

Advent Week 1: Make Room for Hope

1. What is Advent?

Today marks the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is about taking Christmas seriously. This is not just some sentimental Christmas fluff.

The question we are asking ourselves at Advent is:

If God came to see you today, would you notice his coming? Would you be too busy? Would you be too distracted? Would you be too sophisticated? Would you be too gloomy? Would you be too proud to recognise him or welcome him?

To help us on our way, we are going to be looking back to the Christmas stories, learning from those faithful people who were waiting for God to come, living in unsettled times. And he came in a most surprising way to be one of us. He sent His Son Jesus.

We also look forward to God's ultimate coming, learning to live in the firm hope of Christ's return, when his peace, healing and justice will restore this world for good.

Having looked back and looked forward we open our eyes again in the present, my hope is that we find we have new vision to recognise God's coming in our lives in the myriad ways he does.

Our theme is 'Making room...'. Over the four weeks we are exploring and making room in our lives for Hope, Peace, Joy, Love.

These advent virtues are the lenses needed for our eyes to see God's coming.

This will mean some slowing down, some tidying up may be required in our lives, some self reflection, letting God sift through our goals and dreams, so that we can listen and wait in expectation for God's coming.

Today we are making room for hope.

2. How we talk about hope...

What exactly is hope? Specifically we want to know not just a dictionary definition, but what the Bible has to say about hope. We have to know what we are talking about before we can get very far in making room for hope in our lives.

Mostly when we use the word 'hope' we mean '**finger-crossing hope**': Hope in this sense is a desire for something good in the future and it is far from certain:

'I hope Dad gets home early today so we can bounce on the trampoline'.
'My hope is that after I finish this course it will lead me into a fulfilling job.'

Another way to understand hope is that it is a **reservoir of emotional strength**. When our hopes are fulfilled, we feel strong and buoyant. But when life throws us curved balls and we're not able to swing things back around to where we wanted to be, when things don't work out as we'd hoped our reserves of emotional strength are drained. We say 'my hope is waning'. We become less confident. We consider compromises. We wonder whether we can get to where we initially planned.

3. Recognising Places of Hopelessness

Luke begins his gospel with this story of the old priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. And this is a story that begins with hopelessness - there's nothing left in the tank for these two.

For Elizabeth and Zechariah, they're hopeless circumstance was their childlessness. In their day and age, where the role of wife was primarily understood as bearing children for her husband, Elizabeth in particular, not only faced the personal loss of her hopes and dreams of child rearing and family but she also the torment from those who have children. She was culturally deemed less than, she was mockable, she was a failure.

You can see these values loud and clear in the laws of the day: Jewish law was actually one of the most protective for women in the ancient world? Divorce, for example, was generally at the husband's whim and left the woman with nothing, but Jewish law required that any husband who divorced his wife had to pay a regular stipend for support and it was strenuous enough that there are stories of men reconsidering their divorce because they didn't want to have to pay that stipend. But there are a few clauses that allowed a husband to divorce his wife without penalty. Adultery is the obvious one but barrenness actually also fell in this category. And so as we read the story, consider Elizabeth's perspective. Her husband is a leading priest, a public figure who should be a model Israelite and as such he may have quite lawfully put her aside and taken a new wife so he could have children. Thankfully the picture Luke paints of this couple gives no indication that Zechariah was anything other than a

loving husband but I can't emphasise enough the depth of cultural and personal hurt this couple would have experienced every day in this circumstance.

Do you recognise any places of hopelessness in your life today?

Are you living with lost expectations and major disappointments.

Perhaps the dreams you've had of how you want to live and how you would change things have got lost amongst the more practical things of life. Life rolls on and our dreams fade away, until you're too afraid to dream anymore.

Perhaps its loneliness that has left scars of rejection and make finding new friendships seem hopeless.

Perhaps its illness or injury that leaves you in despair at being less mobile or with less energy.

Maybe your hopeless circumstance is a constant struggle with a persistent sin. Years later you are still fighting the same battle and you wonder if those battles have born any fruit.

Maybe like Elizabeth and Zechariah you are facing or have faced the fear and difficulty that some couples have with conceiving. You are grieving miscarriages and processing hopes dashed.

Most of us have areas where hopelessness nips at us and dogs our steps.

As a church community, it is most important for us to be sensitive with each other in the many unspoken burdens we carry. Can we be a place where everyone finds acceptance?

4. God's Hope

If you're familiar with the Bible you'll remember that this is not the first story about a childless couple. In all the biblical stories that begin like this, the stories of Abraham and Sarah, of Jacob and Rachael and of Elkanah and Hannah, a new kind of hope, one we haven't mentioned yet, bursts in and surprises everybody.

Just like each of these couples, Zechariah and Elizabeth were all out of any finger-crossing hope when a surprising new hope, Hope from God stepped in.

This is the hope that I want you to understand and take hold of today.

I call it hope in God and I'm going to describe some characteristics of it now so that you can understand it and take it on board:

A. Hope in God is relational.

Hope in God does not come down to chance and probability. It comes down to angelic messengers speaking into personal circumstances!

When Zechariah went about his priestly duties on that day, interceding with God on behalf of his people, his and Elizabeth's life were changed forever. Ironically this old priest who in his heart had given up on God's answer to his prayers, was picked to burn the incense for the prayers of the faithful. I imagine Zechariah going through the motions...

In the most holy place God's messenger visited him personally with a message:

'Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the eyes of the Lord.'

It is not hard to point out the personal nature of this encounter.

And later when Elizabeth becomes pregnant and goes into seclusion, she summarises things very personally: *"How kind the Lord is!" she exclaimed. "He has taken away my disgrace of having no children."*

If God is an abstract puzzle to you today, if you have searched philosopher's books and heard all the arguments for and against, I encourage you to try the relational approach! Start by bringing your hopes to God in prayer.

B. Hope in God is Sure and Steadfast

God's hope is sure and steadfast because of who God is.

Metaphors of God: my rock, my fortress, my foundation, my deliverer, my refuge, my shield, my stronghold, my shepherd, a fountain of life.

If God is faithful we can confidently trust his purposes for restoring us and our world.

But it is much easier to stand still in what you know, regardless of how unfulfilling, than to move into the unknown!

Zechariah had no room for hope. He had no category for what was happening. He could not take the miraculous as a matter of course. He had a natural objection to the promise that he and Elizabeth will receive a child in their old age.

In response, the angel Gabriel indicates that God *will* bring his promise to pass regardless of Zechariah's unbelief.

To drive the point home, Zechariah becomes temporarily dumb. This short-term judgment from God is redemptive. Both punishment and gift. His nine months of silence shakes the scales of tiredness and hardness off, and allow his heart to move into a new space where hope and joy took central position.

And after Zechariah writes 'his name is John' and his mouth is finally opened again, he bursts forth in beautiful spirit filled song of praise, which includes these lines:

"Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has visited and redeemed his people. He has sent us a mighty Saviour from the royal line of his servant David, just as he promised through his holy prophets long ago.

C. Hope in God goes beyond God fulfilling our own Dreams

We should also note that Hope in God goes beyond God fulfilling our own dreams.

While God shows his kindness as he attends to Zechariah and Elizabeth's dashed dreams, and we see in this story how our personal stories matter greatly to God, he is also drawing them into a far bigger story, into something far bigger than themselves. This is a story with nothing less than salvation of the world as its endpoint. And their son John will play a key role preparing Israel for God's coming in Jesus.

Do we look solely to the fulfilment of our own dreams to show that God is good? Or are we ready and open when God does act, even when he is acting in an entirely unexpected ways?

When God doesn't answer and all we seem to hear is deafening silence, will we remain faithful to him anyway, or will we walk our own way because we can see how things could be better solved like Zechariah explaining to the angel how impossible the situation is.

I have wondered whether Elizabeth lived to see John sacrificed to Herod's pride. If she was, then the blessing of this child would also have broken her heart. The fulfilment of our desires can sometimes come at a cost. But that also does not mean God's faithfulness was not there. As Elizabeth witnessed to in all her years of longing and hoping and praying, God's silence does not mean that God is not faithful.

Conclusion:

And with that I propose that as we begin Advent, we ponder for a moment Zechariah and Elizabeth's triumphant celebration and commit to make room for hope in our lives this week, that we recognise that God's faithfulness is enough to meet even our deepest hurts, the pains that are so deep we cannot speak about them, when we look to him as our fulfilment. God can handle our hurts and more than that, he is in them with us. His faithfulness will lead us to witness to his works with even greater songs of hope and joy than Zechariah's.

As this advent begins, are you on the edge of your seat, looking for God to be at work? It's much easier to close our eyes to hope because we can't bear to be hurt again. But God is generous, and gives often in very unexpected ways.

God is near and in his time if we make room and are looking for his presence, he will bring us to where we can celebrate his works with great joy. This is hope.

...Because of God's tender mercy,

the morning light from heaven is about to break upon us,

to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,

and to guide us to the path of peace.