

Daring to Hope
Luke 1:5-23
November 27, 2011

With the leftover turkey still in the refrigerator and the remains of pie and bread crumbs still scattered across the floor we turn our attention to the Advent season; to prepare once again for the coming of God among us. While all around us we hear the admonitions to shop early and often, where crowds clamor for the best deal and the bang for your buck, I want to invite you to enter into the story of others who waited for the coming of Jesus, long before they ever knew what it would come to mean. Long before there were shopping malls and on line retailers, women and men waited for the promise of Messiah; anticipated the activity of God in their midst. They dared to believe that God spoke, acted, existed in real time, live, here and even now. They dared to hope that somehow their faithfulness had meaning, purpose, in some personal yet cosmic way. They dared to trust that God would hear and speak to them; that they had a divine reason for being in a dark and uncertain world. This Advent season I invite you to consider anew the stories of men and women not so unlike me and you. For in spite of all the difference of time and culture and space, at the heart of all who believe is the desire to be faithful, the hope of fulfillment, the longing for new birth.

No one could have hoped more for new birth than Zechariah, except perhaps his wife Elizabeth. Childless into their elder years, they seemed to do everything right in the sight of God. Zechariah served God faithfully in the temple according to his turn, entering the Holy of Holies on behalf of the people to offer the gift of incense to the Divine; a pleasing offering in the sight of the Lord. Attending to his prayers and the rituals of faithfulness on behalf of the assembly, Zechariah seemed to have positioned himself in the bright light of divine favor, so much so that he receives a personal visit from an angel of the Lord! Overwhelmed and terrified,

Zechariah can scarcely believe what is said to him: a baby, finally, and a boy at that! Joy and gladness; “great” in God’s sight! What more could an aging, want-to-be father hope for? Dare he hope for even *that*?

You know what its like, don’t you? To dare to hope that your prayers will be answered? That the thing you long for most will come true? Some of you *know*! You’ve prayed for those test results or that job interview or that grandchild who needs God’s touch. You’ve prayed for your marriage, your addiction, your struggle to get yourself out of bed. You’ve hoped against hope that the phone will ring or not ring; that the check will come, that the package will arrive, that the letter is not lost, that the end will come....we’ve who have been faithful *know* something about that voice within us that insists that all this faithfulness, all this devotion, all this sacrifice must count for something, doesn’t it?!

Doesn’t it?! We don’t dare to say that out loud but we think it; I think it! After years of devotion to family, job, home, life, church, the world, surely there some justification for our hope? Some credits we’ve built up? Some assurance we’ve banked that guarantees our prayers will be answered? Our cries will be heard?

I’m thinking that maybe that’s what Zechariah had though. Years and years without....how *could* he dare to hope that what the angel now said was true? How could he dare to believe that after all this time, things would be different, that miracles could happen? How could he set himself up to think there was a chance “I’m an old man and my wife is getting on in years...how will I know that this is so?”

It hardly *did* seem possible, that after waiting for decades, centuries even, that God might break in among humankind with one who would “turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.” It hardly seems believable, even from our vantage point, that a child “with the spirit

and power of Elijah would come to earth again.” Zechariah cannot begin to believe that his prayers could be answered not because he didn’t have faith so much as he had been praying for so many years, he just couldn’t hope any more that it would come true.

I wonder if that isn’t how many of us feel; after years and years of prayers for those we love, for peace on earth, for health and growth and love and mercy and forgiveness and inclusion do we dare believe that this might be the season, this might be the time that God breaks in? Do we dare to hope that today might be the day? That this might be the moment? And if it were to happen to us, that a messenger of God should come and say, “this is your lucky day!” would we be able to embrace the joy or be filled with skepticism and doubt? Would we say, “finally” with a sigh or would we too be struck silent in the deafening sound of our doubts and fears, not daring to hope in God?

Although Zechariah prayed, although he was hopeful, when the time came he had lost his confidence in God. Perhaps it had been too long; perhaps he had seen too much. Perhaps he was just too weary to think that this time it might be true. Whatever happened, Luke tells us this: an angel of God came and spoke to Zechariah and it wasn’t enough; he had lost hope. And so because of his uncertainty the angel removes Zechariah’s ability to speak. Notice that God doesn’t pack up and leave! Notice that God doesn’t take the miraculous gift away! But God, in essence, sidelines Zechariah, alters his reality perhaps so, at least for the next nine months Zechariah will indeed pay close attention, keeping his heart and mind on God.

We know what happens to us when we become like Zechariah, when we lose hope. We become skeptical, cynical, turning inward, away from God’s light. We know what happens when we give up, when our doubt overcomes our expectation: we sink deeper into darkness, feel sorry for ourselves, become convinced the world is against us.

But what happens when we **dare to hope**? When we tenaciously cling to any shred of possibility that indeed God might be faithful? That *this time* things will go our way? That the moment we've waited for has *arrived*?

When we dare to hope, we affirm our belief, no matter by how slim a margin; we cling to the lifeline that connects us to God. When we dare to hope, we assert our position: we will not give up. No matter how uncertain, no matter how farfetched, no matter how unbelievable whatever we're hoping for may be. When we dare to hope we are saying that we have not forsaken our cause, we have not folded our hand, we have not thrown in the towel, we have not given up the ship! Hope declares we are not finished yet...no matter what the odds.

When we dare to hope we can continue to envision, dream, imagine the possibility of God with in, in us, for us! Our hope declares that there can be something else, some other way, some thing different, something more, something other than the space and place we find ourselves in! Hope ignites imagination; it fuels our foray into the realm of possibilities! Hope brings possibility; it shines light!

In hope we can believe that we will be whole, strong, well, safe, creative once again. In hope we can believe that we can repair our marriages, reconcile with our neighbor, befriend a long lost family member, let go of old hurts and begin again. It's hope that gives rise to new ideas and new directions! It's hope that gives us impetus to try, to seek, to discover, to find. Hope is the reason we can greet the dawn with thanksgiving; it's hope rising in us that enables us to begin again.

The invitation of Zechariah's story is an invitation to dare to hope. It is a cautionary tale that encourages us to *keep* praying, *keep* believing, *keep* trusting that our prayers *will* be answered; that our cries *will* be heard. It's an admonition to dare to hope that we make a difference, that God

does reveal, that good does triumph over evil, that mercy and compassion make a difference in the world. We dare to hope because someday peace will come to all the earth, justice will prevail and God will be with us, in the incarnation in Jesus Christ.

In this season of Advent, in this time of expectation, do not fail to hope! Believe that your prayers make a difference, that God is still listening, that the answer will come, that God will indeed be faithful! Dare to hope that God is with us! Dare to believe that light will come!