

Victory of the Lamb // December 22, 2019 // Sermon series: Hope
Sermon theme: Hope is real // Sermon text: Luke 1:26-38 // Pastor Ben Sadler

Do you think we are going to have a white Christmas? Don't get your hopes up. I've looked at the forecast. And it doesn't seem like we are going to have a white Christmas. But maybe that's nothing new for you. Maybe life has already sucked the hope from your heart.

For some of us, maybe we lost hope because we feel forgotten. We wonder if anyone notices us at all. Maybe we always felt like a bother to others. We felt invisible and forgotten. We even feel like God himself has forgotten us. Maybe you prayed to God, and your family member still died, or you still got hurt. So we live in constant dread of this dangerous world and what it could do to us. For some of us, fear has sucked the hope out of our hearts.

For some others, we don't feel like God has let us down. We feel like we have let God down and everybody else. Maybe we have had a moral failing. Or we made a bad financial decision. And we feel worthless. We feel like we have no intrinsic value. So we spend all our time projecting an airbrushed, Instagram worthy image of our lives. We are always trying to earn our value through achievement and performance because we feel so worthless and ashamed. For some of us, shame has sucked the hope out of our hearts.

Finally, for some of us, we don't feel like God let us down, or that we have let God down. No, people have let us down. We trusted in our family or friends to be there for us. And they were unreliable. Maybe they were struggling with an addiction or an abusive relationship. So we learned from little on that we can't trust anybody. We live by the mantra: If something is going to get done, I have to do it myself. We try to perfect ourselves and the world around us because we believe that everything is riding on our action. But after a while, the plates that we are trying to spin come crashing down, and we get angry. For some of us, anger has sucked the hope from our hearts.

But that is why we are continuing our sermon series on **Hope**. We know that life has a way of sucking hope from our hearts. So as we prepare our hearts for Christmas, I want to answer this question: **How can we begin to experience real hope today?**

To answer this question, we are going to turn to the opening chapter of the book of Luke, the story of the angel telling Mary that she will be the mother of God. But before we get into the story, let me explain what it would have felt like to be an Israelite around the time of Jesus birth.

Many Israelites felt forgotten. God had promised through the prophets that he was going to raise up a king like David. And this king would take away their greatest enemies. But for the last 600 years, the Israelites had been under the oppression of one evil empire after another. First it was the Babylonians, then it was the Persians, then it was the Greeks, and now they were occupied by the Romans. Just read the Psalms and listen to the desperate cries of the people, **Why, Lord, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? (psalm 10:1) "Why have you forgotten me? Why must I go about mourning, oppressed by the enemy?" (Psalm 42:9)**. The Israelites felt forgotten and they were afraid.

Some of them felt horribly guilty. They knew that it was because of their idolatry that their country was a mess. God told them to follow his commands. But they weren't even keeping the first one: You shall

have no other gods.” In their shame, they went to the Temple time and time again, sacrificing animal after animal. But deep down they knew that the blood of animals couldn’t take away their shame.

Some of them just gave up on their faith all together. They tried their best to fight off the Romans and preserve their lives with their own strength. Some of them became angry zealots, fighting to perfect themselves and their world around them. In other words, many Israelites had lost all hope. They were covered in darkness and despair.

In the middle of this darkness, God breaks through as he sends an angel to a woman named Mary: **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. (Luke 1:26-27)** These verses offer a glimpse of hope. It’s been 400 years since God has spoken to his people. And now he comes to a virgin, who is engaged to Joseph, a descendant of David. The prophets had predicted that God would one day work through a virgin. That he would one day raise up a descendant of David. So these verses are supposed to make us lean in and anticipate real hope from God.

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. (Luke 1:27-28)

The angel Gabriel greets Mary in a very warm way. *Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you!* Gabriel is doing everything he can to convince Mary that she is bringing good news. But Mary is greatly troubled and wondered what God would be going to ask of her. We don’t know, but she seems to be skeptical that God wanted to do good to her.

Those of us who live in a constant state of fear know what this is like. I asked someone who really struggles with fear to describe what it feels like to follow Jesus. She said, “I’m afraid of what God might be asking of me. Following Jesus can feel like jumping out of a plane, wondering if God is really going to pull the rip cord and I wonder if it will actually open up.”

If fear has sucked the hope out of your heart, hear what the angel said to Mary:

But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary... (Luke 1:30)

Don’t be afraid. God is with you. He knew Mary, this unknown young woman living in a tiny backwoods town. He knew her. And he knows you. He knows the number of hairs on your head. He has good plans for you. Yes, he was going to ask Mary to take on this incredible responsibility, but he was also going to be with her every step of the way. I don’t know what God is going to ask of you. What plane he wants you to jump out of, but I know he is going to be with you to pull the ripcord. So, don’t be afraid. The Lord is with you.

But that is not what we are all struggling with. Some of us believe the lie that we have no value outside of our achievement and performance. This is something that I struggle with. In fact, my wife and I were discussing a personality test. And it diagnosed me as a performer that is always trying to earn my worth and it sucks the hope out of my heart.

In fact, the reason it can be so hard for a person like me to follow Jesus is because I believe I need to be in the spotlight. I believe I need to perform and earn everyone’s approval. It is hard to put the spotlight

on others or even on God, because I believe that I have to overcome my shame and worthless feeling by achieving and performing.

People like me need to hear that next words from Gabriel, **...you have found favor with God. (Luke 1:30)** Mary didn't earn favor with God. She found favor. God was pleased with her before she carried the Savior, before she did anything for God. She was God's creation, God's daughter, and God was already pleased with her.

Many of us need to hear that today. We need to hear that God is already happy with us. We were created by God in his image with intrinsic value and worth. Then Jesus died on the cross to wipe away the shame and guilt that seems to stick to us. God is already pleased with us, so we can step out of the spotlight.

But maybe that's not you. Maybe you struggle with control. You believe that you have to be in the driver's seat. You have to be controlling what's going on. You believe that everything depends on your action. And you are getting exhausted and angry.

If you think that everything that matters rests on your shoulders, listen to what Gabriel promised to Mary, **"You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."** (Luke 1:31-33)

Gabriel told Mary that she was going to be the mother of God. God was going to come to dwell among them. He was going to be their king and rule over them forever. He was going to have a kingdom that would never end.

Some of us need to hear this. Jesus lived, died, rose, and now reigns on high. He is in control. He is in the driver's seat. You can take the passenger seat. You can trust that he is not going to take a wrong turn as he guides this world. You can be still. God's got this.

Can you see what God is promising to Mary? Can you see what this means for us? God is giving all of us real hope. He is taking away the fear, shame, and anger that sucks the hope from our hearts. He is going to be with us. He is pleased with us. He is in control.

This sounds great. Who wouldn't want to live in hope? Who wouldn't want to greet each day with joy and excitement, trusting that God has good plans for us? Yet, how do we know this hope is real?

For Mary, the promise of hope was impossible. She was a virgin. How could God deliver all this hope through a baby. So, she asks, **"How will this be, since I am a virgin?"** (Luke 1:34) Mary knew where babies came from. And so, to believe in the promises of God seemed to be delusional.

Mary asks the question that is on all our minds, "How can this be?" How can I really trust that God is going to deliver? That God is with me, that God loves me, that God is in control. Aren't all these promises just words on a page? Is it just wishful thinking to believe that this hope is real?

Gabriel responds, **"And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God... For nothing will be impossible with God."** (Luke 1:35,37 ESV) Gabriel explains to Mary. God the Holy Spirit will live in you to bring about this new life. God, the Father, the Most High, will surround you

with his power. So this Holy One will be the Son of God. In other words, your hope is real because your hope is in the name of the Lord. Your hope is in the Triune God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

That's why we can have hope. Our hope is not in mere words or ideas. Our hope is in a person. It is in the Lord. It is in our Triune God. And nothing is impossible with God. That God is Jesus, the one who was born in Bethlehem. That's why we have hope, because...

1. Our hope has a heartbeat.

Our hope is not a delusion. Our hope is real. Our hope is based on our God and nothing is impossible with God. Mary believed that so here is how she responded. **"I am the Lord's servant. Let everything you've said happen to me." (Luke 1:38 GW)**

Mary didn't just hear God's promises, she received them. She received them like a Christmas gift. She opened her heart to receive the gift. She said, "I am the Lord's servant. Let everything you've said happen to me." God, I trust you. I believe you are with me. I believe you love me. I believe you are in control. I received your promises into my heart.

That's what I want us to do right now as well. Let's follow Mary's example. Let's **2. Open the gift of hope**. Let's receive the gift of hope that God is offering so that we can experience his presence, his love, and his peace.

So back to our original question: How can we begin to experience real hope today? We need to open the gift of hope that God is offering.

So here's how I want to do this. In a moment, I'm going to pray. Now normally when we pray, we pray with our hands folded. That's a good practice. It keeps us from checking our phone or doing anything else. But this time instead of having your hands closed, I want us to pray with our hands open.

I heard this from a Christian writer and lawyer named Bob Goff. He says that when he is doing negotiations between two people, he makes them keep the palms up and open. He believes our posture of openness affects how we talk with one another. It also affects how we talk with God. So when we pray, let's try praying with our palms up and open. Let's be ready to receive the gift of hope that God is offering.

Let's pray. Lord God, I pray for those of us who live in fear. We struggle to have hope in you. We wonder if you have forgotten about us. So we struggle to be optimistic about our future. Lord, speak to our hearts. Tell us what you told Mary, "Don't be afraid." Calm our anxious hearts. And drive out our fears.

Lord some of us have lost our hope because we put our hope in our performance. We struggle with self-worth. We feel worthless. We are trying so hard to perform and achieve. Tell us what you told Mary. You are already pleased with us before we perform, before we achieve.

Lord, some of us, are exhausted. We are trying to control everything in our lives. We are trying to perfect an imperfect world. Tell us what you told Mary, that Jesus is king. He reigns forever. He's got this.

Lord God, give us all hope in Jesus. Show us that your hope is real. That it is here. Let us experience that hope so that we would live in peace and joyful anticipation of the good that you have for us in Jesus. Amen.