

+ Luke 1:39-55 + Prepare with Eager Hope + 4th Sunday in Advent + 21 December 2014 +

A frantic husband whisks his laboring wife to the hospital because the child they've hoped to see is on her way. A graduate makes his way across a stage to receive a degree he's hoped to earn after years of study. The grand notes of a processional soar through the air while a bride takes her first hope-filled step down the aisle towards her future husband. Parents eagerly hope that the minutes will fly by before their children will finally be home. The UPS website indicates that the special package of Christmas presents your children were hoping for is now "out for delivery."

There's a lot of hope this time of year—hope for relaxation, hope for family time, hope for great presents, hope for yummy food, hope for a peaceful holiday, hope for the future. You have to admit that all that hope and anticipation is rather fun, even exciting. Yet if you were to step back and take a closer look at all that hope, how much of that hope is just the excitement of the moment? How much of that hope is here today, but gone with the garbage or recycling next week? How much of that hope is based on the certainty of what is coming and how much of it is simply wishful thinking mixed with a heavy dose of anticipation?

During this Advent season, we've been preparing not for a party or a family get-together, but for the coming of the Lord. Jesus urged us to prepare for his coming with confident watching. John the Baptizer called us to prepare with real repentance. Nehemiah encouraged us to prepare with great joy.

So what about today? We're only 3-4 days from Christmas (depending on who's counting), and there's so much that demands our time and attention and preparation. With gifts that still need to be purchased and wrapped, special meals to plan, services and parts to prepare, and last-minute details to work out, there's almost no time or energy left to prepare our hearts for the celebration of Christ's first coming. Yet this morning, two unexpected, expecting mothers and a baby entering the third trimester get us to stop and **PREPARE WITH EAGER HOPE** for the Lord's coming.

It would be safe to say that Old Testament believers had the market cornered on hope. Over the course of several thousand years, generations of believers eagerly yearned to see the coming of the Messiah, of God's Chosen One who would come to save his people from their sins. Generation after generation of faithful believers memorized the promises given through the prophets. They knew what kind of a Savior was coming, but they just didn't know when he would come.

What made it even more challenging was that the Lord had been silent for about 400 years. All they had were the prophecies given to Adam and Eve; to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; to Judah and David; through prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah, Micah and Malachi. Yet even with the silence, their hope didn't give out. They knew the Messiah, the Savior was coming soon.

They waited in hope until God broke the silence. The Lord sent an angel to inform an elderly priest named Zechariah that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a son, who would be the last of the prophets. His name would be John and he would prepare the way for the coming Lord, but Zechariah's hope was pretty weak. How was his elderly wife, who had never borne a child, going to have a son at her age? It would be impossible. So the Lord silenced Zechariah until the boy was born, but Elizabeth rejoiced in hope. With a miracle baby on the way, it was just a matter of time before the Messiah would finally arrive, but when and from where would he come?

About six months later, the Lord answered that question. In Nazareth lived a young teenager named Mary. She had probably always dreamed of being a mom with kids, but she had no reason to expect that to happen before she was married. She was still a virgin and was engaged to a godly, local carpenter named Joseph. Back then, engagement was considered a binding legal marriage with all the responsibilities and none of the privileges until the wedding feast about a year later.

Everything changed when an angel brought a message from the Most High God himself. ***"You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus... The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."*** (Luke 1:31,35)

Try to imagine what was going through her mind after that. Her mind raced with concerns and unanswered questions, fear of the unknown and lots of hope—eager, excited hope. The long-expected Savior was finally coming! As a faithful believer and expecting mother, Mary had to prepare.

However, that meant leaving town for a time. Mary was an unmarried, engaged teenager who had just found out she was pregnant. Few, if any, would believe that this child came from God himself. Some might even try to stone her to death for infidelity. Even if they didn't, most would question her reputation from that point on. So she left to visit her dear relative Elizabeth about whom the angel had said, ***"For nothing is impossible with God."*** (Luke 1:37)

Filled with hope, Mary hurried to Elizabeth's home, but she never expected what would happen when she simply said, "Hi!" When Mary entered Elizabeth's home and greeted her, the child within Elizabeth's womb leaped. Now babies like to move around in their mother's womb kicking and pushing, but this was a special movement. This was an unborn child celebrating the arrival of his Savior—a reaction of eager hope.

The Holy Spirit led Elizabeth to also give thanks for the Lord's blessing on Mary and all people. ***"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"*** In only nine months, Mary would give birth to the Savior of the world. The hope of so many would finally be fulfilled. What hope! What anticipation! What joy!

...And it wasn't shallow or short-lived. It was based on the reality of what God had promised would come. Remarkably, Mary was prepared. She didn't let the potential glory and fame go to her head. No, she sang a song of glory to her Lord, humbly confessing her need for the Savior, while joyfully praising her Lord for his glorious and undeserved grace in sending that Savior.

"My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, because the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, even as he said to our fathers." It was a song of certain hope in the Lord.

In these last days of Advent, how is your hope? Is it burning brightly with faith-filled confidence or is it distracted by sales and stuff, activities and responsibilities and difficulties? If you don't have that solid hope that looks ahead to Christ's coming, how can you prepare?

The truth is, you can prepare for Christ's coming by going back to the Gospel in Word and Sacraments. There the Savior renews your hope. In the Word, the Lord reminds you how poorly prepared you are and how desperately you need a Savior, but that Word also points you to the Savior, whose very presence in Mary's womb was a miracle of God's undeserved love for you.

In the Word, Jesus comes to you and shows you all he did for you. That child of Mary was born in a Bethlehem stable. He grew up living a perfect life, never demanding glory and praise for himself, but always deserving thanksgiving and worship as the Son of God. Eventually that loving mercy took him to a cross to die for you and all your sins, to cleanse you of all your guilt with forgiveness that he guaranteed with an empty tomb.

Yet Jesus doesn't just tell you about it in his Word. He also gives you real hope in the waters of Holy Baptism. There in the water and the Word, your sinful, unprepared nature is crucified with Christ and a new self rises, made holy in Jesus' blood, ready to receive all God's promises with confident trust. To those life-giving waters, you can daily return to drown that sinful nature and renew your hope with God's forgiveness through Jesus.

The Savior also renews your hope in his Holy Supper. There Christ gives you his holy body and blood with bread and wine for the forgiveness of sins, strength for new life, and the assurance of your salvation. Through the Gospel, then, Jesus prepares you for his coming filling you with eager hope.

Now that hope isn't just based on the past, but it looks ahead to the future. Remember what Jesus has promised, ***"Behold, I am coming soon!"*** (Revelation 22:12) So in the reality of the coming Savior, we put our hope that will soon be realized on the Last Day. On that day, Jesus will come to gather his people and bring them home to heaven. Now even as you look into the manger and see the shadow of the cross behind it, you can look heavenward to Christ's return. ***"The Mighty One has done great things"*** for you in a womb and a manger and on a cross. He will certainly fulfill that final promise too.

Yes, there are only days until Christmas, but there's still time to prepare for the Lord's coming. Let the great things God has done for you through Jesus take your breath away, and keep this ancient prayer on your lips, ***"O Emmanuel, our King and our Lord, the anointed for the nations and their Savior: Come and save us, O Lord our God."*** (*Great O Antiphons*) God's answer to that prayer is coming soon. In the meantime, prepare with eager hope. Amen.