

1996 was a big year in our country. The *Macarena* was a #1 hit in 1996, and I'm sure some of you still love dancing to that tune. 1996 was big for Tom Cruise, who starred in two smash movies, *Mission: Impossible* and *Jerry Maguire*. 1996 was a gigantic year for Tyco Toys, as the world went crazy for Tickle Me Elmo dolls. The Yankees won the World Series for the umpteenth time in '96, Bill Clinton and Jim Hunt were both re-elected as president and governor of North Carolina. NBC had a fantastic 1996, with the top seven highest-rated TV shows: *ER*, *Seinfeld*, *Suddenly Susan*, *Friends*, *The Naked Truth*, *Fired Up*, and *The Single Guy*. What a year 1996 was!

1996 was a big year for Lutherans in the Wake Forest and North Raleigh area, too. To be more specific, December 8, 1996 was a spectacular day for the Lutherans. Twenty-five years ago this week, the first-ever worship service of the group that would soon become Hope Lutheran Church was held.

The first pastor of that fledgling congregation, the Rev. Preston Wagner, fell asleep the night before wondering if anyone was going to show up. The next morning, at 11:00 AM, he was amazed to see 126 people in attendance for that first worship service.

He preached a sermon that morning, titled "There's A New Preacher In Town." He used the Gospel Lesson for the Second Sunday in Advent, about John the Baptist, the same story we heard today. Pastor Wagner talked that day about how the ministry of John the Baptist was pointing people to Christ, as their only hope, and how the ministry of this brand-new congregation was going to be exactly the same.

I asked Pastor Wagner the other day if there was anything at that first service that surprised him. He laughed, and told me how, after everyone had left and gone home, he and his wife, Lana, were closing up the church. They discovered one little detail that no one had prepared for. The offering was still sitting in the offering plates. There were no volunteer counting teams yet, no church officers. So Pastor and Lana took the offering home, counted it, took it to the bank; and then they established teams to take care of this important detail.

Through the subsequent twenty-five years, so many ministry teams have been formed. So many big and little ministry tasks have been tackled here in our church. As we begin our anniversary celebrations today, we have so many reasons to rejoice, to be joyful, to praise our gracious, loving God for countless blessings showered upon this congregation.

The story of Hope didn't really begin on that day of the first worship service, though. Hope's beginnings, Hope's genesis, really started at another Lutheran church in downtown Raleigh. Pastor Larry Lineberger of Our Savior Lutheran was convinced about the need for a new congregation in the fast-growing North Raleigh area, where many of his own church members were living.

He tells the story how one day he was making a shut-in visit at the nursing home here in Wake Forest. He drove up Main Street, and noticed a "For Sale" sign outside the Catholic Church. So Pastor Lineberger went in, and spoke with the priest. He saw this as a golden opportunity, so he started pulling strings here and there, got some money together, encouraged the purchase of that church building, and urged some of the Lutherans from this area to start meeting for weekly Bible study in the trailer behind that Catholic Church.

He says that these folks were “all in, and very excited about the prospect of starting up a new congregation,” and their group quickly began to grow.

Clearly, God was working through that group of laypeople who started meeting and gathering around the Word. Clearly, God was working through Pastor Lineberger and other local pastors. Clearly, God was working through Pastor Wagner, whom arrived on the scene soon thereafter. We give all praise and honor to God today, as we recall this wonderful story of the genesis of Hope, but we’re also really thankful for those pastors for and the people who were there from the start. If any of you were at those Bible study meetings, or at that first worship service back in 1996, would you please stand up? We thank our God for you!

For all of us, there’s great value in knowing and celebrating the story of our church, especially in those genesis years. The story reminds us that we need to always look to God, as the founders of this church had to do back in those early days. God is always the source of every blessing, the giver of all good gifts. He was then, and he is now, the true and only head of our church. It was God who was preparing the hearts and spirits of the people, and God who was setting the mission agenda for this brand-new congregation, back in 1996. And that’s the way it works still today. We need always look to God. Perhaps today, more than ever.

And we do. It’s God’s Word that we still gather around today, in 2021. It’s God’s Word that we teach to our kids, that we preach from this pulpit, that we study in our small groups, that we share in the community. It’s God’s Word that gives us hope, in these challenging times in which we live. It’s not easy doing church work in 2021 America. It’s not easy for a church like ours to have a vital, well-respected place out there in the community. But today, as in 1996, we look to

God for all our inspiration, for all our blessing, for all our direction as a church.

I think about that sermon that Pastor Wagner preached twenty-five years ago. It strikes me that it's that very same prophetic ministry of John the Baptist, that the new preacher in town spoke about, that we're still engaged in here at Hope today. Our mission, as a church, is unchanged. Like John the Baptist, we're pointing our friends and neighbors to Christ. We're proclaiming his life and death and resurrection. We're here as a church to bring Christ to people, and to bring people to Christ. And that will be the mission of our church until the day when the Lord returns to take us home.

When I talked with Pastor Wagner and Pastor Lineberger this week about Hope's genesis years, they both mentioned something that I want you all to hear. They both commented on how the numbers, back in 1996, were so favorable in Wake Forest for a new Lutheran church. And they both remarked how the numbers and the opportunities around us are all the greater today. This was a growing, mushrooming community in 1996. It still is. There was a great need back then for a Protestant, Bible-based, family-friendly, Word and Sacrament-focused church in our town. And we're still the only one for miles around.

Pastors Wagner and Lineberger see this clearly, and Pastor Lew and I talk about this all the time, too. On this 25th Anniversary Sunday, I want for each of you to recognize this blessed reality, as well. Today we celebrate Hope's beginnings, Hope's genesis; and we thank God for 25 years of grace in this place. But we celebrate, also, in faith, Hope's next genesis, and the new beginnings God has in store for us, the exciting and dynamic ministry chapters that lie ahead for our congregation – beginning today! May God bless our church, Hope Lutheran, and all our new beginnings. Amen.