

“Hope”
Luke 1:67-80

December 2, 2018 – First Sunday in Advent
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Today is the First Sunday of Advent. It's the first day of the church year. It is a day when we begin to think forward, and that is what I often think of with the word “hope.” It's a word that helps us think forward. And in doing so, I am reminded that for many of us, the idea of hope is something that we can easily push to the side. Basically our daily lives tend to be fairly well taken care of. Most of us have the food we need, a place to stay, the ability to be warm, and the opportunity to be here to worship. We can forget the edge that hope sometimes suggests.

And yet, if I think a little further I can recognize that perhaps there is a need for hope after all. If you think of the possibilities in the world, sometimes you can get a little overwhelmed with the things that are more of a struggle—things like global warming, nuclear war, the prejudice and bigotry that's going on, or the struggle of divisions we have among us. I again recognize that perhaps we do have more need for hope than I might have first realized.

As we begin to think about hope, I wonder how that might work out in our lives. I was thinking about a story of a young man. Let's say his name is Nathaniel. Nathaniel came from a small rural community. His parents didn't have a lot. The community didn't have a lot. He was one of the first ones in his family to go to college. As he arrived at college full of hope, he realized that so many there were already ahead of him. They had much more going for them. As he went through college, he had to work 30 hours a week just to be able to attend, and he was never quite able to keep up. He was always feeling a little behind. Then he graduated. His major wasn't one of those that led him right into a job. For a moment he was in despair—no job, no money. Now what? Not only no money, he had a lot of debt. So as he wandered, he struggled and wondered, “What's my future?” It's one of those times when you think of all the expectations you grew up with and whether they were real, whether the possibilities were right.

Nathaniel eventually found a job and began to settle in at work, and began to pay off his debt. Then one of his parents became ill, and he needed to do all he could to support them. During that time he felt like he lived in the darkness, under the shadow of death.

I could probably give you other scenarios in which one might live into a situation where they felt like they lived in the darkness under a shadow of death. Perhaps we have all had times in our lives where we felt like we lived in the darkness under the shadow of death.

The interesting thing about Nathaniel is that as he lived in that moment, he happened onto some folks who seemed to bring light to his life. They welcomed him

into their gatherings, into their lives, and didn't expect that he had the best job ever or that he had become wealthy. They accepted him for who he was, and they cared for him in the midst of his care for his parents. In the midst of that caring, he realized that they were expressing a grace that came from their experience of grace. He began to realize that there is a God that showed him love through them and invited him to know that grace. He began to recognize that God's love had come to us in Jesus and this love invited him into a life that wasn't dependent on all the expectations he had growing up. It was the love of God in Jesus Christ that helped him begin to realize that he could be part of something different. He could be part of the goodness of God. He could be part of a community of faith. He could be who he was, and be loved and valued, and be a child of God. He began to realize that he had hope and he realized that that hope was not in all the things he expected out of college or expected out of the world around him. He began to hope in a God that showed him love.

When it comes to hope, it's important to think about what we hope in. What gives us that sense that we can participate in something that's good? I can hope in a lot of things. I can hope that my work will solve my problems. I found that doesn't always work. I can hope that technology will solve my problems, or that knowledge will solve my problems, or that I can put my hope in somebody else—maybe a politician or a leader—and still, all my problems are not solved.

I can find that while my problems may never all be solved, they take a different shape when I begin to hope in God. It is God's hope that comes into my life that begins to help me see my whole life differently. It reshapes the nature of my problems. It reshapes my life. I begin to have hope in something that is beyond me, that invites me. I begin to hope in the very God that gave us a life that is good. It feels to me like what God gives us is a hope that we can participate in the very goodness of God. We can think of it as being embraced by God's mercy, and thus enabled to hope.

When God came to Zechariah and said, "I'm going to do a work right before you," Zechariah said, "I don't think that's possible." It feels like that's central to this idea of hope. I want you to cross your arms, maybe a tight cross. This is the posture of Zechariah. "Nope, it's not going to work, God. Won't happen."

Now open your arms wide and be ready to embrace what God will bring. Do you feel the difference? At the end, Zechariah embraced his child and embraced God's work, and was able to give that wonderful hymn to what God will do. He now has hope. He's recognizing a light in his darkness, that God's grace is real. We can embrace hope, for God will embrace us.

As we think forward in Advent, we are invited to think about the posture we take. Are we going to go into it with arms crossed? Or will we go into it with arms open, expectant that God will be present, that God will be at work among us and with us, that God will be reborn in our lives? Amen.