

A Glimmer of Hope: One Light in Dark Times

November 30, 2008

Year B: The First Sunday of Advent

Chadron United Methodist Church; Chadron, Nebraska

Luke 1:5-25 (NRSV)

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

⁸Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, ⁹he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. ¹⁰Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. ¹¹Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹²When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. ¹³But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years."

¹⁹The angel replied, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. ²⁰But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur."

²¹Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. ²²When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. ²³When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

²⁴After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, ²⁵"This is what the Lord has done for me when

he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

I heard a story once about a Sunday School teacher that was questioning one of her students, "Now, Johnny," she said, "tell me truthfully, do you say prayers before eating?"

"No maim," little Johnny replies, "I don't have to. My mom is a good cook."¹

Today we are going to talk about HOPE. In fact, you are going to hear about HOPE all the way to Christmas.

Now, I want to provide a word of caution for you right now. If you don't want to hear about hope, if you don't think you need to hear about hope, if you don't have time for hope, or if you're thinking that we shouldn't be talking about during the Christmas season, then I'd recommend you box your ears right now – leave now – and don't return until after Christmas. Now, this may seem harsh, but I don't know about you, but when I'm facing a crisis – whether it be economic or personal – when I'm having a hard time looking down the road, when the future just seems so darn uncertain, I'd rather hear about hope than anything else.

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. ⁶Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. ⁷But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Luke here provides us with a great background of what the first Christmas was like. In the days of King Herod of Judea. . .

In Matthew 2 we learn of the story of the wise men who first meet with this King to search for Jesus. Herod is quite jealous. Here is a tiny infant that will some day overthrow his kingship and to ensure this does not happen we learn in that Gospel that Herod orders the massacre of all infant boys in his Kingdom. Fortunately for Jesus, an angel tells them about this and they escape to Egypt. Now I'm thinking, if Herod was willing to do that to infants, just imagine what he was like as a ruler.

But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years. . . Zechariah and Elizabeth were old and they had no children. In Biblical times this was a stain on their name. Nowadays we would look at the issue of infertility but then it was all Elizabeth's fault. God did not favor her, at least that's what the people believed, because she did not have a child.

And in this passage we have it alluded to that the people are waiting – longing for the coming Messiah – but there is a problem. They have been waiting for so long that their hope has become futile.

¹ Cynthia Gaskill. "Don't pray – mom is a good cook." *Seth's Compiled List of Jokes & Illustrations, Part V*. 28.

You know I'm a big fan of Husker football. I grew up in a big time Husker family. I attended a lot of football games and my dad and I always listened to every game on the radio. When I entered Nebraska Wesleyan in the fall of 1991 I was still a Husker fan and I had a lot of shirts to prove it. Here I was in Lincoln – on a different campus – but I was still close to my shrine of Memorial Stadium. I noticed something when I was a freshman at Wesleyan, I was the only one on campus that wore Husker shirts (or so it seemed). You may remember, Nebraska hadn't won the National Championship since 1971 and since I did not want to stand out I quietly put away my Husker shirts.

In the winter of 1992 I met my wife. She was a student at UNL and I soon learned that she had season tickets. Now it was winter, so the season was over, but she told me something that literally shocked me. She hardly attended any games. I couldn't believe it! She said it was like that with many of her classmates. They got tickets but rarely did they go to games.

You see, every year, the Nebraska Cornhuskers started out the season with hope. The fan base believed this as well. "This is the year that Nebraska will win it all." It was something we knew about, but you know what happens – we stopped believing in it. Back in the early 90's, it had been a 35 year drought of winning the National Championship. We knew about hope but we stopped believing in it.

Now, just replace Huskers with the Eagles, or the Cardinals, or whatever your favorite team. If you follow any type of sport you know hope is something you long for but as the season goes by, for many that hope becomes futile.

That is the state of the Hebrew people at the time of Luke's writing. They were living in dark times. Hope certainly was fleeting. They had a cruel king, times were tough, and for Zechariah and Elizabeth they were the least likeliest to bare a child and certainly not a child that would usher in the coming Kingdom of God. And the longing for the Messiah well it was something they knew about but they stopped believing that it would happen. Hope was becoming futile. The possibility of any change, of anything differently occurring was simply not on the horizon. Yet, one light began to shine.

¹³But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. ¹⁴You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. ¹⁶He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. ¹⁷With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Several years ago, an experiment on endurance was conducted at the University of California at Berkeley involving Norwegian field rats. The rats were placed in a tub of water, where they were forced to swim until they grew exhausted and finally drowned. During the first experiment, the researchers discovered that on the average, Norwegian field rats were capable of swimming for over seven hours before drowning.

A second experiment was conducted, exactly like the first but with one exception. When a rat was getting too exhausted to swim any longer, the researchers would remove that rat from the tub of water for a few seconds, then put the rat back into the water to continue swimming. These rats were able to swim for almost twenty hours before perishing.

The researchers concluded that the rats in the second group were able to swim much longer than the first group because they had *hope*. They had experienced a rescue – and what kept them going was the *hope* that they would be rescued again.²

Folks, what is keeping our head above water? It is hope. Now, I'm not talking about some fleeting concept. I'm not talking about a bunch of words on paper. I'm certainly not talking about that feeling that comes at the beginning of a sports season. And I'm not talking about something that is only spoken about in a prayer. When I say HOPE – I mean it! When I talk about HOPE – I'm talking about something that keeps us going. When I mention HOPE - I'm lifting up a light that we can actually reach out and touch. When I believe in HOPE – I see changed lives that know hope, that know what it means to make a difference.

When Donald Barnhouse was in Africa he took a picture of two young women; smiling and beautiful as they wore flowers in their hair. They were brought before this author and preacher for some special attention. They were twins – the first twins ever permitted to grow up in that part of Africa. To this tribe of Africans the idea of twins was horrible. Even today in some of Africa's tribes, twins are killed at birth. Their superstitious religion had a great fear connected with the birth of twins, but in this instance the gospel of Jesus Christ had come to the tribe some 30 years earlier. Shortly after the parents heard about Jesus, they found out the news that they were pregnant with twin daughters. Their newfound faith was strong enough to resist the public outcry against the children, and they were allowed to live. When those girls reached womanhood, they married two men of the tribe, also Christians. These twins stood before the Rev. Barnhouse as living proof of the hope that is in Christ, and he rejoiced in this hope that transforms individuals and even tribes and nations.³

You will know hope when you begin to see life differently. You will know hope when your whole outlook is guided not by the surrounding darkness but by that one light that refuses to go out.

Folks, our days are not so different then it was for Zechariah and Elizabeth and eventually John the Baptist. Our looming economic crisis, possible high unemployment, tax dollars drying up (just think how many jobs in this community rely on local, state, and federal taxes), and you never know when gas prices will go up again (maybe just before we really need to heat our homes). And the holidays continue to be filled with uncertainty. How will we pay for everything? How will we get everything done? What if our family can't come this year? How are we going to enjoy the season? How will we know peace, harmony, a

² Wayne Rice. *More HOT Illustrations for Youth Talks: 100 MORE attention-getting stories, parables, & anecdotes.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: ZondervanPublishingHouse. 1995.) 145.

³ Donald Grey Barnhouse. *Let Me Illustrate: More than 400 stories, anecdotes, & illustrations.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Fleming H. Revell. 1997.) 163.

relationship with God when everything seems so futile? You know, folks, Zechariah asked the same questions: will I know hope? How do I know that this hope is indeed real?

¹⁸Zechariah said to the angel, "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years."

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For us, hope I don't think it is as dramatic as losing your voice, but I believe that the only way to know hope is to believe that that one light will get us through our dark times. The only way to know hope is to focus on that one glimmer and believe – no – more than just believe – know (actually know) that life will indeed be better. That things, that events, that your outlook on life will be guided not by some fleeting sense of hope but by a hope that you know will happen.

So what is hope? Some of you know that I am a big fan of *The Far Side*. You go to my office and you will see *Far Side* comics all over my door. My favorite ones are the ones about Hell. The best one – the one that gets me laughing the hardest is this one. . . Now that is HOPE. Even in hell there is a suggestion box. It doesn't go anywhere, but those people still have HOPE.

In an interview with *Christianity Today*, Desmond Tutu, the 1986 Nobel Peace prize laureate and Anglican archbishop of Cape Town, South Africa, was asked if he was hopeful about the future.

"I am always hopeful," he replied. "A Christian is a prisoner of hope. What could have looked more hopeless than Good Friday? . . . There is no situation from which God cannot extract good. Evil, death, oppression, injustice – these can never again have the last word, despite all appearances to the contrary."⁴

On April 19, 1995, the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City killed 168 people, including 19 children. Only six youngsters survived. Two of those survivors were the children of Jim and Claudia Denny: three-year-old Brandon and two-year-old Rebecca.

When Jim Denny first arrived at the Murrah building, he did not think any children in the day care center on the second floor could have possibly survived the blast. "I didn't think we had any children left," he said. "So from there, it has all been a plus."

Although Rebecca went home after ten days in the hospital, her brother was less fortunate. Brandon was so severely injured that his father recognized him only by a birthmark on his thigh. Debris from the bomb blast embedded in his head with such force that chips of Brandon's skull were crushed into the left side of his brain. He spent 44 days in intensive care at Presbyterian Hospital in Oklahoma City and 55 days at Baylor University Medical Center Pediatric Center

⁴ G. Curtis Jones and Paul H. Jones. *500 Illustrations: Stories from Life for Preaching & Teaching*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press. 1998.) 139.

for Restorative Care in Dallas. After four operations and intense physical therapy, Brandon could sit up and stand, and take a few steps. 100 days after the bombing, Brandon went home.

Three years later, doctors were reluctant to predict how much improvement he will make or if he will ever be able to talk or walk on his own, but his father made his own prognosis: "If he doesn't get better we'll be happy, but he will get better. Where there's life, there's hope."⁵

Folks, hope isn't something that is just believed in. Hope is something that is real, that keeps us going when everything else says differently. Hope is that one light even in dark times. Hope is something we will know, and believe, and have when this Advent journey concludes on Christmas Eve. And because I believe in hope so much I just had to know about that little boy from Oklahoma. That story I told you about was written 10 years ago. What about Brandon today? Does his family still hold on to hope? Just listen to this latest news story from last year. A reporter for the Seattle Times interviewed the family. When she asked what the family thinks about the bombing today they responded: "It has a big effect on everybody's life in this family. We have to accept the fact we can't go back and change anything. We just have to live with it. That's the way I see it."

"Brandon doesn't say much," said the newspaper reporter. He often stared blankly when asked questions. He occasionally slips in a quip while his sister is speaking.

"They ask me (about the bombing) a lot," said Brandon. "They ask me 20 times a day."

Pause.

"I'm pulling your leg."

"Before this happened, Brandon was the real outgoing one," Jim Denny said, "and Rebecca was the laid-back one. Rebecca went from a follower to a leader, and Brandon went from a leader to a follower."

Despite the hardships, Jim Denny said his family is "about as normal as normal can be — whatever normal is."

"We have our own normal," Claudia Denny interjected.

"And it's good," Jim Denny said.⁶

Now that is hope – hope not as fleeting, but hope that is real today and it's good. Amen.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ http://seattletimes.nwsourc.com/html/nationworld/2002245596_oklakids19.html