

# Holding On To Hope

Tallgrass at The Well | Sarah Siders | November 28, 2021

We are beginning a new series as we enter the Advent season, and something always strikes me about the word Advent itself.

The word means "arrival", and yet, I don't know about you, my Advent experience is always about waiting.

Waiting with hope and expectation, but still waiting.

The Advent activities all lead up to something, the arrival of Jesus, Christmas, but most of the season is spent waiting.

**Most of us can probably relate to that, the feeling of always being in between, always waiting on something.**

The thing you want, pray for, hope for, often finally arrives, although there are times when we never get the full answer to a prayer

But either way, we always find ourselves in the middle spaces, in the in-between. The not-yet.

**Even the story of Jesus' arrival, of finally coming to earth, as a baby might feel familiar to us emotionally.**

- Here comes the Savior, but he's a baby?
- We've waited all the time, all these thousands of years, and now we have to teach him how to feed himself.
- Well, that's...not what I expected.

**All this in-between living can cause our hope and faith to flounder and struggle.**

**But really, the in-between is our life.** It's all we have.

Even as we achieve one goal or begin a long-awaited adventure, we are immediately thrust into a new in-between.

**\*\*And our job is to keep our hearts alive and connected to God, ourselves and others in the midst of whatever we face.**

**We are approaching Advent this year from five key themes: hope, peace, faith, love and light.**

And today we are talking about hope, because everything is built on that.

**Hebrews 11:1 tells us that faith is the substance, the tangibility of what we hope for, and so without hope, we can't even have faith.**

## **TRANSITION:**

**And yet we find today in our world, the US Census Bureau reports that this year, 1 in 3 Americans are regularly feeling a sense of hopelessness or despair.**

**And that's an improvement.**

**Around this time last year**, the US Census Bureau gathered that during the pandemic, with the continued visibility around the struggle for civil rights and the prolonged separation from friends and family, unemployment and financial impacts, **48% of Americans were experiencing a sense of depression and hopelessness.**

That's 1 in 2 of us.

**This overwhelming sense of despair seems to be embedded into our human experience.**

Because you would think, in our modern age, with our longer life expectancy, conveniences and technologies, we would be happier and more hopeful.

And yet we are not.

**And it is precisely this environment that Jesus is drawn into.**

**About two thousand years ago, the Hebrew people were in their own state of prolonged and epic hopelessness.**

- Their nation, their land and their capital, Jerusalem, had been constantly under siege for hundreds of years.
- In the approximately 450 years following the final Old Testament prophet, Malachi, the kingdom changed hands six times.
  - That's less than once every hundred years.
- Israel itself had divided into three theo-political parties: the Pharisees, Sadducees, and the Essenes (eh-seenz).

**Talk about enormous instability.**

**You can imagine how exhausting this would be**, to constantly to be fighting for your freedom but never really get free.

To always have to watch your back.

To have your glory days seemingly behind you.

**As you can imagine, this constant string of losses would leave you with a devastating hopelessness.**

And that's exactly what happened to the Jewish people.

**But it wasn't just the Jewish people who were feeling this sense of hopelessness.**

Like it is today, this sense of hopelessness was global.

Many nations had been defeated over and over again by the rises and falls of the reigning kingdom of the time:

Babylon, Persia, Greece, Syria, Rome

**Pastor and author, Ray Stedman**, writes in *The 400 Years between the Old and New Testaments*,

**SLIDE:**

*"Meanwhile, the pagan empires around had been deteriorating and disintegrating. Their religions had fallen upon evil days. The people were sick of the polytheism and [the] emptiness of their pagan faiths. The Jews had gone through times of pressure and had failed in their efforts to re-establish themselves, and had given up all hope. There was a growing air of expectancy that the only hope they had left was the coming at last of the promised Messiah. -Pastor Ray Stedman*

**So this was a universal feeling - this hopelessness.**

But for the Hebrew people, who were used to hearing from God, they experienced an extended time during which God does not speak through a prophet.

**It's known as the 400 Years of Silence.**

**All this war, death, loss and instability and God says nothing?**

What gives?

**Maybe you can relate to that prayer.**

**God, what is taking you so long?**

- Why don't you **intervene** in my situation?
- Why don't you **heal** me or my marriage or my family?
- Why don't you **bring** a child or a spouse into my life?
- **Where are you** and what is taking so long?

**It turns out, "How long, O Lord?" is one of the most common prayers in the Bible.**

Waiting on God who seems invisible and silent and seemingly non-interventional is a part of the human experience.

**But finally, into this 400 years of hopelessness, comes a breath of relief.**

**Gabriel appears to Zechariah, the priest**, while he is completing the annual sacrifice, to announce that he is going to, FINALLY, have a son.

Zechariah is seeing an angel, a messenger from God, and no one has heard from God in 400 years.

**But let's pause for one minute cause this is important.**

**What WAS the last thing they heard God say?**

Here's it is, in the 4th chapter of the prophet Malachi.

**SLIDE:**

<sup>5</sup> "See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. <sup>6</sup> He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction." -Malachi 4:5-6

**So that's the last anyone has heard from God, and here comes Gabriel.**

**SLIDE:**

But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. <sup>14</sup> He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord...

**<sup>17</sup> And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."** - Luke 1:13-15, 17

**Do you hear that? God is continuing the conversation. He's picking up where he left off.**

This is a HUGE thing when God does this.

He's saying, You know that thing I was talking about 400 years ago, the one who goes before the Messiah, the messenger in the spirit of Elijah, yea, that's your son!

Whoa!

Feel free to be impressed here.

**Because Zechariah was *not* impressed.**

It's like he doesn't even notice the Malachi references about his own son, which you would think would be a huge honor.

**Here's how Zechariah's responds:**

**SLIDE:**

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man, and my wife is well along in years." -Luke 1:18

**What happened?**

He has been waiting so long for a baby that he has lost hope.

- He has slipped into a self-protective mode the Bible calls unbelief.
- And it actually blocks God from acting in our lives.
- **Remember that Jesus, in his hometown of Nazareth, "could not do many miracles there because of their unbelief."**

**Gabriel responds to him by saying,**

**SLIDE:**

<sup>19</sup> The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. <sup>20</sup> And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time." -Luke 1:19-20

**Gabriel says, since you didn't believe, you don't get to talk or you're going to ruin this whole thing.**

Don't you think that's interesting? He was silenced because when he did talk, he didn't speak with hope and faith.

- I wonder if God didn't want Zechariah's unbelief to ruin this miracle for him and his family.
- It goes to show that **hope and faith are fragile things and our words can protect or harm them.**

**So fast forward six months, Gabriel visits Mary,** a teenage girl from Nazareth.

She's engaged to a man named Joseph and minding her own business when an angel shows up.

**SLIDE:**

The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

<sup>29</sup> Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. **(As one would.)**

<sup>30</sup> But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> 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, <sup>33</sup> and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

**Okay, hold up? What? His kingdom will never end?**

**But like Zechariah, Mary is focused on the impossible baby part, not so much the Son of God part.**

**And she asks a very valid question,**

**SLIDE:**

<sup>34</sup> "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

**But notice that Gabriel responds differently to her, because her question has a different spirit, a different heart or motive.**

**She is responding with hope and faith.**

**SLIDE:**

<sup>35</sup> The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on 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. <sup>36</sup> Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month.

<sup>37</sup> **For no word from God will ever fail."**

**Mary responds by saying:**

**SLIDE:**

<sup>38</sup> "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

**Because of her hope and faith as she received this promise of God spoken into the 400 year void, Mary was given the choice of how to steward her hope and faith from then on.**

Zechariah lost his options because he had let himself sink into a self-protective state of cynicism, doubt and unbelief over the years.

**It's very easy to do this. Cynicism is sexier than hopefulness, and far less risky.**

But hope and faith are what attract God.

**So how *do* we hold our hearts together with hope when we experience elongated waiting or disappointment?**

**I want to share a story about a time in my life where I also sank into this state of cynicism and disbelief.**

And it's also a story about a baby and parents.

**It was about 12 and a half years ago, and Josh and I wanted to start a family.**

- Now I am not a patient person, but if you have been through this process yourself, you know.
- Dealing with infertility is a process that makes you feel every day in every month.
- And then, month after month, there is often this sinking disappointment

And you realize that no matter how much you pray or manage your nutrition or stop drinking coffee or whatever you try

In the end, you can't control the outcome.

You just can't.

And for anything that you really want or are hoping for but can't make it happen, that is a really painful experience.

**So eventually, I got cynical, about 9 months in. It wasn't a very long time, but it felt like it.**

**And in the beginning of 2010, I got a phone call from my best friend, Jazzy.**

She got straight to it. "Hey, God talked to me about you. You need to pray and repent of your disbelief about having a baby."

**Now you might be thinking, "What is this business about God talking to you or your friend? Do you believe that?"**

And the thing is, I do.

First off, because this is my friend who I have known since I was 12 and the only thing she was ever wrong about were my fashion decisions.

And to be fair, she was right about that sometimes too.

**And two, God speaks to us through his word, his Spirit and his people.**

And it resonated. I could feel it hit home because I recognized my own hopelessness and how I had converted that to disbelief.

So I was listening.

I got off the phone and sat in a chair in my living room in our little apartment and prayed,  
"God, I repent of unbelief. I turn away from it and I receive faith."

And then I heard that characteristic, quiet God voice deep in my heart say something that I can still hardly believe.  
"You will have a child, and you will name him John."  
It still gives me goosebumps.

**I was like, Whoa, God, this is kind of a lot.**

A minute ago, I was repenting of unbelief and cynicism and now you're telling me the name of my future child?

- How do I even know that was God?
- What do I do with this?
- My mind was racing.

**But I quickly realized I had just prayed for faith and now I have to use it.**

So I quietly sat on this word and the only person I told was Josh.  
It impacted him obviously.  
But I knew I could trust him with this promise I was holding.

**Two months later, I had a positive pregnancy test, and I'm gonna be honest, I was shocked. Shocked.**

Because maybe I *had* heard God.

**But still, we didn't tell anyone about this encounter with God nor the name of the baby.**

We just told people we knew that we were having a boy, which they thought was odd.  
And when he was born, we announced his name was John.

**But that's the thing about receiving a promise from God, whether something you read in the Bible or something that speaks directly to a circumstance in your life.**

Like Mary and the mysterious announcement she received, the promise thrusts us into an immediate in-between period.

Here is this miraculous thing that is going to happen, at some point in the future, and we have to sit on this knowledge and wait for it to happen.

**You can imagine Mary was thinking, "Who am I going to tell? Who will believe me?"**

*And maybe on a hard day, she thought, "Maybe I was dreaming?"*

*Who am I to be the mother of the Son of God?*

You can imagine what battling for hope and faith might have looked like for her.

**So what she does next is a pathway for those of who want to hold on to hope.**

#### **TRANSITION:**

Maybe you need hope for your future, just to believe that things in the world will turn out okay.

Maybe you need hope that something you are really longing for, like a spouse or a child or career opportunity, will finally happen.

Maybe you need hope that the work you are doing for good in the world is actually making a difference.

Maybe you need hope for a restored relationship with a friend, a spouse, a child.

Maybe you need hope that God is real or that he hears you and loves you.

**No matter where we are in life, we are in between one thing and another.**

And we always need hope for those seasons.

**So here are two things that Mary does that allow her to preserve her hope.**

**First, she goes right over to visit her cousin, Elizabeth, who is part of this miracle story.**

**The first chapter of Luke tells us that right after Gabriel visits Mary, she immediately hurried off and headed for her cousin, Elizabeth's, house.**

- Gabriel told her that Elizabeth is pregnant and so she has to see this for herself.
- She knows that Elizabeth will be a safe person to share her story with.

**Some of the time, when we are praying for and hoping for something, we tell the wrong people.**

- They are people who care about us, but they are worried for us.
- **They don't want us to get - our hopes up.**
- They don't want to see us get hurt.

**Or maybe they will accuse us of grandiosity.**

- Like who do you think you are hoping for that? Like Joseph's brothers did.

**Either way, we have to guard these dreams.**

**We have to share them with the right people who will cheer us on.**

People who are believing for their own miracles.

**When we need to hold on to hope, and we always do, it's important to surround ourselves with hopeful people.**

Because when you have an off day, they can hold you up.

**The second thing Mary does right in response to this impossible situation is she reminds herself** about who she is, who God is, and what God has done for her and others.

Through her song in Luke 1, she is telling herself the truth about God so she can ground herself when doubt comes her way.

It's also possible that Mary's song, known to us as The Magnificat, were some of the first words she spoke aloud between her visit from Gabriel and seeing Elizabeth for the first time since her pregnancy.

**She's been holding on to this news all this time, and this song comes pouring out of her, and it's her response to Elizabeth's greeting.**

You can just hear the hope and joy resonating.

**Let's listen in to Mary's song, and notice where she is speaking about herself, God and others.**

SLIDE:

Mary's Song

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said:

"My soul glorifies the Lord

<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

<sup>48</sup> for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me—

holy is his name.

<sup>50</sup> His mercy extends to those who fear him,

from generation to generation.

<sup>51</sup> He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;

he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.

<sup>52</sup> He has brought down rulers from their thrones

but has lifted up the humble.

<sup>53</sup> He has filled the hungry with good things

but has sent the rich away empty.

<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel,

remembering to be merciful

<sup>55</sup> to Abraham and his descendants forever,

**just as he promised our ancestors."**

**Mary is a shining example that one of the most important things we can do when hope is at stake is remind ourselves of what God has ALREADY done in our lives and in the world.**

Philippians 4 tells us that part of calming our anxiety, holding on to hope and joy and keeping our peace starts with reminding ourselves what God has done.

**SLIDE:**

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> **Do not be anxious about anything**, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, **with thanksgiving**, present your requests to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

<sup>8</sup> Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about (meditate on) such things."  
Philippians 4:4-8

**Mary no doubt had reason to be anxious, to doubt, to move into unbelief.**

And we all do.

**But she kept her hope alive by sharing her story and the promises she was holding onto with people who would encourage her,**

And by reminding herself who she is and who God is and what he has done for and the world.

**This is the path for all of us in these uncertain times, in-between the first arrival of Jesus and when he returns.**

We are celebrating Advent together, remembering that Jesus came the first time, born of a virgin, as he said he would.

And when we celebrate Advent, we remind ourselves, as Mary did, of all that God has done for us.

That Jesus removed the barrier to God and removed our sin from us.

But here we are, in the in-between again, waiting for Jesus to bring his kingdom to earth.

That's the ultimate hope of Advent, the hope of Christmas.

**And when we remind ourselves of all God has done for us, his redemption of humanity and all the little ways he intervenes in our lives,**

**Then we can remember to trust him and hope that he will indeed return again to make all things new.**

**So this next week, I want to invite you to tune in to your heart and to Holy Spirit, and to ask yourself two questions?**

**NEXT STEP SLIDE:**

- **Notice where do you need to hold on to hope in your life -**
  - Where have you let doubt and cynicism creep in and you might be blocking God's movement in your life.
- **And ask Holy Spirit, how can I restore hope in this area of my life?**

**Let's pray together.**

Worship team, you can come on up.