

# Learning to Hope in the Dark

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Preacher: Junia Mays

[ 0 : 00 ] It's Advent, y'all! Yeah, let's hear it for Advent! Let's get ready to wait, because that is what this season is about, friends.

We are waiting together. Oh, and I forgot to get this before I started. And so now I'm doing it while I'm talking. That's all right. Yeah, we're waiting for the arrival of the Messiah.

We are, yeah, we can hear it for the Messiah, yeah. But we are waiting for God to break into our lives. We're remembering the wait for Jesus' first coming.

And we're living in the wait for the second. And I promise you, no matter how boring that sounds, it is anything but. So one of the things that we do during Advent, or at least a lot of us, Christians, that is, is light candles, as you can see.

We've got one for each of the four weeks. One for hope, one for joy, one for peace, one for love. It's a beautiful tradition, very cozy, full of good vibes.

[ 1 : 09 ] But here's the thing about candles, y'all. You only need them when it's dark. And right now, things are pretty dark.

And I know we got some kids in the room, and I know it might be weird to hear a grown-up say this, but I get scared of the dark. I get really scared of the dark sometimes. Especially when we stop talking about the real darkness in the basement, and start talking about the unknown, where I can't see, where I don't know what's coming.

That gets scary. And we're going to be talking a lot about fear in the coming weeks. And we'll be talking about one of the hardest things to think about when you're scared.

And that's hope. But first, I want to give a special introduction to the kids in the room. Thank you so much for hanging out. Everybody say hi, kids. Everybody say hi, kids.

Thank you very much. Thank you very much. Kids, how we doing? All right, that's fair. I just want y'all to know, in case you didn't know, we've got drawing supplies out there.

[ 2 : 22 ] If you don't have some and you want some, ask a grown-up around you to see if they can get you some. And I want you to, if you get bored during my sermon, because I might be boring, I don't know. None of us know until I do it.

I want you to draw a picture for me that feels like being loved. And if you do and you want to show it to me after the service, I would love to see it.

Anyway, before all this, we've got, not before all this, we've got two scriptures today, actually, y'all. Let's hear it for double scriptures. And I promise that is the last time I'm going to ask you to cheer.

I promise. We do have two scriptures. We got one from Carol. Thank you very much. Luke 1. The next is Lamentations 3.

About 600 years before that first one. Can we get that? Incredible. I called on your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit. You heard my plea.

[ 3 : 32 ] Do not close your ear to my cry for help, but give me relief. You came near when I called on you. You said, do not fear. Let's hop in a time machine.

This is what it looks like. Imagine it in your head. We're tuning it back 2,600 years. About 600 years before Jesus is born.

And you wake up one morning and your city is... Destroy. Yes. Good. Yes. It's burning. Yes. It wasn't very fun to experience, but I'm glad you're excited about it.

The city is burning. You've got foreign soldiers in the streets. You've got neighbors, coworkers, friends, people you have known your whole life who are being dragged away in chains.

A quarter of your city's population has been taken away. And the temple, the place where you worship, the place where you felt closest to God, the building where God was supposed to live, like that was supposed to be where God really lived, and it's rubble.

[ 4 : 46 ] Torn to the ground. In short, it was the end of the world. And hey, isn't that a little familiar? Weren't we just talking for a few months about how oppressive political realities feel so dramatically evil that it seems like the end of the world?

And doesn't it feel maybe a little bit like the end of the world to be living in this world right now?

Well, it's at this ancient end of the world. Two and a half millennia ago, in the middle of this apocalypse, that there's this anonymous poet.

And he's a sad guy. Actually, we don't know that he's a guy. Probably from some of the pronouns, it doesn't matter. A sad person. And this very sad person writes a very sad book, appropriately titled Lamentations.

And this is what they lived through when Babylon conquered Jerusalem. And for almost the entire book, the author is just screaming. Just sitting, screaming into the page, saying, God, this sucks!

[ 5 : 56 ] How much does it suck? I forgot. Where'd it go? Oh, no. This is unbearable. I can't do this anymore. The author writes, God has driven me into darkness without any light.

I have become the laughingstock of my people. I have forgotten what happiness is. And I have been there, y'all.

Maybe you have, too. This poet is full of fear. Am I ever going to live in a place that feels like home again? Am I ever going to know the love of God again?

Will I ever be able to recover the worship that I used to love? Now, we are living in a situation that is quite bad, but it's not nearly as bad as what they're doing.

But what are you afraid of? Is it political? Is it political? Is it political? Is it political? That things have gotten so bad that they will never get better?

[ 7 : 06 ] That your own country, the very place you have made your home, is fundamentally against you? Home is supposed to feel comfortable, safe.

And God, it's rough when we feel like even home hates us. Or are your fears personal?

That you aren't enough? God, I struggle with that one. That no matter how hard you try, you will never become the person you want to be. Or maybe you think you'll always be rejected.

That you'll never find a place where you feel welcome. And yet, it's really rough, y'all, when ourselves are the most basic things we have.

And it's really, really rough when we don't even feel secure in that, the foundation for everything else. There are a lot of good reasons to be scared out there, folks.

[ 8 : 05 ] We're going to go back to that passage from Lamentations, though. I called on your name, O Lord, from the depths of the pit. From the depths of the pit. You heard my plea.

Do not close your ear to my cry for help, but give me relief. And you came near when I called on you.

You said, do not fear. Notice how God responds here. It's not saying I'm going to fix everything.

It's not even saying everything's going to be okay. No. God comes near and says, do not fear.

Hold on to that. Hold on to that, beloveds. For the rest of this sermon and beyond, that one of the most important things, if not the most important thing, God gives us in the moment of our despair, is their nearness.

[ 9 : 12 ] Their love. Their intimacy. We don't know what ends up happening to this anonymous poet, author of Lamentations.

They probably never saw their friends and coworkers that got taken away ever again. Almost 50 years would go by between the destruction of that temple and the end of the exile when all the Judeans were allowed to return.

But they did return. And you know what? They built a new temple on the ruins of that old one.

Check out Ezra for that story. It's a good one. They rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem.

That story's in Nehemiah. From the abyss of despair, they worked and they schmoozed their butts off. They sought to be as wise as serpent and innocent as doves.

And together, working together, they clawed together a new life for the inhabitants of Judea. And, of course, that beautiful new normal got soon shattered.

[ 10 : 16 ] Because that's how it goes, right? We go through cycles. Yeah! We go through cycles.

Things get better and then they get worse. Then they get better and then they get worse. And this is exactly what happened to them. Another empire swept through, got them again.

Then there was more freedom and then more domination. And in this last, this latest period of domination, we get our second scripture. Luke.

This time, the empire was the Romans. I hate the Romans, y'all. I know I'm not supposed to. That's the Christians love. I'm not supposed to hate anyone. Roman Empire.

Anyway. Anyway. A pagan empire that had ultimate authority over the Judeans. Roman tax collectors and soldiers roamed the streets.

That feels unfamiliar. Extorting everyday people for their last penny. Fortunately, less familiar. Fear again is everywhere.

[11:15] And hope again, hard to find. But, unlike Lamentations, Luke isn't thinking as much in this story about that political situation.

Luke is much more interested in a deeply personal one. That of a husband and wife named Zechariah and Elizabeth who desperately want a child and keep on trying.

And they just couldn't make it happen. And now they're way too old. There's no way this dream is happening. Zechariah seems to have made his peace with this.

He's sad about it, sure. But he knows that any hope is just going to make him more upset. How many of you have ever made peace with the death of a dream? Something that was once really, really important to you, but now you know will never, ever happen?

And, whew, God knows I have. Sometimes giving up on hope feels like it's the only way to make it through the next day. Sometimes giving up on hope feels like the only way we can protect our ordinary lives.

[12:24] Sometimes we feel like we have to sacrifice hope for the status quo. And so Zechariah is in the middle of his ordinary life, his status quo, doing his ordinary priestly duty, when something absolutely terrifying happens.

Hope. Hope breaks through. You might be thinking, hope's not scary. Hope's fun. Hope's good.

Hope's happy. Not always.

He's kneeling there like he always does, praying like he always does, and suddenly someone else is there. No one else should be there. Someone else is there, and someone radiating holiness and power so intense that Zechariah's body seizes with fear.

Someone who is very much disinterested in sacrificing anything for the status quo. What does this angel say to Zechariah? it's time to dig up those old hopes you got them in graves time to get them out of there because God's going to make them happen and what is Zechariah's reaction?

doubt fear I am too old those hopes are too deep not even God can get them out and one thing I keep on learning about God y'all is that they never like being told what they can and cannot do because we always underestimate them always the child Elizabeth eventually bears John the Baptist can we get John the Baptist on the screen?

[14:03] look at that guy look at that guy he gets born and he becomes a herald of justice stoking the flames of hope throughout the empire throughout Judea not the whole empire he's a living testament to the triumph of hope he would prepare the way for the king of kings Jesus Christ the one we believe has defeated the powers of empire and the one we hope will one day eradicate them entirely but before all that before the glory Zechariah's still scared he doesn't know about that and even we don't think he should be scared knowing how the story ends he's scared and what does God do in the midst of his fear?

God draws near and says do not fear if you don't get anything else from this sermon get this kids if you're in the drawing that's wonderful listen to me for this right now when we are gripped with fear God draws near takes our fear into their arms and says I'm here I love you so what do we take from these two stories connected across 600 years of history we're sitting in the belly of the beast city that is the seat of power for the most materially powerful empire in the history of the world an empire that is eager to blaspheme the holiness of our God by worshipping racism bigotry and capitalism in God's name and all the while our own problems haven't stopped what you're telling me fascism's coming and I gotta do the dishes come on maybe you're awash in an ocean of your own failures maybe like the author of Lamentations you're so deep in your despair that you're not sure if you'll ever get happy again maybe like Zechariah there was a dream that was really important to you and you've had to bury it because it was just too painful to keep believing what I love looking at these two stories together is they do not have simple answers for us they seem to have completely different messages right?

Lamentations ah everything sucks and maybe something good will happen someday but not now Zechariah oh my God I get my miracle the thing I was hoping for is happening what?

and hey the author of Lamentations was in a sense completely right about their despair a lot of scholars think this text was written shortly after the destruction of the temple there would be another 50 years before they'd see anyone that left again and even every bright spot they'd find would just get followed by worse domination until the eventually the temple was destroyed for good and the ancient states of Judea and Israel were shattered but then again when the author cried out to God from the pit God didn't tell them that things would go back to how it used to be God didn't even tell them they'd find happiness God came near and said do not fear and in the depths of our despair whether political or personal God says the same to us do not fear so what could that possibly mean for us here how do we possibly make that truth real to us when everything feels so hard well let's look briefly at the fearful questions we imagined at this author asking at the beginning will I ever live in a place that feels like home again probably not maybe probably not will I be able to know the love of God again that love never left whether this author got to feel it again

I got no idea will I ever be able to recover the worship I used to cherish not exactly but the author would write something that wrestles so powerfully and evocatively with suffering that generations to come would say in this text I hear the fingerprint of God there's no bigger honor for a writer than that they would never be able to recover the worship they used to cherish and yet their work would shape the worship of their people to come sometimes hearing God's do not fear means recognizing that our circumstances might not change in the way we want them to but even so if we're faithful and you can't be faithful with at least holding on to a thread of hope our hopes can still come true in ways we don't expect and then there's that weird tough story about Zechariah because his circumstances do change he gets his miracle but then again what does

[19:08] Zechariah fear it's not his despair no that guy loves his despair are you kidding me his despair helps him survive what Zechariah fears is hope when God breaks into his daily life and promises to save him he doesn't believe it's possible he holds on to his fear unfortunately for all of us that hope that God announced in that moment was the kind of hope that was going to happen whether Zechariah went along with it or not the wheels were already in motion but our hopes are usually quite different more often than not when hope breaks into our daily lives it requires us to seize it in order to make it real and Lord knows I have held on to my fear so many times instead of seizing on to hope you ever let fear suffocate your future sometimes hearing God's do not fear means letting ourselves recognize hope when it arises it doesn't mean we should lie to ourselves about false hope but it does mean searching actively for where real hope can be found and once we see a glimmer we don't stop until we drink every last drop both truths are necessary we need to reconcile with what we can't change but we also need to recognize what we can and through it all we need to hold tightly so tightly onto the truth that undergirds it all that when we draw near to God God draws near to us whether we see it or not and through it all their love is steadfast unflinching God bless you beloveds do