year, a tree is chosen from the northeast area and it is brought to New York City, set up, and decorated in Rockefeller Center. Did you know that each tree is decorated with strings of lights that measure over 5 miles long? The 2020 tree will sport 50,000 LED lights and 3 million crystals. This year, the official lighting of the tree will be on Wednesday December 2nd. I even wrote it down on my calendar as I clicked on the picture.

And then I saw it. First, I saw the "before picture." Before, it was a majestic tree, towering over an average house in a residential neighborhood. It was exactly what I imagined a Rockefeller Center tree ought to look like in its natural habitat. But the "after picture," it wasn't spectacular. It wasn't breathtaking. The trip from its home in upstate New York to New York City must have been quite harsh because this tree, this traditional symbol of hope and resiliency, wasn't awe-inspiring or magnificent. It was...predictable.

In fact, if 2020 was a tree, it would look like this tree. And bless his heart, when asked for a comment, Rob Speyer, the president and chief executive officer of the company that owns Rockefeller Center, said, “The Rockefeller Center Christmas tree always represents the holiday season, but it has also stood tall as a symbol of hope and resilience...2020 has been a difficult year, but New Yorkers have persevered, and we are determined to come back better and stronger. We are particularly proud to continue the joyous tradition this year.”

<https://www.theloop.ca/the-annual-christmas-tree-at-rockefeller-center-just-went-up-and-its-peak-2020/?fbclid=IwAR32N3dWGIfQUpp99USVW3g2nnG5ABCyWVP4qE8HoUkiQ3QZ0aJXi2i27Zg>

Some have compared the tree to the Charlie Brown Christmas tree. One person on Twitter even suggested the tree be left undecorated, except for a single red ornament. I mean...why not just put it out there for the world to see...hope looks very different in 2020.

So maybe this different kind of a year will help us find a new perspective on the, maybe too familiar (?), stories that surround Jesus’ birth, in the Gospel of Luke, one of which Gordon read for us a few minutes ago. The author of the Gospel of Luke is unknown; however, the text gives us some general clues about him. He wrote sometime between the Roman destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 C.E. and before the end of the first century. So, as we read the stories in this gospel, it’s important to understand that they were written down, not by an eye-witness, but by someone as much as 2 generations removed, with his own perspectives and his own reasons for writing.

When I talk specifically about the author, I will refer to him as Luke though we don’t know his name. The Gospel reflects Luke’s wide reading of the Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible. He was not Jewish, but his writing suggests that he studied it prior to becoming a Christian. His purpose in writing was to convert Gentiles to Christianity by weaving a story of how God’s fulfillment of scriptural promises to Israel gave birth to a church that included both Jews and Gentiles. Luke’s gospel is about promises fulfilled and the book of Acts, which Luke also wrote, is about the church that was birthed as a result.

Today's story mirrors stories in the Hebrew Bible in which couples who were faithful people of God seemed unable to conceive children; Sarah and Abraham, Rebekah and Isaac, and Rachel and Jacob are a few that come to mind. Their stories were part of the promise and fulfillment narrative in the Torah. God promised land and descendants and eventually God fulfilled that promise. But we know that was not the end of Israel's story. The Hebrew Bible continues with the stories of good kings and bad kings, prophets and judges, freedom and oppression, war and rarely peace.

Without actually quoting scripture, in the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah's longing for a child, Luke links the story of Jesus' birth to the story of Israel. By the time Jesus was born, probably in 4 B.C.E., the ancient Jews had lived under one empire after another for around five hundred years. Some empires were worse than others, but all of them did what empires do. They oppressed and committed acts of violence and injustice against the residents. The Roman Empire had taken over in 63 B.C.E. and the Jewish people were more oppressed than ever.

This story took place in the temple, the center of the Jewish faith. Zechariah, who was a priest, was chosen to offer incense at the temple that day. The job of the priest was to preside over rituals like incense offerings, priestly blessings, purification rituals, and to intercede between God and the people of God. As usual, Zechariah went into the sanctuary alone that day, while the people waited outside praying. While he was inside, an angel visited him and said what angels always say, "Do not be afraid." And the angel told him that his prayers had been heard, he and Elizabeth would finally have a son and they would name him John. The angel went on to tell him about his son, how he would follow in the priestly tradition and, like the prophet Elijah, would turn people toward God. I don't know what the angel was expecting Zechariah to say or do, but his response was not it.

Zechariah responded by saying (this is my loose translation), "Wait...how do I know this is true? I'm old. My wife is old." And then I feel like the angel got a little salty here and said (again my loose translation), "Seriously? Don't you know who I am? I am Gabriel. I live with God. Trust me, I know what I'm talking about here. And...since you don't get it, you will be mute until the baby comes. So there."

Wouldn't you have loved to see the look on his face as he came of the sanctuary that day? The people could tell right away that something had happened, but he couldn't tell them what. Later, he went home.

The story doesn't say what happened when he arrived home, but whether Zechariah was able to communicate with her or not, Elizabeth got it, "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," she said.

I imagine before that day in the temple, Elizabeth and Zechariah, day after day, week after week, year after year, talking about, crying over, and hoping for, a baby. That kind of hope wasn't the kind of hope that is like a wish, like a child's Christmas list or her whisper in Santa's ear for a Red Ryder BB gun or her two front teeth. The hope we read about in the Bible, the hope we talk about on this, the first Sunday of Advent, is much more robust. People like Sarah and Abraham, like Elizabeth and Zechariah, reveal a hope worth risking for, worth holding onto, a hope that pulled them from their present reality into a future story. Mary Lou Redding, author of *While We Wait*, writes, "This kind of hope tends to spill out from one person's life into the lives of others and it changes everything.

Advent hope isn't about what we wish only for ourselves, it is about all of us together. This hope acknowledges what life is like now and imagines something better, something that aligns with God's dream for all of creation.

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called his vision for that future the "Beloved Community." King envisioned the Beloved Community as a society based on justice, equal opportunity, and love of all human beings. A while ago, I talked to you about a book called *The Seventh Story: Us, Them and the End of Violence*, by Gareth Higgins and Brian McLaren. The authors describe the Seventh Story as a path of open-heartedness toward others that invites us understand that the stories we're telling about how things work in the world lead to fear, aggression, and loneliness — and asks us to consider how we might tell a story that creates joy, connection, and abundance even in the most difficult times and places. Frankly, it sounds a lot like MLK's Beloved Community, which sounds a lot like what I know about shalom in the Hebrew Bible. Shalom, is wholeness and well-being...for everyone. Like hope, shalom is not about what I want for myself, it is about all of us. I will never have shalom if my neighbors do not.

My point is that there are a lot of ways to package these ideas...Beloved Community, Seventh Story, shalom, and there are more...theologian Walter Brueggemann talks about it in terms of the common good.

But all of it hinges on one thing: HOPE, hope for a different kind of world, a world we can see sometimes, when the light is just right, in the eyes of a stranger, or our own reflection in a Christmas ornament, or maybe wrapped up in a blanket in a crib. As we prepare our hearts and our homes to celebrate Christmas, let's give ourselves the time to let our imaginations run wild, to dream with God, to dream with each other, to HOPE.

And maybe those dreams will be so real and so persistent that we won't be able to stop thinking about them. Maybe they will attach themselves to our hearts so completely that we will be forced to act. Maybe we will be inspired to do brave things, to say brave things, to put on our masks and tell our neighbors and co-workers about the world we are dreaming of. And maybe they will find safe ways to tell their neighbors. And they will tell their children and their children will talk about it in their Zoom classrooms. And someday soon, on playgrounds and in our homes, offices, and neighborhoods, in Oklahoma City and in Washington D.C., and all over the world, we will all be living as if our dreams have become real.

And then we will see how hope tends to spill out from one person's life into the lives of others and it changes everything. Can you imagine it? Can you see it? That vision has inspired me to begin my own Christmas list. Maybe it has inspired you too. Right now, all I want for Christmas is HOPE. How about you? Amen.