

Hope in the Lord
Luke 1:26-33; Luke 1: 46-55
December 23, 2018 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

The Magnificat of Mary, which we just heard, is among the most beautiful of all the scriptures in the New Testament. But let us back up to our earlier scripture. Mary, a good Jewish girl, probably a girl of thirteen or fourteen is minding her own business. She's engaged to Joseph who is probably in his early twenties, but she's still living with her parents. I can envision her helping around the house, maybe taking care of other children, cooking, doing some chores, or possibly doing some gardening, when suddenly, an angel, a messenger of the Lord, appears to her.

Exactly how this appearance manifested itself, we haven't a clue. Matthew reports that this same angel appeared to Joseph in a dream. Did Mary also have a dream? Did she hear a heavenly voice while fully awake? Did she actually see a heavenly presence, some sort of spiritual being? We really don't know. The Bible tells us she was perplexed, and maybe even frightened; for immediately after the greeting, the angel tells Mary, "Do not be afraid." Afraid? I'd be scared to death. But the angel goes on to give Mary some of the "wildest" news ever delivered.

Mary, though a virgin, was to conceive and bear a very special son. He would be called "the Son of the Most High" and would be given the throne of his ancestor David; and of his kingdom, there would be no end.

Friends, today we lit our fourth Advent Candle the candle of Hope; and, as we read Mary's Magnificat, we found an endless statement of hope:

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.
He has scattered the proud.
He has brought down the powerful; and
 lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things; and
 sent the rich away empty.
He has helped Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,
 according to the promise made to the prophets.

Indeed, in the baby to be born of Mary there is hope, hope as expressed by the Prophet Amos, that "justice will roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream." (Amos 5:24)

For the past several weeks, as we have tied our scriptures to the Names of Jesus and the Advent Study that Rev. Alice is leading. Today, clearly the name which ties everything together is "Messiah." Messiah is a Hebrew word

(*Meschiach* in Hebrew). It means “the anointed one.” Translate it into Greek, and we get *Christos*, from which we derive the name “Christ.”

The expectation, the *hope* for a Messiah goes all the way back seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, to a time when Isaiah penned those words that we’ve already heard a couple times during this Advent:

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given,
and authority will be on his shoulders.
He will be named Wonderful Counselor, Almighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. (Isaiah 9:6)

Indeed in the message of Mary, and in the birth of Jesus there is great hope. Now, let me be the first to recognize that my Jewish friends have a problem with my very Christian claim that Jesus is the Messiah. They ask me, “How can you claim that Jesus is Messiah; he didn’t do anything that Messiah is supposed to do?” Isaiah tells us that, when the Messiah comes, we will “beat our swords into plow shears and our spears into pruning hooks; and we will not learn war anymore.” (Isaiah 2:4) Isaiah tells us, “The lion shall lie down with the lamb, and the child shall play in the hole of the adder.” (Isaiah 11:6-8) We still have wars. We still have violence. We still have illness. We still have tragedy. “How can you claim Jesus is Messiah?”

The traditional answer to my Jewish friends is “the Second Coming.” Jesus is coming again, and when he comes again, all these things will come to pass. Now, I don’t dismiss the Second Coming. That being said, I note that it’s been two thousand years since the first coming; and so, I’m not expecting the Second Earthly Coming of Jesus to happen in my lifetime. Did you hear that word “earthly.” Yes, I do believe Jesus will come again. I believe Jesus will come personally to me at the time when I am called to transition from the life into eternal life in the presence of Almighty God. And, I believe at that time, I will experience the peace that passes all earthly understanding. And yes, there is *Hope* in that.

But the hope of Mary, is not about some afterlife experience of the divine. No, she is speaking of the here and now. She is speaking of hope for a people hugely oppressed by the Roman Government. She is speaking of a hope for non-Roman citizens who had few rights in a Roman world. That’s the hope that Mary has in the Son which she is carrying in her womb.

So what about us, today? What do we do with our Christian belief in Messiah? Friends, I need to tell you it’s a matter of hope; and it’s a matter of where we place our hope. Is our hope truly in the Messiah, the Christ, the baby born in Bethlehem; or is our hope in military might? Is our hope in the baby born in Bethlehem; or is our hope in the Stock Market? Is our hope in the baby born in

Bethlehem; or is our hope in our leadership in Washington or Columbus or City Hall? Is our hope in the baby born in Bethlehem or is our hope in our personal wealth or gain or abilities. Mary was a lowly teenage peasant girl; but her hope was in the Lord.

And so I return to our “theme song” – “Silent Night”:

Silent night, holy night!
Wonderous star, lend thy light
with the angels let us sing,
“Alleluia” to our King:
Christ, the Savior is born!
Christ, the Savior is born!

Friends, I don’t want to celebrate Epiphany, before Epiphany. I don’t want to spend a lot of time talking about the Wise Men, before we celebrate their arrival – twelve days after Christmas. But today, I do want to consider that *hope* that they placed in the baby. A star appeared in the sky; a very special star. Now twenty-first century astronomers have recreated that Bethlehem sky. They tell us of planets coming into alignment, in specific constellations that might have had special meaning to the astrologers of the first century. Friends, I’m no more certain what the Wise Men saw in that sky than I am what the angel looked like to Mary. But I do know that it took a lot of hope, and I might add a huge amount of faith to see an event in the sky, get on a camel and travel several thousand miles to bow down, to worship, and to present some very special gifts to the Messiah, the Christ child.

And, of course, as we’re considering the skies, let us not forget those lowly shepherds. I like to juxtapose the shepherds with the wise men. Here we have the very wealthy and the very poor, both worshiping the Christ child. It reminds us that Jesus truly is the Christ, the Messiah, the Savior for all people – no exceptions. Luke tells of a multitude of heavenly host singing:

“Alleluia – Peace on earth, good will among people.”

And so, today we celebrate the hope of the Christ child, as we are called to put our hope in the Christ child, for Christ, our Messiah, truly is the King of kings, and Lord of lords. Christ truly is our Savior, a Savior born anew at Christmas – the only true source of Peace and Joy, Love and Hope. Thanks be to God for the greatest gift the world has ever known; and praise be to God, for “Unto us a child is born who is Christ the Lord.”

Let us pray. . .

Most Holy Lord,
Tomorrow is Christmas Eve,
and so today, we wait with anticipation for the coming anew
of the holy child.
May we, this Christmas, and throughout this year,
know his peace, his love, and his joy,
as we put our hope, our trust, and our faith in him.
Amen.