

St James United Church

Message for December 8, 2024

Second Sunday of Advent



“The Power of Active Hope” - Preached by Rev. James Ravenscroft

Malachi 3:1-4; Luke 1:57-80; and “Moon and Water” by Mary Oliver

What a difference nine months makes! Zechariah has come a long way since we first met up with him in the Temple as he made the incense offering. As you’ll recall, his reaction to Gabriel’s visit was less than stellar. And the consequence of his refusing to take the angel at their word was for him to be made unable to speak. But now not only has he found his voice, but prophecies about what God is doing and how his newborn child will be a part of that divine unfolding.

Now to be honest, his conversion wasn’t immediate. Over that nine months two things happened that might have helped it along, in narratives we jumped over, so we’d keep the two John stories together. The first I alluded to last week, as I compared Zechariah’s reaction to Gabriel’s visit to Mary’s. Second, right after Gabriel came to her, Mary went off to stay with Zechariah and his spouse, her cousin Elizabeth, perhaps to offer support, and to get some as well. I am sure the months they spent together reflecting on their pregnancies helped shift Zechariah’s perspective.

This points to an important aspect of hope. It’s best shared with others. It’s one way hope is distinguished from wishful thinking. That’s more of a feeling and is passive. Hope is active. It has an end goal more than a vague idea. It gets that because it starts with realism, the sought for end discerned through reflection on the current situation. Then added onto this discerned direction is awareness of the steps needed to get there. This is where sharing hope is critical. It is easy for our hope to collapse back into wishful thinking because left to our own we talk ourselves out of trying. We do this out of self-doubt, listening to the inner critic who questions our capacity, even our worth in imagining a changed situation, let alone getting there.

It strikes me that this is what may have been going on with Zechariah nine months earlier. If as I suggested last week, the cause of his refusal to accept Gabriel’s announcement was fear, then it makes sense that he doubted his capacity as well. He would have watched the Romans march into his homeland as they expanded their empire. Initially Judea was “self-governing” but only in name. Herod was appointed king by the Romans, and only as long as he Romanized the country and kept tax revenues flowing. Zechariah knew their sovereignty was on unstable ground. In a few short years Judea would be a Roman province, ruled by a governor using soldiers to keep people in line. I’m sure Zechariah wished the situation would change, but waited for someone else to do it. To be fair, surviving took all the personal agency that most people could muster.

But then something shifted, signified in his being able to speak and then prophesying about his child. He rediscovered a sense of agency, a confidence in his own power. But it wasn't just his. It was aligned to his spouse as he confirmed his child was to be named John. And with God, that confirmation an act of personal acceptance of God's plan, acceptance that John would be a messenger, that he would point to the Messiah, like the moon reflecting the sun's light, but not the sun itself. Recognizing that is your role does express your agency. We don't have to be the leader to be engaged in bringing about change. We just need to be engaged.

And this again is where community comes in. Zechariah recognized that he, Elizabeth and John, along with Mary, Joseph and a soon to be born Jesus, didn't need to be afraid, that together they were joined in a movement of God's making, one that God needed them to get going. As he said, "your child will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before God to prepare their ways. The tender mercy of God breaks upon us, dawn for all sitting in darkness and the shadow of death." Death was around every corner in their situation, and if we are honest, increasingly in ours. But in the face of that God called them, still calls us, as messengers of compassion, love and peace, to be a counter movement to the oppression, fear and violence of their age and ours.

We don't have to do this alone. Our personal agency is encouraged and amplified with others. As part of a shared movement, we can lay aside our doubts. As we share them with others, we realize we do have capacity, are worth a brighter future. It doesn't mean we have all the skills we need, but there are people who can help us learn. And together we foster a sense of possibility, that we can do this. We may get stuck at times, like how it feels in the world right now, forces pushing against us to prevent change. But together we work to shift them. Even a small shift can be enough to let the drive for change begin to move again. That is what hope is about, not waiting for someone to bring a future for us, but naming what is possible as step by step we do what we can. And in all this we remember that just as Zechariah and Elizabeth were of one generation, Mary and Joseph another, John and Jesus yet one more, the community in which we hope is cross-generational, us passing our hope to our children and grandchildren as our parents and grandparents passed theirs to us.

All the while we recall that hope is a spiritual gift first of all, founded in God and the future God wants for us. Like John who'd prepare others for Jesus' coming, as a community we're to be a messenger of hope, pointing toward the future we're seeking. We won't always get things right, but as we listen to each other, encourage each other, learn from each other, forgive each other, grounded in compassion, love and peace, we embody what God calls us to be. We need communities like this, especially now as globally we face political, social and environmental crises. It may feel like the dawn of God's new day is far off, but we can be a community of hope, like the moon in the night, shining to remind us of a power beyond us, inspiring us to keep going.

We can keep going because God is ahead of us, calling us in hope to join others in supportive communities as our personal agency is encouraged and amplified. Zechariah had been made unable to speak by his fear, but with others he found his voice. In community we can find ours too. May that be our hope. Amen.