12-1-19 Altogether Hope Rev. Amy Haines

Luke 1:5-25 Advent 1

In what ways did you live by hope this week?

Did you hope for safe travel? Did you hope that the turkey would cook in time? Did you hope that the kids or the dogs or Uncle Joe would behave themselves? Did you hope for short lines at the stores on Friday? Did you hope for precious time with family?

Every day we live by hope. Sometimes our hope is wishful thinking. A dream that will never be fulfilled. A desire that is beyond our control. A yearning for someone to act different than they are.

Yet sometimes our hope is an expectation. A confidence that in spite of current circumstances,

there is something better yet to come. A belief that a promise will be fulfilled. A desire to join with others in making the world a better place.

Which type of hope do you most live by? Wishful thinking or expectant desire? Almost hope or altogether hope?

In 1741, John Wesley, the Anglican priest who founded the Methodist movement, wrote a sermon titled “The Almost Christian.”

Wesley described an “almost” Christian as one who had all the outward appearance of godliness. This person did all the basic things right: practiced decency toward others, went to church, abstained from bad behavior, and sincerely tried to do his or her best. Sounds commendable, doesn’t it?

Yet, Wesley proclaimed, God wants more. God desires our whole hearts. God desires us to make an impact for the Kingdom of God in this world. So an “altogether” Christian is one who unreservedly and wholeheartedly trusts God and puts that trust into action. This is a Christian fully committed to the love of God and love of neighbor in such a way that this love encompasses all of our heart, soul, mind and body.

-taken from “Almost Christmas” p.7-8 Abingdon Press

In my 20 years of ministry, I have observed this difference in my life as well as in the lives of many others. Sometimes, we have to confess, we play at church. We play at claiming the name of Christ. We make our faith more about our own comfort and preferences. We serve when we feel like it. We only give a fleeting thought to the radical message of God that Christmas proclaims. So many times, Wesley would have every right to call us “almost” Christians.

However, Wesley would rather commend us as “altogether” Christians. Consider who you know that oozes love for neighbor because of their love for God. Their love flows from deep within them, influencing all aspects of their lives.

Consider who you know that claims their place in the community of faith because of their conviction that we are all beloved sons and daughters in the family of God. Then consider how they reach out in love and justice because they yearn for others to also claim their place in the family of God and the community of faith. Consider who you know that steps out in faith, in trust, in love, because that is the direction God calls, even when they cannot see where the next step will take them. These faithful men and women are “altogether” Christians, faithfully following Christ with heart, soul, mind and strength.

This Christmas, as we prepare to welcome the gift of God’s love at Christmas, John Wesley invites us to offer God the gift of ourselves. Our altogether selves, not our almost selves.

Our altogether faith, not an almost faith. Our whole hearts, not just a part of our hearts.

A faith that is rooted in community rather than selfish desires.

How can we move from an almost faith to an altogether faith? By embracing God’s ways of hope- love- joy- peace. Today we begin with hope.

This hope is more than wishful thinking. Instead, this hope is an expectant desire. This altogether hope is the foundation of Advent, the Christian season that counts down the four weeks leading up to Christmas, four weeks that call us to anticipate and to prepare for the coming of Christ.

The hope of Advent is founded on the firm expectation that God will fulfill what God has promised, with the coming of Christ at Christmas and throughout our lives. Our Scripture today is a powerful story of altogether hope. As a prequel to the story of Mary and Joseph, we hear today the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Zechariah was a Temple priest in Jerusalem and his wife Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron, the first priest of Israel. They were a righteous couple who were blameless in their observance

of all of the Lord’s commandments and regulations.

Their only struggle was that Elizabeth was barren. When a woman’s sole purpose was to have children, Elizabeth felt unfulfilled, and frankly, shunned by others. By this time, they were both getting on in years. Their hope for a child dimmed with every passing year.

In many ways, their dimming hope mirrored the dimming hope of Israel. For over 400 years, there had been no direct word from the Lord; no prophets, no angelic visitations. Israel still clung to the hope that one day God’s promised Messiah would arrive. Yet that hope ebbed and flowed depending on Israel’s circumstances. Now, as they chafed under King Herod and the Roman Empire, they yearned once again for the Messiah to come to save them. Yet even as God’s people believed that God was silent, they continued to worship and pray and hope and wonder.

As a Temple priest, Zechariah served the Temple in Jerusalem for seven days twice a year.

During that time certain jobs in the Temple were chosen by casting lots, believing that whoever was chosen by lot was actually chosen by God. One of the highest duties chosen by lot was the incense offering in the holy of holies. This was a once-in-a-lifetime experience. The incense represented the prayers of the people, and when the incense burned, it indicated that God heard the people’s prayers.

On this particular week, Zechariah was chosen for this once-in-a-lifetime honor of burning the incense. As the people prayed and waited outside, he entered the holy of holies, lit the incense,

and offered a prayer on behalf of the people of Israel.

Suddenly, Zechariah realized he was no longer alone. An angel of the Lord stood before him.

Naturally, he was terrified. To know that God had not spoken direct to the people in hundreds of years, and to suddenly realize that an angel of the Lord had chosen him to receive a message from God…he was overwhelmed with fear. Would he hear a word of judgement, a word of warning, or a word of hope?

The angel spoke, “Fear not. Do not be afraid. Your prayers have been heard.”

Which prayer? First, the prayer for a miracle for he and his wife. “Your wife Elizabeth will give birth to your son and you must name him John. He will be a joy and delight to you.”

Yet again, God decides to make the impossible possible. Following in the footsteps of Sarah and Hannah, Elizabeth will give birth to a son even in her advanced age. Yet that is not all.

Second, his prayer for Israel will be fulfilled—beginning through his son John.

The angel declared: “Many people will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the Lord’s eyes. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before his birth. He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

John will be the precursor to the Messiah, the one to come and get the people ready to receive the Lord. He will be the one to call the people of Israel into a baptism of repentance for the forgiven of sins, so that they will be ready to receive the coming of Christ when he appears.

After 400 years, a word of hope is once again spoken, a word of promise fulfilled is proclaimed,

that God’s Messiah will appear and soon.

Yet Zechariah’s first response to the angel is to ask a question of doubt,

“How can I be sure of this? How will I know that this is so?”

How often are we like Zechariah still today, that when God calls us to a specific ministry, a specific calling, or even to a deeper life of faith, a reorienting of priorities, we balk and say,

“Are you sure about this God? How can I be sure?”

Zechariah forgets his history, forgetting that God worked the miracle of birth through Sarah and Hannah, who were both old and barren. Zechariah forgets his training, that when an angel speaks, it comes to pass. Zechariah forgets his faith, that God will do what God says he will do.

The angel responds, “I am Gabriel.” “I stand in God’s presence.” “I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you.”

Gabriel didn’t reprimand Zechariah, yet did give him an unusual sign, certainly not one he was expecting. “What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn’t believe, you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen.”

Not only was Zechariah struck dumb, the Greek word used here for dumb also means deaf.

So suddenly he was not only unable to speak, but also unable to hear.

What a unique sign, until it comes to pass. There is a promise of fulfillment, of speech and hearing returned, at the proper time—after John’s advent, following John’s arrival. Until then, Zechariah would remain silent.

In due time, the first promise was fulfilled. God made the impossible possible. Hope became reality. Elizabeth became pregnant and gave birth to a son.

 And at the time for the son to be circumcised, in the midst of a crowd of family and neighbors,

another promise was fulfilled. When the time came for the naming of the child, many expected him to be named for his father. Suddenly Elizabeth spoke up, and emphatically proclaimed,

“No, his name will be John.”

The crowd began to grumble. Then the priest turned to Zechariah. And Zechariah wrote down, surprising everyone, “His name is John.” Not he will be called John. Not name him John. Rather, he name IS John. His name is already John, meaning “God shows favor” or “God is gracious.”

At that moment, hope became reality. Zechariah’s ears were open and his tongue loosened,

and he began praise God. Zechariah’s praise was less about the birth of his son, and more about the fulfillment of God’s promise—the advent of God’s Savior. The ultimate salvation for the people of Israel. Hope born anew.

Hope is evident throughout the Christmas story, an expectant yearning for the promises of God

to be fulfilled in the long-awaited Messiah, although this hope becomes reality in unexpected ways, in unexpected places, with unexpected people.

Yet, isn’t that often when hope shows up? In the midst of struggle. In the places we aren’t looking. In those farthest from power and money and authority.

When John Wesley preached in England, he often was not welcome in the churches, for he took the hope of Christ to the poor and ordinary people. Instead of standing at a distance, he preached at the entrance to the mines. Instead of staying in the safety of the church walls,

Wesley journeyed to where the people were, to offer the light of Christ in the midst of a dark world. And the religious elite shunned him for his ministry.

Pastor Ingrid Mcintyre found her hope renewed by creating community among the homeless in Nashville, TN, following the devastating flood of 2010. She networked churches together to find new homes for the homeless. She continues to offer God’s love and welcome to them simply because they, too, are God’s beloved. Sometimes her hope fulfilled looks like running into one of her homeless friends after not seeing them for a few weeks, thankful they are still alive. As long as they are alive, there is always hope for a better tomorrow.

At annual conference this past summer hope was shared by twins who refuse to allow an incurable disease to define them. Rather, they find intentional ways to share God’s love and grace with others. Hope was shared by a couple who are recovering addicts who through the power of Christ are clean and sober and helping others fight addiction in order to live transformed lives. Hope was shared by two young adults whose youth pastor grounded them in faith so that they are now sharing the love of Christ with others through their passion for music and children.

Hope is the expectation of new life, of promises fulfilled, of God with us. Altogether hope is found in sharing God’s ways in the midst of community, often in unexpected ways.

This hope is not easy. God’s timing is not always our timing. New life doesn’t happen overnight.

While we can claim the promises of God here and now, we may not always see the fulfillment of those promises.

Lewis B. Smedes once said, “Waiting is the hardest work of hope.”

--thepastorsworkshop.com: hope

Yet give thanks for seeds of faith planted, nurtured and taking root. Give thanks for glimpses of God’s kingdom in the here and now, even through our mission and ministry.

Ingrid Mcintyre gave thanks for hope using the image of her mother’s quilt. She shared:

..My mother made a quilt for my nephew, and when all of those pieces were scattered on the floor, they just looked like a jumbled mess. They were different shapes and sizes and colors.

None of them looked alike. Coming together, they each carried something that made the whole quilt what it needed to be to give warmth and beauty, to tell her love story for him. I know that I am not going to end homelessness, but hope is alive in me that I can do my part and that’s all God is asking…without each piece and each person, the quilt is not complete. As we take bold steps in hope for transformation, joining our stories with the likes of John Wesley and other faithful people, we know that one day Hope will be complete.

--taken from “Almost Christmas” p.52-53 Abingdon Press

There is still much hopelessness in our world today. We wonder if we will ever get a handle

on homelessness or addiction, on the spread of HIV or ebola, on the stress and struggles facing our children, on the negativity and divisiveness of our country. We wonder if the church has a future in the face of apathy, division and a consumerist culture.

Yet, God is still God. God’s promises are still true for us, promises of love and forgiveness,

of grace and new life, of salvation and hope.

We are still called to be one small part of the great tapestry that is the church, and do our part of sharing the love of Christ person by person, day by day.

So in what ways are you called to worship and serve in community?

In what ways are you called to share the gift of Christ with those around you?

In what ways can you give thanks for the hope of God within you?

In what ways are you called to live by an altogether hope this Advent season?

We are beloved children of God. We are loved and forgiven and freed for new life. We are called to love in response wholeheartedly. We are called to trust in God unreservedly.

May we live by an altogether, living hope in Christ this Advent season, moving beyond wishful thinking to our confident conviction in God’s ways and God’s promises fulfilled.

May it be so. Let us pray.