

THE ONLY HOPE**Luke 1:5-25****(Read Luke 1:5-25)**

Intro: This is the most wonderful time of the year. Right? For a lot of people it is. For a lot of people it is not. Also there is a growing despair in society that not even Christmas can cure. This is because only Christ can cure despair, and all too often Christ is left out of Christmas. Now, before you think I'm going off on a rant about whether the clerk at the store says "Happy Holidays!" or "Merry Christmas!" as they send us on our way; and the blessedness of the latter, and the horribleness of the former, I'm not. Instead of a rant, I want to talk about hope. In fact, our only hope. I'm going to do this by discussing this familiar passage I just read from Luke. First some background leading up to the text:

Prior to this announcement to Zechariah the priest, there had been hundreds of years of silence. The people of Israel had slipped into increasing hopelessness. It was as if God had abandoned them. This elderly couple, Zechariah the priest and his godly wife, Elizabeth, who had never experienced the joys and hardships of parenthood, were representative of those centuries of hopelessness. They were good people waiting for what? Nothing really. They were past that. To be childless in that culture was shameful – it was thought to be sign of God's displeasure. Even though they had been really good people and had given God no reason for displeasure. Similarly God's people, the Jews, had experienced some 400 years with no revelation from on high. God had been quiet for so long and the shame was palpable. Pagan peoples had overrun the homeland and all the while there had been no deliverer. Hopelessness took over. What can God do with a people like us? And, where is God anyway?

Suddenly there was hope for Zechariah and Elizabeth. God had promised a son. It seemed crazy and the old priest said so – and it was the last thing he said for 9 months. But he began trusting. So did his wife. Even though they were old, they trusted God.

Their son would be the forerunner of the one who would come and be not only the deliverer of the Jews, but for all people. Suddenly the hope of Elizabeth and Zechariah was the hope of all humanity.

Here is what I want us to learn today and live out 365 days a year: like this elderly couple we need to trust God when he speaks and acts. We need to listen and watch his word come to pass. We will not be disappointed and we will not have long to wait.

Let's look at this verse by verse.

Even when we do everything right, things often don't go as they are "supposed" to. Still we have hope. vv. 5-7

- Our text tells us that Zechariah and Elizabeth followed the law blamelessly. They were very good people. They did things by the book. They were exemplary. And yet they were childless: one of their greatest desires had never been realized. Childlessness meant they had no one to care for and no one to care for them in their twilight years. They also had no legacy to pass on – children were needed for that. Through no fault of their own, since they were blameless, they bore the stigma of no children. Being past childbearing age, they were hopeless – at least in the area of progeny.
- Society dictated the expectations Zechariah and Elizabeth had. Culture has a way of doing that. Expectations are high and when life doesn't go as its "supposed" to the blame has to somewhere. Back when people still believed in God, he was the one who got blamed. Nowadays it is used as proof that there is not God. But the truth is, while God promises to never leave or forsake us (Deuteronomy 31:6) and Jesus promises to be with us always (Matthew 28:20), life will not always go "right" for us. This is true even when we do everything right. This is because we live in a fallen world. Bad things happen to good people. And good things fail to happen for good people. But, here is what we can know from this passage – hope goes on because of the only hope.
- And you can be assured . . .

Life goes on and we go on, because we have hope. vv. 8 - 10

- Despite their disappointment and shame, Zechariah and Elizabeth persisted. They didn't give up. They were still godly people doing what they knew to be the right things. They obediently kept going.
- For Zechariah this meant participating in his responsibilities as one of the 18,000 priests who faithfully represented a silent God to an increasingly hopeless people. He could well have given up and resigned his

post, citing the futility of serving a God who no longer revealed himself. But he didn't. As a godly man he knew that life goes on and because God is God, we still have hope – if only a glimmer.

- This is where the rubber meets the road for us. When life stinks, how can we have hope? When you lose a loved one, how can you have hope? Not only that when you lose a child, how do you have hope? When your supposed loved one walks out on you, how can you have hope. When you get a very discouraging diagnosis, how can you have hope? Where is God when it hurts? These are legitimate questions. They are good questions. Life goes on, it's true, but it stinks. I remember thinking about this just 10 days shy of 20 years ago. My dad had died the night before and I was trying to keep busy so I didn't think too much. One thing I couldn't get out of my mind was the question, what will Mother do after 57 years of marriage? How do you just get over that? The answer is, you don't. You don't get over it, but life goes on and you survive on hope. Because of Jesus, we know that death is not the end. For the Christ Follower it's the beginning. We have hope. We have the only hope.
- And even in the face of seeming silence we have confidence that . . .

Our prayers have been heard - so we have hope. vv. 11-13

- The angel tells the old priest, "*Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard.*" v. 13. Four hundred doesn't just seem to be a long time, it IS a long time, and that many years of silence would seem to indicate that God wasn't listening. Prayers seemed to be bouncing off the sky. In fact, why pray?
- Fortunately, this wasn't the attitude Zechariah and his wife took – obviously they had persisted in prayer – and now their prayers had been heard. How many times have we heard testimony of parents or spouses who have prayed for a child or a spouse to receive Christ, and how many more times have we seen their prayers answered. God hears our prayers. Don't stop! We have hope. And here is the promise . . .

Our obedience and our hope gives birth to a contagious good news. We pass on our hope vv. 14 – 17

- The faithful and answered prayers of an old priest and his barren wife brought infinitely good news. It would be a joy and a delight for formerly hopeless parents, great rejoicing for most everyone else and he would bring the people of Israel back to God. After years of nothingness – this was very good news.
- More importantly, this child would be empowered by the Spirit even before he was born. This is exciting it's a promise that has further fulfillment in the events of Luke 1:39-45 when Mary, who has just heard about her own impending pregnancy goes to share it with this one and the same, Elizabeth. The Spirit was not a new – the Trinity was in community from eternity, but Holy Spirit's abiding with John is an intensification of his presence among Old Testament prophets. Everything about this points back to the Old Testament but it shows an escalation of God's work and the approach of a New Testament.
- This is all really good news. It spread fast and far and wide. Because of the Holy Spirit we have hope. This is because . . .

God can do the humanly impossible. What the world considers hopeless is possible with God. vv. 18 – 20

- Zechariah was talking to the angel named Gabriel and he was receiving the best news he'd ever heard. Not only would Israel be restored, but he was going to be a Daddy. This was a mind-blowing experience to be sure – so isn't it just a little justifiable that he could have just a little doubt. Humanly, the answer is yes. But is the God of the impossible. Just because we don't think he can doesn't hold him back and he doesn't hold it against us. Well, Zechariah couldn't speak for a few months, but he knew the joyful truth.
- So even when we don't completely believe what God can do – we have hope. And, think about this . . .

Even when we cannot speak, the world can see the hope we have. vv. 21 - 22

- Zechariah was bursting at the seams, but he couldn't say out loud why. He had to write it in the air or in the dirt outside the temple doors. He might have been dumb but joy was written all over his face. He's gone into the Holy of Holies to carry out his duties and he was carried back out on a cloud of joy.
- Have you ever noticed how there is a certain joyful aura around the people of God? You just know it. You're that way too. People can see Jesus all over you. You don't have to say a thing – the Lord comes through in the Fruit of the Spirit (that we talked about last week) that shines through. They see our hope.
- And it's because . . .

God always keeps his promises. That means we always have hope. vv. 23 - 24

- Zechariah completed his work and went home. And soon, Elizabeth was pregnant. Because God means what he says. Remember that promise from 1 Thessalonians 5, *The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do it.* 1 Thessalonians 5:24. Or in Peterson's words *If he said it, he will do it.* God keeps his promises. A baby was born to an old couple. A deliverer was promised to Israel – and a baby was born in Bethlehem. The Holy Spirit was promised on a mountain just before Jesus returned to his Father – 10 days later he came upon 120 people in an upper room. Jesus said he would come back and that means Jesus WILL come back because God keeps his promises. Incidentally, are you ready for that? God keeps his promises – that means we always have hope. And finally . . .

God shows his favor. God is our only hope. v. 25

- Even barren Elizabeth had hope. As I pointed out earlier, childlessness was seen felt every ounce of the unfair stigma. But here we see how God honors the faithfulness of this godly couple and gives the desire of their heart – and better. He announced his plan for all humanity – the child they had conceived would be the forerunner of one who would bring deliverance at the Cross. In fact, that makes Jesus the hope of the world. The only hope.
- God removes shame and disgrace for anyone who calls on him. There is nothing you are or have done that he does not redeem. It's been all through this talk, but let me say it again, God brings hope to the hopeless.

Conclusion: The name John means “God is gracious.” The name Jesus means “God is Salvation.” John came to proclaim the coming of salvation. God is doing. Man is hoping. God does the impossible, whether it's through an old woman who is past child-bearing age, or through a virgin who has never been with a man. He promised. He keeps his promises. That's why he is the only hope.

James Dobson once told a story of an elderly woman named Stella Thornhope who was struggling with her first Christmas alone. Her husband had died just a few months prior because of a slow-developing cancer. Now, several days before Christmas, she felt terribly alone, so much so that she decided she was not going to decorate for Christmas. Late that afternoon, the doorbell rang, and there was a delivery boy with a box.

He said, “Mrs. Thornhope?” She nodded.

He said, “Would you sign here?”

She invited him to step inside and closed the door to get away from the cold. She signed the paper and said, “What's in the box?” The young man laughed and opened up the flap, and inside was a little puppy, a golden Labrador Retriever. The delivery boy picked up the squirming pup and explained, “This is for you, ma'am. He's 6-weeks-old and completely housebroken.” The young puppy began to wiggle in happiness at being released from captivity.

“Who sent this?” Mrs. Thornhope asked.

*The young man set the animal down, handed her an envelope, and said: “It's all explained here in this envelope, Ma'am. The dog was bought last July while its mother was still pregnant. It was meant to be a Christmas gift for you.” The young man then handed her a book, *How to Care for Your Labrador Retriever*. In desperation, she again asked, “Who sent me this puppy?”*

As the young man turned to leave, he said, “Your husband, Ma'am. Merry Christmas.”

She opened up the letter from her husband. He had written it three weeks before he died and left it with the kennel owners to be delivered with the puppy as his last Christmas gift to her. The letter was full of love and encouragement and admonishments to be strong. He vowed that he was waiting for the day when she would join him. He had sent her this young animal to keep her company until then.

She wiped away the tears, put the letter down, and then, remembering the puppy at her feet, she picked up that golden, furry ball and held it to her neck. Then she looked out the window at the lights that outlined the neighbor's house, and she heard from the radio in the kitchen the strains of “Joy to the World, the Lord has Come.”

Suddenly, Stella felt the most amazing sensation of peace washing over her. Her heart felt a joy and wonder greater than the grief and loneliness.

“Little fella,” she said to the dog, “it's just you and me. But you know what? There's a box down in the basement I'll bet you'll like. It's got a little Christmas tree in it and some decorations and some lights that are

going to impress you. And there's a manger scene down there. Let's go get it." Stella's hope was restored. Amen.