

St James United Church

Message for December 1, 2024

First Sunday of Advent



“The Year-long Virtue of Hope” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Jeremiah 33:14-16; and Luke 1:5-25

Today we begin Advent, a wonderful time of year where we wait in anticipation to celebrate Christ's birth. The culture around us may be in full on Christmas mode but as church we take a different approach. We go more slowly, getting to Christmas a bit at a time, like lighting one candle, then two and so on, including extra festive music each Sunday, or adding elements to our stable scene in the chancel and in front of the lectern, all ways to embody the Christian posture of hope. Hope is a spiritual muscle we need to build up and marking Advent rather than go straight into Christmas helps us do just that. We need to practice hope if we truly believe Christ was born to usher in God's Reign. As I shared last week, God's Reign is always in process but never fully realized. We need hope to trust that God's Reign is growing around us even when it feels so very far off.

It's to honour this call to hope that we've opted this Advent to concentrate on the beginning of Luke's gospel rather than jump around in the timeline as we normally do. I wanted to do this because I find the first two chapters of Luke to be all about hope, how we live into it, or not. What's more hopeful than a birth story? And Luke shares two - Jesus' birth and his cousin John's. We end up with two of everything with much to say in the details. Thus we start with the first annunciation story. There's one character in common, Gabriel, but apart from that this story is very different. For starters, Gabriel appears to an older man not a young woman. Next Zechariah is in the Temple doing his priestly duties. This means he's in the capital, so someone of importance, compared to Mary who lived far from the centre of power in Galilee. But most notable is his reaction. Mary's famous response is, “Let it be with me according to your word.” Instead, Zechariah's response is doubt and so he's made unable to speak until what Gabriel said comes to pass and John is born.

Now it could be argued that Mary also had doubt. How different is “How will I know this is so? I am an old man, and my wife is getting on” from “How can this be since I am a virgin?” It is perplexing. And that might be the difference. We'll hear at the start of annunciation story number two how Mary was perplexed at the angel's greeting. Perhaps her response to Gabriel's declaration was also perplexity whereas Zechariah is dismissive, scoffing at the idea that Elizabeth could get pregnant after trying for so long. In this too it is assumed the issue of infertility is her fault and not his. It speaks to issues of power and privilege. Which I wonder is

where the hesitancy comes in. After all, what was this child of theirs to do but be the forerunner, not the awaited leader who rises like a branch from the fallen tree of David but the one who prepared for his coming. And how? By calling people to seek righteousness, to strive for justice, to be at peace, in right relationship with others.

Maybe Zechariah was too caught up in what he'd lose, despite being born into the priestly class and so presumably a person of faith after serving in the Temple all his life? Or maybe it wasn't selfishness, and I am just being too hard on him. What if it was fear that kept him from believing God was bringing about what was promised for so long. It's understandable. Their position was precarious, King Herod was a puppet, the people allowed in the Temple only because Rome let them. All that could be swept away (which is what happened not long before Luke wrote his gospel, the Temple and Jerusalem destroyed in 70 CE). Perhaps Zechariah was afraid of the wrath of the Romans should the Messiah, believed by many to be a political, even a military saviour, not succeed after all. Maybe he felt it was too risky to believe Gabriel's words?

And isn't that how we can be? We know all's not right in the world, that it could be more just, equal, loving, fairer economics not just here but around the globe, possible if we practice God's teaching, lived as Jesus showed us. Yet we hold back. Are we afraid of the results if we try but nothing changes? Or we try and those with most to lose strike back? Or we try and the world is more just as God promised but we'll lose power and privilege? Like Zechariah we shift God's words to make worship how best to follow God, a bit of charity here and there, but not enough to change anything since heaven is our goal. We end up holding our tongues, mute as Zechariah.

I wonder if Zechariah lost hope, and thinking it's all on us, we're tempted to as well. But does that need to be our response? We look at the world, see more steps going back than forward and resign ourselves that at least we'll have a future in heaven, but what if we looked attentively to where things are shifting? The timeframe for God's Reign to come into being is lengthy but it is emerging. It does so with us, but not only by us, even in spite of us, because it is God's Reign, not ours. And you see it as you look over history, compare things to where we are now. Is the speed frustrating? Yes. But Jesus came in vulnerability, not power. Through him, God sits with us in our hurt and frustration, our longing and impatience, our fear too, even in our selfishness, inspiring us to change and to lean more deeply into God's reign of justice, peace and love. God in Jesus is there with strength, courage and perseverance, all qualities of hope, the kind of hope that we will soon hear Mary had.

In the meantime, we come together as a spiritual community. Not just to worship, but welcome one another with openness and love as an expression of God's Reign, retell our stories and recall God's presence with the people, enact those stories in trust that God is still with us, especially as we share in communion, pray for and with each other, encouraging one another in how we can live into God's Reign each day. In all of this we are nurtured in our hope, an Advent virtue we're to embody not just this month but our whole life long. Amen.