

“What the Future Holds”

Luke 1:5-25

First Sunday of Advent

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This past Thanksgiving evening, a series of texts arose between me and a couple of my friends from college 30 years ago. I attended a small school in Minnesota, and when we were in college, we all watched many a Minnesota Vikings game together on Sunday afternoons.

One of those friends was not a Vikings fan.

He was a Patriots fan.

And since we graduated almost 3 decades ago, he's had more than his share to gloat about.

But after the Vikings beat the Patriots last Thursday evening, he texted to say that this year, the Vikings are a team of destiny.

Now I may have been too young to watch the Vikings lose 4 Super Bowls back in the 1970s. But I've been through enough heart-breaking playoff losses to know that when someone predicts the Vikings finally win the Super Bowl, my reaction is...no way.

Not getting my hopes up.

That's too good to be true.

Have you ever said that about anything before?

It's too good to be true?

Of course you have.

If I told you right now that during the upcoming holiday season:
you will never have to wait in line,
you will never feel stressed or strained over the next 4 weeks,
you will get along with every member of your family when
you sit together at the dinner table, what would your first thought be?

That's too good to be true.

Or maybe you had that thought earlier in our worship service this morning.

Do you remember the words we heard during the lighting of the Advent candle?

“We are preparing ourselves for the days when nations shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore.”

I suspect a couple of you secretly had a raised eyebrow...
Swords into plowshares?
Spears into pruning hooks?

That's just too good to be true.

I think Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, knew something about that feeling, that outlook...

Our text for this morning is the first story in Luke's Gospel, the story of John's parents, Zechariah and Elizabeth.

They are a righteous couple, but a barren couple.
They have no children.

Which makes them a DISAPPOINTED couple, and—in their community, at that time—there was a kind of embarrassment.

So one day Zechariah is performing his priestly duty in the Temple when the angel Gabriel appears. Gabriel tells Zechariah that God has heard Zechariah's prayers, and Elizabeth will have a baby boy.

It's the best news Zechariah could possibly imagine.
 And what does Zechariah say?
 Does he leap with joy?
 Does he shout with excitement?

Oh no.

Zechariah says to Gabriel, "*How will I know that this is so?*"

In other words—I like what you've said, Gabriel...

but it sounds too good to be true.

Now I get Zechariah's response.
 I think we all do.

It comes from a place that says, don't mess with me on this painful subject, Gabriel. This vulnerable place in my life where my wife and I have hoped and hoped and hoped...and never received what we asked for.

We've always wanted a child and never been able to have a child.
 And now I'm an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.
 So don't go there, Gabriel.
 How will I know that what you've said is so?

Life had squashed this hope of Elizabeth and Zechariah...and he's scared of getting his hopes up, only to have them dashed one more time.

What a FASCINATING way for Luke to begin his Gospel.

Why start the good news of Jesus Christ that way?

Luke does not begin his Gospel in a place of trust and faith.

Luke begins in a place of doubt and fear.

A place where Zechariah and Elizabeth, this righteous and upstanding couple in their community—are at their most vulnerable.

It sounds like a strange way to begin his story, but I love the fact that Luke starts his Gospel here. Because **vulnerability** runs like a ribbon through the opening chapters of Luke.

Think for a moment about Mary.

Mary is going to have a child, and she's not married, and who's going to believe her story that this is all because of the Holy Spirit?

After Gabriel visits her, Mary is in a vulnerable place.

So she races to her cousin Elizabeth's house.

And do remember the song that Mary sings, when she gets to Elizabeth's house? The Magnificat?

It's about the lowly being lifted up.

It's about the bottom rung coming out on top.

It's about God paying attention to the vulnerable.

Or how about the Christmas story itself?

What does it tell us?

That God did not enter the world as a mighty warrior, as a powerful politician, or even as the son of a well-off family.

God came into the world in a backwater town, to a poor Jewish couple, to a people under the thumb of Roman rule...in other words, God came into the world...vulnerable.

Do you know what that's like?

For God to enter your life not at your point of highest success, but at the point of your greatest weakness, where you're unable to help yourself?

When the former White House speechwriter and columnist Michael Gerson died a couple weeks ago, some of the obituaries recalled not a speech, but a sermon that Gerson delivered in the Washington National Cathedral in 2019.

Gerson began that sermon by talking about how he had recently been hospitalized for clinical depression. An “insidious, chronic disease,” as he described it, that left him telling himself things like:

“You have no future.”

“You are a burden to your friends.”

Realism, he said, seemed to require hopelessness.

Gerson went on in the sermon to credit his recovery to the professional help he received—the doctors and nurses who knew his own mind better than he did.

“I’d urge anyone with undiagnosed depression to seek out professional help,” he told the gathered assembly. “There is no way to will yourself out of this disease...”

But Gerson also spoke of his faith.
And he goes on to describe the paradox of hope.

When I'm in my right mind, I choose hope.

And then he points out that hope is not only a choice, but a gift, the way that God intervenes in our lives.

It's something we have no control over, according to Gerson.

There really is no formula...

Paul's blinding light on the road to Damascus...

Augustine, instructed by the voice of a child to 'take up and read...'

Teresa of Avila, encountering the suffering Christ with an 'outpouring of tears'...

John Wesley's heart becoming 'strangely warmed.'"

"Faith, thankfully, does not preclude doubt," he said.

"It consists of staking your life on the rumor of grace...
the wild hope of a living God..."¹

Do you remember what the candle stands for, the one we lit on the wreath at this start of this service?

On this first Sunday of Advent, it stands for hope.
But what kind of hope?

Not tame hope.
Not prudent hope.
Not practical hope.

But WILD hope...

¹ Michael Gerson preached this sermon February 17, 2019; found at [Sermon: Michael Gerson - Washington National Cathedral](#).

Because the temptation for all of us at this time of year is to turn hope into something we can domesticate.

We want our day to go well.

We want a problem we're having to get solved.

Not bad wishes.

But I'm not convinced that captures what the Bible means by hope.

In the Bible, hope has something to do with vulnerability, and it is God's startling, surprising gift.

Twelve years after his historic release from prison, Nelson Mandela journeyed back to Robben Island where he had been incarcerated for more than a quarter of a century. Mandela wanted to take in the visual landscape that he had gazed at for so long—this time with the eyes not of a prisoner, but of an artist.

He drew what he saw upon his return.

And by drawing some of the dominant scenes, he hoped to tell a new story through them.

One of his most poignant drawings is a rendering of the prison lighthouse. The tones of blue and white lend an air of serenity to the scene that Mandela painted, but that serenity is ambiguous.

Standing pale and lonely against the sky, what does that lighthouse represent?

Is Mandela painting a picture of the eerie calm of the evil that held him in prison all those years, when he was at his most vulnerable?

Or is he depicting the peace that is born of righteousness, of his finally being released?

Mandela said that he felt both.

“It is true that Robben Island was once a place of darkness, but out of that darkness has come a wonderful brightness, a light so powerful that it could not be hidden behind prison walls, held back by prison bars or hemmed in by the surrounding sea.”²

The first Sunday of Advent is about hope.
What are you hoping for these days?

Sure, I hope that the Vikings might finally win a Super Bowl this year, but that’s not the kind of hope that I’m talking about at this moment.

What are your deepest hopes right now?

Perhaps it’s for healing in your family.
Perhaps you’re desperate for a loved one who’s struggling with addiction.

Perhaps your deepest hope is that your mistake will be forgiven, or your anger will go away.

Whatever your hopes might be, I suspect they don’t all come from a place of strength and confidence. I suspect that the deepest ones come from a place of vulnerability.

² From “Slow Miracles,” in *A Surprising God: Advent Devotions for an Uncertain Time*, Thomas G. Long and Donyelle C. McCray, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2021.

A place in your heart that's not too far from that place in Zechariah's heart.

The French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery is probably best known as the author of that wonderful book, *The Little Prince*.

What isn't as well-known is that Saint-Exupery was also a pilot in the French Air Force during WWII. He was stationed in North Africa, and became friendly with some of the local Bedouin—

tough people,
resourceful people,
living their days in the desert.

On one occasion, he managed to fly a few of these Bedouin home with him on a visit to France.

He expected these “desert nomads to be wowed by Western technology:

the Eiffel Tower,
the railroad locomotive,
the automobile...
but those wonders of the modern

age were met with indifference by the Bedouin.”

There was, however, one sight that filled them with awe.
It was in the French Alps.
It was a waterfall.

Remember, these were people **who measured their lives by WATER—**

how much water their canteens could hold,
how many hours' ride it was to the next oasis,
how long their camels could go without taking a drink.

Yet here, gushing from the side of the mountain, was something they had truly never seen before.

It was, from their experience, too good to be true.

In the words of Saint-Exupery:

“They stood in silence...[looking at that waterfall]

“The flow of a single second would have resuscitated whole caravans that, mad with thirst, had pressed on into the eternity of...mirages.

[They stood there,] “gazing at the unfolding of a...mystery. That which came roaring out of the belly of the mountain was life itself...”³

What was so remarkable, so heart-stopping for those Bedouin, was the fact that the flow of water...never stopped.

Can you think of the most vulnerable place in your life right now?

That place where your guard is up, and you're too scared to even have any hope?

The good news at Advent is that this is exactly the kind of place where Christ will be born.

Not as we expect.

It's never like we expect.

But the promise is that Christ will be born anew, in my life and in yours.

³ This story is taken from Carlos Winton's article, "What Cancer Teaches," in *Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 2007.

May that new life be like the roar of a waterfall for you,
wild and untamed, some life-giving gift that never stops,
a gift you never saw coming...

Amen.