# Congregational-Presbyterian Church

 **“Hope”**

**Luke 1:5-25**

 **November 27, 2022**

Today is the first Sunday of Advent. Our Sunday morning journey to Christmas and the birth of the Christ child will be guided by the gospel of Luke. Luke tells several stories leading up to the birth of Jesus, stories which help to frame the meaning of the coming of God’s Son into the world. This morning we look at Luke’s first story, the story of a Jewish husband and wife named Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Like all young couples of their day, they had the great hope of having a child. But, as the months and then the years passed by and Elizabeth did not become pregnant, it must have become harder and harder to believe that they would ever be parents. I’m sure they wondered why. In their day, it was believed that children were a sign of God’s blessing. So, why was God withholding this blessing? Was there some law of God that they had failed to keep? Was there some reason for God to be displeased with them?

You and I ask ourselves similar questions when our hopes go unfulfilled. Sometimes we blame ourselves or others or our circumstances, and sometimes we blame God. Perhaps God has forgotten us, or he is willfully causing us to not be able to experience what our heart desires. We pray diligently for a loved one suffering from a serious illness, for a spouse to come to know the Lord, for a child who like the prodigal son is lost and wandering in a far-away land – but nothing seems to be happening. Why is God silent?

Zechariah and Elizabeth are now old, and they have resigned themselves to the fact that they will not have a child. After all, it’s impossible for Elizabeth to get pregnant at her age . . . isn’t it? Luke tells us the story of what God does for them. It is a story about the fulfilment of hope for a child, but it is also a story about the beginning of the fulfilment of hope for a savior. 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 begins with history: “When Herod was king of Judea.” It would be easy for us to read this and simply move on. But, that would be a mistake, because Luke includes this historical fact for a very important reason. This king is the Herod who is sometimes referred to as Herod the Great. His so-called greatness was because of his military and political skills, and because he managed to build some magnificent structures. But greatness would never have been a designation of his character. To put it mildly, Herod was not a nice person. He was tyrannical, he was cruel, he was suspicious, he was vindictive, and he was detested by his subjects who abhorred his deeds of cruelty. One historian says of him that “as long as he lived, no woman’s honor was safe, and no man’s life was secure.” Having had several of his sons put to death, another source declared: “It was safer to be Herod’s pig than to be Herod’s son.” This is the same Herod who a couple of years later will have all the male children aged two and younger killed in Bethlehem because he has been told that a “King of the Jews” has been born in that city. So when we read these opening words of Luke’s story, we need to understand that these were dark and evil days for the people of Judea. But, in the darkness, God was getting ready to turn on the light. God was getting ready, so to speak, for a special birth on Christmas Day.

Next, Luke moves from history to mystery, from the realities of the world in which we live to the reality of the God in whom we place our trust. The hopes of Zechariah and Elizabeth for a child, and the hopes of the world for a Savior, are about to be fulfilled. In the darkness, in the emptiness of hearts that have lost hope, the mysterious work of God is coming about. “When Herod was king of Judea, there was a Jewish priest named Zechariah.” The story of God’s salvation of the world begins with the birth of a boy named John. And, notice, *he* will be great in the eyes of the Lord, unlike Herod the Great whose greatness was merely of this world.

In the present darkness of our contemporary world, with its divisions and rage, with its killings and mayhem, with its turning away from God and seeing itself in the place of God, the light of hope has not been extinguished. In the present darkness of your personal life and mine, where long-held hopes lie unfulfilled, the light of hope in God is encouraged to shine brightly this Advent season. To wait patiently for the Lord is never easy, but those who hope will receive new strength. They will mount with wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not faint. Don’t lose hope. The Lord has heard our prayers. Trust him to answer them in his time and in his way, the mystery of God invading the history of our world and the story of each of our lives.