

Hope: First Sunday In Advent

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[0 : 0 0] Hi everyone, my name is Meg Clark and I serve as the co-director of prayer here at the table, as well as a member of our preaching team. And I am excited to be bringing a message today as we kick off the season of Advent. Now we are doing a virtual service today because of Thanksgiving, because lots of folks are out of town. But if we were in person, you probably would have, you know, come through the doors and said hi to some folks at the welcome table while you wrote your name tag, maybe chatted with some friends in the lobby, and then introduced yourselves to the folks you sat next to in the sanctuary. And a common greeting that most of us use is, you know, hey, how are you? How are you doing? How was your week? And there is sort of an unspoken expectation that folks are not always going to be honest with their reply. You know, we are sort of saying it as a bit of a pleasantry and assuming that folks are going to say, oh, it was great. Oh, it was fine.

And keep moving along. I, in the last couple of months, have decided to sort of free myself from that idea that the response should be that I'm doing fine, that I'm doing well. So for me, and maybe some of you have experienced this, if you ask me how I'm doing, there's a real chance that I might say I'm doing bad. You know, as a person who lives with depression, as a member of the LGBTQ community, which is, you know, very much not a protected group, a group that has all the rights that we are seeking, as a person who cares about black lives and an end to police brutality, there's a lot to be not feeling great about. And so I am looking forward to bringing a message about hope today. That's going to be the theme for our sermon. And we are kicking off the season of Advent today. If you grew up in a more liturgical tradition, you may know Advent as the season where, you know, the church is decorated in purple. We have an Advent wreath with the different candles. And, you know, we have sort of the lighting every week and the different themes. If you weren't raised with Advent, it is a season of preparation, expectation, and sort of joyful anticipation of Christmas. You know, we are remembering the incredible gift of the incarnation that God became flesh to dwell among us. And many Christians, we are looking forward to Christ's second coming that is discussed in the Gospels. And so as we think about Advent, you know, there is a lot of anticipation of hope. And we are going to be talking about Advent through the lens of dreaming using a framework about those who dream. So we will be talking about, you know, the ways that we think about dreams, the way that we think about hope. There are lots of lots of dreams in the Bible, and some in the Advent stories specifically that we are going to be looking at sort of the ways that we move into dreams that we hold on to dreams, and sort of identifying what, you know, some of what some of our dreams are, and what the things we may be hoping for.

So we are actually today going to sort of skip ahead past Christmas in the Bible. For talking about hope, it can be helpful to, you know, talk about things once they've come to fruition. So I appreciate you all giving me some grace that we are going to jump ahead a little bit past the Nativity. So we are going to start in Luke 2 with the story of Simulian.

with the story of Simulian and Anna in the temple when Jesus is brought in for presentation. So we are going to start at Luke 2, chapter 25. I'll be reading from the NIV if it's helpful to follow along or the words will be on your screen.

[4 : 1 8] Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit was on him.

It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When Mary and Joseph brought the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God saying, Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations, a

light for revelation to the Gentiles and glory for your people Israel.

Jumping ahead a few verses, we read, There is also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel of the tribe of Asher. She was very old. She had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was 84.

She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem, excuse me.

And so if we look at these verses, you know, we think about what these two characters are hoping for, and it's tied to what we are looking for, what we are hoping for in Christ.

[6 : 05] Simeon says that his eyes have seen God's salvation, prepared in the sight of all nations. Simeon knows that Jesus is a source of salvation for not just the people of Israel.

As we read in 32, it is a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of the people of Israel. So God is calling all in.

You know, this is radical that Simeon is calling out that, and naming that this salvation that Jesus brings is not only for the Jewish people, but bigger than that, bigger than them and expanding into the Gentile community, which was living in Jerusalem and the surrounding areas of the time.

So when we think about hope, sort of conventional preaching guidelines tends to be breaking things down into three points.

So we are going to hit some three points. And, you know, I was sort of thinking about hope in terms of, you know, the idea that change, that activism, that societal change is a marathon, not a sprint.

[7 : 20] You know, that unfortunately change takes a long time and that we are in this sort of for the long haul for a long time. And so the idea of sort of what is coming up to the starting line look like, what is the idea of sort of being rooted in hope?

And so we have a sort of ready, set, go idea to talk through today with the idea of being ready. You know, you're ready for change.

You are acknowledging and lamenting what is wrong. You are able to name and say the things that are going on in the world that are not right. And then once you've named what's not right, you can set your eyes to what could be.

You're naming and moving forward towards that new vision. You are able to name the thing that should be different and how it should be better. And last but not least, to go.

You know, there is a certain idea of, you know, thoughts and prayers, which has become sort of a unfortunate trope of a lot of sort of big Christian responses to societal problems, problems we see in our world.

[8 : 39] But as as we've said here as a church, you know, when when we pray, we move our feet. There's something for us to do in that hope, in that prayer.

And so the idea of going is sort of, you know, where are you going confidently towards what what this goal is, what the idea of God's will is spoken to you.

And so what we're going to do now, we have a little color code sort of makes me think of the Mario Kart stoplight as you're waiting to go and hit the button at the right time, which I'm very bad at.

But please do not challenge me to Mario Kart. You will win. So what we're going to do is walk through the passages that we just read with this sort of framework, with this ready, set, go idea in mind and see where we can find each of those ideas in the scripture that we just read.

And something that we know is really important with scripture is having the context. So it's important to know, you know, what what was happening in Jerusalem, in the world at this time?

[9 : 48] What would the original readers of Luke, the folks who were receiving this gospel, what would they have known that maybe isn't, you know, top of mind for us isn't the most obvious thing?

So for a little background, in 63 BC, Jerusalem is annexed by Rome under Caesar Augustus. So that is the Roman occupation of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem is no longer governed by just the Jewish people. They have a Jewish sort of figurehead, King Herod, who is, again, a nativity figure.

But there isn't, you know, that autonomy, that that self governance. In 4 CE, there is a messianic Jewish revolt of members of the Jewish community trying to claim and take back Jerusalem for themselves to be able to have that self governance.

And unfortunately, as a result of this, Rome came down harder. In addition to sort of the figurehead leader that was Jewish, they also had a Roman governor.

[11:00] Quirinius was the first Roman governor, and he is the one who issues the census that brings Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem.

So with all of that background, let's look again at our scripture for the day. So we've got that ready, set, go color code. And for us, you know, it's pretty easy to name that what we just talked about, what we just covered, the Roman occupation of Jerusalem, this people group not being able to govern themselves is something that needs to be lamented, something that needs to be named as wrong.

And if we look in this passage, you know, Simeon knows what he is hoping for. He is hoping for the consolation of Israel, which is another way of talking about that self determination, self governance. And he talks about how the Holy Spirit has revealed to him that he won't die before he sees the Messiah. He has this internal hope, this specific connection with God about his role, the way that he will be part of this story.

And then we see also that Simeon takes action. He's moved by the spirit and comes to the temple. He takes the baby Jesus in his arms and praises God.

[12:18] He prophesies in front of everyone who is in the temple. He's making this proclamation in front of others as a way to tell everyone else that, you know, something is happening here.

There is a change, a salvation coming. And if we jump forward to Anna, you know, she has that same background. She's also a Jewish person.

And another thing for her that is something to name, something that is hard, is that it's identified that she is a widow. Widows were an incredibly marginalized group at this time.

They are named often as a group that the Israelites must give charity to and support, along with orphans and foreigners or refugees.

And so she probably lived a life of pretty near poverty. She relied on the kindness of strangers and her community to get by for her daily needs.

[13:18] And now we have to do a little jumping around in the color coding, but you can see at the bottom her hope and the hope of hers around her is, again, this redemption of Jerusalem.

And, you know, while these folks were thinking of sort of a legal redemption, we know that there is a different type of redemption that Christ is bringing. And she goes and so she stays in the temple, worshiping, fasting and praying.

And she sees the Holy Family, Mary, Joseph and Jesus. She comes up to them. She gives thanks to God. And like Simeon, she talks about it. She tells the other people who are dealing with their own hope that the hope has been fulfilled, that there are things happening and changing.

So now that we've looked at our scripture for the day, I'd like to sort of pull us forward into a more personal example.

As I mentioned at the top, I am a person who lives with depression. I have been in therapy and on medication for five years for sort of maintenance and treatment.

[14:31] And it has been such an incredible gift, so important to my life and being able to function and be the person that I am.

As with many of us, the pandemic was really hard for me. You know, I was used to having an in-person office, a good group of friends. We had weekly in-person church meetings.

I had a small group that I attended. And so having that all sort of removed suddenly was really hard. I also lived by myself, which means that I went from seeing, you know, 30 people a day and passing at work to not seeing anybody on a lot of days in the beginning when, you know, things were things were really scary.

And only recently, you know, I had a conversation with my psychiatrist, you know, my every six month check in and he asked how I was doing.

And as I said at the beginning, you know, I'm done sort of telling people that I'm fine. Also, if you have a mental health care professional, I highly advise not just telling them that you are fine if you are not fine.

[15:42] But I responded, you know, I'm I'm hanging in. I'm doing all right. And he paused and sort of, you know, asked if I was serious.

And I said, yeah, no, like, I'm OK. I wouldn't say that I'm great. And he said, OK, so what are we going to do about that? Which was really surprising to me. You see, I had lost sight of what I was supposed to be hoping for.

I had sort of resigned myself to the idea that, you know, I was just going to have to get through as best I could. That the point of medication was to sort of eke out an existence with as little as I could. And my psychiatrist really helped me sort of reshape that and have the the idea that my goal is to be happy, to not feel depressed instead of settling for, you know, just going about day to day and trying to get by.

And so together we made the decision to try some new medications, which for me was really scary. Psychiatric meds are not quite an exact science. So there's a little bit of trial and error, which I have experienced over the last couple of months.

[17 : 01] The first medication we tried was not a great fit for me. And it made me feel a lot worse for a couple of weeks before we reassessed.

And now I'm on our second attempt and I don't know that it's doing much, but it's not making me feel worse. And so for me, I'm, you know, making that decision, investing and committing to trying and to working through it.

So we can apply the ready, set, go framework to my story as well. You know, the pandemic leading to isolation and increased feelings of depression.

That's hard. That's important to name and to lament. My psychiatrist was able to help me reset my expectations to know that my focus should be on feeling better.

I'm feeling great instead of just, you know, being able to get by. And the decision to try new meds, to get up every day and take the new medication and keep going is, is my part, is my commitment that I have to do to bring about that ultimate hope, to bring about that thing that I am hoping for of feeling great.

[18 : 20] And I do just want to add in as an aside that often when folks talk about personal experiences in sermons, it can be comforting.

And I do hope that this has been comforting to you. But it can often feel like an invitation to share what you're going through with that preacher. And unfortunately, right now, I'm not in a place where I can carry that with you.

If you are, you know, particularly in a place of real need and crisis, you can reach out to the mental health hotline, which is 988.

But I even recommend, you know, talking to a friend, a family member, someone in leadership here at the church. And I look forward to and I hope for a day that I am, you know, on on meds that feel good for me where I am able to carry that with you.

But for now, I appreciate you all just hearing and absorbing. But, you know, maybe not not coming to me as a first choice with your stories.

[19 : 25] You know, there are lots of folks who would love to talk to you and connect with you. And at some point I will be in that place again. But for now, that's not not something that I'm able to do, unfortunately.

And if you need a space where you can process sort of, you know, some of the heaviness that I know comes with the holidays, some of the heaviness that is surrounding all of the things that we are hoping for that we know are not right.

I'd like to invite you to a retreat that we are hosting on December 11th. You can find more information on that at the table church dot org slash events. But it will be a space for connection, for communal sort of practices around waiting and hope.

And we would love to have you there. Now, as we look through our ready, set, go and closing, I'd invite you to think about where you fall.

You know, we're all hoping for many different things. And so we all fall at different places with each hope. And I want to name that each of these places are a valid place to be.

[20 : 38] You know, where where are you in this stage of lament? Where are you naming the things that are wrong and calling out injustice?

Where are you setting your intentions forward? Where are you talking about the good that could be and discerning what God's will is in a situation?

And where are you in a stage of going, a stage of stepping forward with confidence and faith, making the actions that you do matter to the outcome that you're hoping for?

I do want to name that for marginalized communities, this idea of going can be impossible or dangerous. And that hope is a complicated thing when there isn't much that you feel you can do on a day to day basis to impact it.

I want to name that it's complicated. And to name that, you know, I don't have all the answers. And I would just say that, you know, there's there's nothing wrong with being in the ready and set phases. [21 : 52] If going is not a thing that you can do right now or in general. We all need to rest. We all need to take breaks. Please take care of your mental health, your physical health.

Remembering to rest and to be gentle with yourself. As we close out this sermon and look forward to the next three weeks of Advent, I look forward to continuing to talk about where we are ready, where our intentions are set and where we are hoping to go. We're hoping to go.