# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

 **“Hope”**

**Luke 1:5-25**

**December 2, 2018**

Our youngest son, Kyle, and his wife, Gabby, are expecting the birth of their first child later this month. Friends and family will celebrate the birth, and Lauri and I are looking forward to our time with them and the baby when we visit them in Texas. For Kyle and Gabby, however, the arrival of their child is more than simply a cause for celebration. For them it is a commitment of dirty diapers, middle-of-the night feedings, and all the other ways that parents take on the responsibility of a newborn. Lauri and I will be able to enjoy the little one, hold and care for him for a week or two, and then we get to fly back to Lewiston and pick up our life here pretty much as it was before. But for Kyle and Gabby, life will now revolve around their child. His coming into the world will change their world.

So it is for us with the arrival of Jesus. His birth demands our attention. Christmas is not simply a time of celebrating a birth and then moving on with our lives as before. His coming invites our daily commitment to him and to exploring God’s Word to determine the purpose of his birth. This morning and the next three Sundays of Advent we will spend time in the first chapter of Luke’s Gospel in order to better understand the reason for his coming. I invite you to turn with me to Luke 1:5-25

When Herod was king of Judea, there was a Jewish priest named Zechariah. He was a member of the priestly order of Abijah, and his wife, Elizabeth, was also from the priestly line of Aaron. Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God’s eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord’s commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both very old. One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple, for his order was on duty that week. As was the custom of the priests, he was chosen by lot to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and burn incense. While the incense was being burned, a great crowd stood outside, praying. While Zechariah was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing to the right of the incense altar. Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear when he saw him. But the angel said, “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. He must never touch wine or other alcoholic drinks. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even before his birth. And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly.” Zechariah said to the angel, “How can I be sure this will happen? I’m an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years.” Then the angel said, “I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was he who sent me to bring you this good news! But now, since you didn’t believe what I said, you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born. For my words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time.” Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah to come out of the sanctuary, wondering why he was taking so long. When he finally did come out, he couldn’t speak to them. Then they realized from his gestures and his silence that he must have seen a vision in the sanctuary. When Zechariah’s week of service in the Temple was over, he returned home. Soon afterward his wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant and went into seclusion for five months. “How kind the Lord is!” she exclaimed. “He has taken away my disgrace of having no children.”

Luke tells us the story of God’s work in the life of an elderly couple. It is a story of a personal hope fulfilled, of a man and a woman who have longed for and prayed for a child and are told that God will give them what they have asked for. But, in fulfilling the personal hope of Zechariah and Elizabeth, God is also addressing the universal hope of humanity for a Savior. This child, who will be named John, will prepare the way for the coming of the promised Messiah – God is fulfilling his promise which, first recorded by the Old Testament prophets, is now about to come to pass in first century Judea.

Luke’s story is about two simple, devout people who are living a quiet life in the hill country outside Jerusalem. Luke tells us that they love the Lord and serve him faithfully. Zechariah is a priest and his wife is the daughter of a priest. Sadly, we are told that they have been unable to have children. So, out of the circumstances of their lives they have lifted up their hope for a child before God, but hope is fading as they are now old.

Out of the circumstances of our lives, personal hopes are born. The hope that a difficult financial situation will get better; the hope that the deep loneliness we feel at the loss of as spouse will diminish; the hope that our illness will be cured; the hope that a child who has gone astray will return to us and to the Lord. The events of our lives which cause us sorrow give rise to the hope that things will one day be better for us personally. And, this holds true for our universal hope. Out of the circumstances of the world in which we live, out of the hate and division and injustice and godlessness that pervades our world, we hope for a salvation that will bring us back to God and back to one another. So, we have personal hopes for our own lives, and we have universal hopes for the world. What are we to do with our hope? We do what the story tells us to do; we do what the people of God have done for thousands of years; we bring our hopes before God in prayer.

“God has heard your prayer, Zechariah. Your wife will bear you a son.” God has known your hope from the first day you uttered it, Zechariah. He has brought your hope into his presence, and there it has resided until now when God is ready to give you that for which you hope. And God has heard his people’s prayer for a Savior, and through his prophets he promised long ago to answer that prayer. And then, for a time, God was quiet.

The last book of the Old Testament is the book of Malachi, written four hundred years before the birth of Christ. The last two verses of Malachi read as follows: “Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah. His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers.” For four hundred years the people of God have been asking, “Where is this one who is like Elijah whose preaching will bring about reconciliation?” For four hundred years there were no prophets, no messages from God, nothing, but silence. And the people waited. Until that day when the angel appeared to Zechariah and said, “You will have a son . . . and he will be a prophet in the spirit of Elijah, and he will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children.

How often do we lift up our personal hopes before the Lord and receive only silence? How often do we lament the state of our world and wonder how long it will be before Christ returns to bring about the restoration of all things? The message of God’s story from Luke’s Gospel this morning is this: don’t lose hope. Silence does not mean that God is not paying attention. Lack of an answer from God does not mean that he doesn’t care. He is waiting for the right time, and at the right time all our hopes will be fulfilled. We don’t know when that time will be, but we continue to pray and hope that it will be soon. At the right time, Jesus came two thousand years ago, and at the right time he will return. Again, we don’t know when that will be, but we continue to pray and hope that it will be soon.

When the angel told Zechariah that his prayers had been answered and he would have a son, Zechariah just couldn’t believe it. He was so wrapped up in his personal situation that he had lost sight of a God who could do the impossible. “I am old,” he says. “I am Gabriel,” the angel responds. Which reality is stronger, old age or God? Which reality is stronger, my personal circumstances or God? Which reality is stronger, the problems of our world or God? The story of Christmas is the story of God coming into the world through his Son and telling all who will listen that his love is stronger than our hate, that his ability to reconcile is stronger than our ability to tear apart, and that his ability to give life is stronger than death itself.

Jesus Christ is the hope of your life and my life, and he is the hope of the world. We do not understand all that God is doing in our lives and in the world today, but whenever we are tempted, like Zechariah, to retreat into our own understanding and say, “I am human,” God responds, “I am God.” For us, much is impossible, but for God, all things are possible. That is the hope of Christmas.