

Hope Incarnate, Hope Redefined

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Preacher: Richard Kelley

[0 : 00] A little bit. Good evening, everyone. Great. Okay, if you would just pray with me real quick. God, as we come to the space, as we enter this time, we pray that whatever is spoken, may it be fruitful.

May it challenge us to grow. Whatever is not helpful, those who are hearing it, ignore it or be on Facebook at that time. Whatever, Lord, you want to have moved in this time, may it be moved. Lord, I just pray that I can move out of the way so that you can speak the word that you need your people to hear this evening. In your name we pray. Amen. So, hello again.

Welcome to the Table Church. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Richard. I am one of the pastors at the table. Last week we heard from Pastor Tanetta, who challenged us to think about how we creatively engage our embodied existence as part of making the world right.

[1 : 11] Our series for Advent is focused on what it means to live into what God has created us to be. To acknowledge and hold onto the physicality of our faith.

Of the flesh created. Inspired by Toni Morrison's beloved, we are using Advent to explore what it means when we say, in this here place, we flesh.

And as we continue in our time of Advent, when we focus on enfleshment in a season where we remember the pain of waiting and the reality of expectation.

In a season where we reflect on the beauty of this time in which we are anticipating what is to come. And in a season where we are in a season where we are in a season where we are in a season where we sit in imperfection, brokenness, hurt, longing, and frustration.

It is in this context that I have been tasked to preach about hope. And specifically, hope in body. Now, before I begin, I want to name something.

[2 : 16] For some people in this room, and online, and perhaps for many of us, the world feels really terrible right now. But I want to be clear that talking about and even embracing hope should never ask us to ignore the realities within which we exist.

In fact, I believe that hope, at least the hope that we are called to in following Christ, requires us to openly acknowledge the hardships of this world. To recognize the brokenness and evil around us. This is why, in order for us to talk about hope, we need to talk about the definition of hope first. And I want to start out with a dinosaur comic.

Now, my husband Richard tells me that a lot of people in the church actually follow this closely, probably more religiously than they come to this church. So some of you may have actually already seen this one. We have at least one.

I appreciate your honesty. So I'll give you a moment to read it in case you're like me and haven't seen it. Okay, everyone's finished.

[3 : 36] I needed to make one quick edit for my sermon purposes. So, as a culture, we have seen to redefine hope as a synonym of wish.

Someone's in a tough situation, for example, so we say, I hope it works out for you. Without any intention of working towards helping them work it out. Or even any intention of following up to see if it actually worked out at all.

And this is honestly how many of us may be treating our spiritual life. We focus so much more on the future, on what will be, than we do on the present, on what we are called to abide in.

N.T. Wright describes it as the following. He says, Rob Bell, in his book, Love Wins, articulates it this way.

It often appears that those who talk the most about going to heaven when you die, talk the least about bringing heaven to earth right now, as Jesus taught us to pray.

[4 : 48] It feels like often we, and frankly the church more generally, uses hope as a way to abdicate responsibility for the here and now.

A way to make us temporarily unaware of the suffering around us. But hope requires us to embody the gospel. Reverend Peter Gomes put it this way in his book, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*. He wrote that hope can seem a wimpy word, and it can be as flaccid as a typical Advent service. Yes, I get the irony. Yet if we remember, as Paul reminds us, that genuine hope, a hope worth having, is forged upon the anvil of adversity, and that hope and suffering are related through the formation of character, then we will realize that hope is much more than mere optimism.

Hope is the stuff that gets us through and beyond when the worst that can happen, happens. See, hope is not optimism in the absence of adversity.

It is the embodiment of the gospel while holding and recognizing the brokenness in the world. Hope is active. Hope is communal. Hope is not for somewhere or something else, but instead rooted in the present ability to work towards heaven on earth.

[6 : 17] And as we continue to abide in the Advent season, a season of anticipation for the coming of the Messiah, part of hope is figuring out how to wait well.

See, I don't think it's controversial to say that the earth right now does not look like what we imagine heaven to be. And in fact, it feels a really long way off.

We are at a time where we as Christians are coming to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Messiah, but also a time where we are reminded of Jesus' promise to come again, to bring renewal to this place.

Nearly 2,000 years has passed, and we are still waiting. Similarly, though, when we look at the nativity story, when we look at the birth of Jesus, we see in many ways the same context exists. The Jewish people had been waiting for a Messiah for centuries. And while people still profess belief that the Messiah was coming, it is hard to hold hope when our hope is focused on the event.

[7 : 31] So let's turn to our passage for today, which is Luke 1, 5-38, to talk about what waiting well can look like. Now these are a lot of verses, so I will skip some of them.

They'll be up there in case you want to read them, so that you know I'm not skipping anything super important. But I also don't think you want to hear me read all of it. But we're going to start really looking at the first several passages, because they give us a bit of context.

So they read, In the time of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old.

Once, when Zechariah's division was on duty, and he was serving as a priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

[8 : 38] And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. So we won't go too far into these six verses.

But this context would have made sense to anyone who was a contemporary of Jesus. See, what's important to grab from here, and there's a lot more in here, but is that you need to know that only those who were the members of a specific class, the priesthood, could burn incense, and that the burning of incense was one of multiple roles, and it was actually an extremely important role, chosen by lot, and by some scholars' account, likely only a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

This was a big deal. Zechariah would have been considered a man of devout faith. So we continue to read. Then the angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.

When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will call him John.

Skipping to verse 17. And he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.

[10 : 09] Zechariah asked the angel, How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years. The angel said to him, I am Gabriel.

I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time.

See, we're given clues throughout this story that it is Zechariah who is the devout priest of God, the one who knows every story, every promise, every custom.

But when the angel appears to Zechariah, he responds in a way we often do with disbelief. See, Zechariah knows the narrative, but I'd argue that perhaps Zechariah has been so focused on the event, on the promised future, instead of God, that he no longer has hope in that future because he has been so long in waiting.

And Gabriel sees his heart and says, because you did not believe my word, basically, because you did not retain active hope in what God can do, you shall be silent.

[11:29] Now, if we read on, we see in verse 23 and 25, in contrast to Zechariah, Elizabeth embraces the miracle. She gives credit to God. It says, when his time of service was completed, he returned home.

After this, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. The Lord has done this for me, she said. In these days, he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.

Now, there's a lot we could talk about in there, but I actually want us to keep going because we see a similar narrative to what we saw with Zechariah in the narrative about the birth of Jesus.

So if we continue in our passage, in verse 26, we see that in the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David.

The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

[12:38] But the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son and you are to call him Jesus.

Skipping to verse 34. How will this be? Mary asked the angel, since I am a virgin. And the angel answered, The Holy Spirit will come on you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child in her old age. And she who has said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail. I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May your word to me be fulfilled. And then the angel left her. So first, I can't pass up the opportunity to point out what I find so fascinating in this moment.

And it's that a religion that has spent so much energy telling women they are not permitted to speak grounds its origination in a story where God tells the man to shut up and the two women to proclaim God's wonder.

[13:55] In fact, if we keep reading Luke 1-39-56, which I promise I won't, there's actually a recorded dialogue between Mary and Elizabeth proclaiming God's wonders.

But that's a different sermon, so we'll put a bookmark in that. But secondly, I actually think it's important to compare the structure of the two encounters with the angel Gabriel, who appears to both Zachariah and Mary.

So the basic structure is as follows. Gabriel appears. Gabriel then says, do not be afraid. So either angels are scary or Gabriel is just particularly scary.

Either way, we know that Gabriel had to affirm to both of them that they do not need to be afraid.

Then Gabriel tells each person the good news of a miraculous birth that's coming their way.

Then Zachariah and Mary each ask a question. Zachariah says, how? Because we're old. Mary says, how? Because I'm a virgin. Either way, the response of Gabriel is actually different after this.

[15:05] See, when we look at Zachariah, Gabriel tells Zachariah that he will be silenced because he did not believe Gabriel's words. But we get no similar proclamation in Mary's story.

Instead, Mary responds, I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled. I want to note this because waiting well, hoping well, does not require us to refrain from asking questions, to refrain from seeking to understand.

Mary asked her question. Frankly, I thought it was a pretty good word. But the angel Gabriel responded not to them asking questions, but instead to their heart set, to Zachariah's lack of belief.

See, hope is not a blind following, but a continued engagement with our creator. And I think it really matters where our hope is focused. Too often, our hope is focused on what is promised, the event in the future.

Zachariah seemed focused on the birth of a child which he felt was not medically possible due to their old age. But Mary focused on the promisor, trusting that even though she couldn't fully understand in the moment, that God is worth hoping in.

[16:28] This dichotomy, the placing of one's hope in a promised event rather than the one making the promise in the first place, is not a new dichotomy in the story of the people of Israel.

In fact, in Exodus, we see this very issue play out over and over again. For context of those of us who might not be familiar with the story of Exodus, effectively, this book, in combination with another book of the Bible, Joshua, tells us the story of the people of Israel's liberation from Egypt and settlement into the promised land.

We are told in Exodus about the deliverance of the Jewish people from slavery by the Egyptians. Christians, and then we are told that they spent 40 years wandering the desert.

And along the way, the people of Israel failed to keep hope. Their focus was on the promised land, not the promised war. Despite God delivering them from slavery and working miracles in the process, we're told in chapter 16 of Exodus that on the 15th day of the second month, not too far into the 40 years, they were already grumbling and saying it would be better to have been slaughtered by the Egyptians.

Now, I'll be the first to admit, I've never been stuck in the desert, likely without meaningful access to resources like food, for what sounds like at least 40 days. But here we see a people who want a promise fulfilled, that promise of that land of milk and honey, but have already lost their hope in the one who made the promise in the first place.

[18:05] Because if God could deliver them from Egypt, God certainly could deliver them from hunger. And God did. But we see later in chapter 16 of Exodus, that as God is providing daily bread for them, which they are directed not to keep, that yet again we see an instance of lack of hope in God.

See, instead of their hope being in the promisor, some people kept the bread. again, their hope seemed to be placed in what is promised, the abundance, instead of the promisor, God.

And when we place our hope in an event or an outcome, our hope becomes feeble. Because when the event doesn't happen on our timeline, which in this case it seems that the Jewish people expected a pretty instant result here, the foundation of our hope crumbles.

If we continue to read through Exodus, we see another example of this dichotomy at play when we turn to chapter 32 where we are told the story of Moses going up to Mount Sinai.

And he was gone long enough that the people built a golden calf to worship to another god. Now, I don't know how long Moses was gone, but whatever time that was, because their hope was in a person, Moses, or in a place promised, this land of milk and honey, and not with God, we see the people of Israel stumble yet again.

[19:39] But, there is another narrative going on here, the narrative of Joshua, who keeps his hope in God. We see in Exodus 24 that Joshua accompanies Moses up Mount Sinai.

and as the 40 years pass, we observe that Joshua remains faithful. His hope remains in the promised or not in the promised.

And we learn that eventually Joshua is the person that ends up leading the Israelites into the promised land. See, Joshua remains faithful those entire 40 years of waiting because Joshua's hope, a hope in action, was in God, not in an event.

And God is faithful. So, waiting well requires hope in the promisor, in God, not in the promise. Because when we only focus on the future, we lose what is right before us.

And we are able to fall into a pattern of abdication of our role in bringing about the promise as incarnate images of God. See, the promise does not always come in our lifetime or in the time we expect it to.

[20:51] And the question of hope has to relate to whether we believe in God's presence here and now. As Rob Bell put it, taking heaven seriously then means taking suffering seriously now.

Not because we bought into the myth that we can create a utopia given enough time, technology, and good voting choices. but because we have great confidence that God has not abandoned human history and is actively at work within it, taking it somewhere.

Now, another theologian, Austin Channing Brown, engages with this concept of hope in several of her writings, including her book, *I'm Still Here, Black Dignity in a World Made for Whiteness*, and in a shorter piece adapted from that entitled, *The Shadow of Hope*.

Now, she first takes the time to challenge her readers to be comfortable with the idea of the death of hope. And when she talks about this, she's talking about the hope that ignores injustice, the hope that is used to avoid engagement and action, the hope that is in the future gift without any expectation of present involvement in the work.

And instead, she rearticulates a hope that she calls *The Shadow of Hope*, a hope that she has said she had to develop in the struggle against racism in the United States.

[22 : 17] She speaks of the hope that persists as a knowing that we may never see the realization of our dreams and yet still showing up. She continues to lay out a stark reality for her reader.

She writes, I do not believe that I, or my children, or my grandchildren will live in an America that has achieved racial equality. And so I stand in the legacy of all that black Americans have already accomplished in their resistance, in their teachings, in their voices, in their faith.

And I work towards a world unseen, currently unimaginable. Austin Channing Brown's articulation is perhaps one of the most powerful illustrations of our living out hope as incarnations of the divine.

She trusts that God is still at work and that her role, even if she can't quite grasp the end event, is still needed. Now, if we look back to our main text, we see Zechariah has stopped hoping.

He couldn't imagine a world with a miraculous birth, even though he knew the stories of the Jewish people. He knew of God's fulfillment of a child for Abraham and Sarah despite their old age.

[23 : 34] He knew that God was a God of wonders. He knew that God had delivered the Jewish people from Egypt, had settled them in their own lands, had protected them and been present for them.

And yet, even when an angel of God appeared in the holiest of places as he was fulfilling one of the holiest roles, Zechariah couldn't imagine the currently unimaginable.

He had not seen the promise fulfilled and somehow, it seems, had stopped placing his hope in the promisor. In contrast, Mary demonstrates a hope even in the unimaginable.

It's not that she didn't have questions, but she still hoped in her God. I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered. May your word to me be fulfilled.

She was ready to play her role in God's story. So what's the point? You may have been asking that over the last 22 or so minutes. Well, if you've ever heard me preach before, you know that I try to end all sermons with some sort of way to take the sermon and make it practical, to implement it now.

[24 : 49] And of course, if I've asked you to define hope as an action, this sermon will end no differently. N.T. Wright describes Jesus as hope in person. And we have asked you as a church to contemplate the incarnate nature of our faith, that you too are the embodiment of God's hope for the earth.

Now, as many of you know, I've been at the table church for quite some time. I believe I initially joined in 2014, about a year after it started. And sometime in early 2016, I was asked to be the parish pastor in Columbia Heights.

And my journey with the table has continued from there. But this concept of hope in action felt particularly real to me after Pastor Tanetta's sermon last week.

And in particular, her statement at the beginning, grounding her first sermon at the table in her own story. Confessing that she had no intuition that a black girl could become a pastor in the fullest sense of the word, and definitely not a pastor in a community where white folk were present.

And then she continued to explain that it was even more rare when she starts to think about the lack of queer folk in pastoral ministry. Now, I cried at this moment, actually tears of joy, because I realized that for the first time in a while, I was overcome with a sense of hope for what the table as a community can be.

[26 : 27] Now, this is a moment where we get vulnerable with each other. And part of this, and I've said this before in sermons, but really, sermon writing in a lot of ways has at least always challenged me to wrestle with God in my own story.

Right? That often I say I'm preaching as much for others who hopefully will gain something from it as I am for myself as I wrestle with what God is challenging me to become.

And I believe that church community requires vulnerability. I believe living into who Christ is necessitates it. And that we can only be the church when we are living fully into who God created each of us to be.

And if you've been around the table long enough, you've probably heard some version of my own grappling with my faith and my sexuality about the loss I felt when I realized I was gay because I was so certain it meant the end of my involvement in institution of the church.

That I was mad at God because I had lost hope in God's promise. I wasn't able to hold on to the unimaginable. A church where I could be fully who God created me to be as an LGBTQ follower of Jesus.

[27 : 41] And honestly, I'm not that old. Though sometimes at the table I feel ancient. But I will tell you the 2000s were remarkably bleak for LGBTQ individuals both in politics and in pastoral decisions in the church.

See, it seemed like every decision further minimized LGBTQ individuals. That we were being pushed further and further into the margins. But in 2014 I came across the table church which at the time was itself wrestling with the question of inclusion of LGBTQ individuals.

But I was told something very important. I was told that no person would ever be denied access to full participation in the church based on some aspect of who they are.

And honestly that was better than anything else around. So I took that and I trusted that. And it seemed true for a long time. See, I was appointed as a pastor at the table.

The first LGBTQ identified pastor and until Pastor Tanetta the only. And as a pastor at the table I was given the privilege of hosting communion, performing weddings, performing baptisms, praying with people, pastoring people.

[29 : 07] I met amazing individuals and built deep friendships. I met one of the most wonderful men in the world and went on to marry him. All at this church.

I saw that there was still more work to be done. Don't get me wrong. But I felt like it was a bit of heaven fulfilled on earth. And then something happened.

In September 2017 the head pastor at the time to be clear not Pastor Anthony said he wouldn't perform Richard in my wedding because it was a same-sex wedding. Now this was the first time that that initial promise was no longer true.

The first time I felt like I couldn't be a full participant in this church in this place that I called home. For the first time at the table my identity was a deciding factor in how I was permitted to participate. Now at the time I felt that somehow it was my fault for being fully vulnerable or feeling fully safe and I know that's not true but that doesn't change that that was how I felt. And part of it was for some people that may seem like such a small piece of participation in church but the reality is it wasn't a new feeling and it's one that I had felt in many spaces and many times in many different scenarios.

[30 : 30] And I'm sure that many here who have been excluded for whatever reason from church spaces can relate to the pain that I felt in that moment. In fact I know many people who were around for that decision who are still here today who mourned that moment as much if not more than Richard and I did.

And the reality is I'm fine, right? I'm still a pastor here preaching to you all today. I got married. We actually flew in a pastor friend of mine from Uganda because that seemed to work better.

A bunch of you were at that wedding and it was a beautiful and wonderful moment of church community. But what that moment also reminded me of is that even institutions and family we love are imperfect.

See, my hope somewhere along the way transferred from a hope in God renewing all things to what I perceived as a secret paradise that was the table.

A secret heaven. And in many ways my hope was focused on a place or a person and had distanced itself from the promisor.

[31 : 46] And this moment reignited a hope for a big C church where there's no more hiding. Where I don't have to scour a website before I enter a church space to figure out whether I will be welcome.

A space where Pastor Tanetta's in the world won't have to declare the rarity of their acceptance and inclusion in the story of God by others. And that hope reignited kept Richard and me here in this space.

And listening to Pastor Tanetta last week all of those thoughts and feelings came rushing back because I realized in a small way that God is bringing a closer version of heaven to our congregation.

But I was also reminded in that moment that a community that wants to reflect the true complexity of the image of God is one that requires hope in action.

See, I have hope that God can use this congregation to bring about heaven on earth. But if we want to be a congregation that does that, we need to be ready to do the work.

[32 : 55] We need to do the individual work, asking God how God would have us involved, asking God how we need to grow. But we also need to do internal community work, supporting this church community in whatever way God is calling us to.

That can be praying for it, volunteering in it, financially giving to it, or any of the combination of those. And we also need to do the external work as a church engaged with our neighbors in working against injustice.

See, we need to be hope in action, not just in work. because part of waiting well for the promises of that future is to act in partnership with our Creator to bring about those promises here.

To place our hope that God is still active in our community and still seeks the justice that we have been promised. So in summary, part of waiting well, part of the anticipation that we are called to engage with during Advent is about hoping well.

And in order to hope well, we need to evaluate what we mean by hope in the first place. Hope is active. When we have hope, we are called to be part of the working towards that hope's fulfillment.

[34 : 17] Hope is communal. We hold hope as a people and as a church and as a broader community and hold each other in that hope.

hope is in the promise or not in the promised. We are not waiting passively for a thing to occur or waiting for someone else or something else to come into existence, but are trusting that God has not abandoned human history and is actively at work within it, taking it somewhere and that we are part of that plan.

so please, as you continue in the season of Advent, challenge yourself to hope well. a good month, or even it moves to hope and towards better strength for your life.

He's going to be at the moment where he is going to be■■■■ honor