

“Make Ready a People: #morehope”

December 3, 2017

Angels Among Us series – 1st Sunday of Advent – Holy Communion

Angels Among Us...a beautiful thought and something we can all cling to, especially in times of struggles. But truly, angels have been sanitized. Somewhere along the way, angels have lost their gut punch. We think about cherubs - cute and harmless. They get wrapped up in the nostalgia of this season. We don't think about a heavenly being who knocks us on our duff with the first words of "Do not be afraid." And yet, that's what we find in the happenings around Jesus' birth.

So that's where we're going in this Advent time - looking at this encounter that ordinary folks had with these angels - these messengers of God - who had a message to share. And that message was extraordinary!

But the thing is, the message wasn't all of it. With the message came a calling that the one who received it would be a part of bringing God's purpose to fulfillment. It's not that God couldn't or wouldn't do it, but honestly, God doesn't work alone. God works in us and through us.

Zechariah had been waiting a long time. He knew the reality of waiting and hoping for a child of his own. I can only imagine that he knew of the pain and shame that Elizabeth felt. We know that he prayed about it because that's what the angel says first - that his prayer has been heard and John will be born.

There are lots of instructions for Zechariah about how to raise John, but what's so incredible is that John will help to prepare the way for the Lord. Zechariah knew the waiting and wondering about when the Messiah would come. His people had been waiting for hundreds of years. And now he's a part of how it will come to pass!

So maybe the angel's "do not be afraid" is because of the surprise of the angel's visit, but maybe there's also a sense of Zechariah's responsibility and role in how all this will happen. Even though he's been waiting so long and hoping so fervently, now he's a part of this. He has work to help God bring more hope to a people who are waiting.

Today begins the season of Advent when we prepare for the coming of Christ - both the celebration of his birth and the reality that he will come again and bring the fullness of God's reign. So we wait, but we have work to do to get ready to receive Jesus again.

Advent is a time of waiting. But I'll be honest. I don't like waiting at all. Now I'm like a lot of people when I'm waiting. My phone is in my hand scrolling through social media, checking E-mail, or sending a text. I feel like I'm getting something done while I'm waiting.

Advent, though, isn't just a time to wait passively. And yet, it's so easy for us to assume that there's nothing we can do to bring more hope, peace, joy, or love in our lives or in the world. And when we're passive, then fear can overtake us. And when we allow fear to overshadow our hope, despair sets in. Advent, though, calls us to active waiting.

Sometimes we find ourselves thinking of everything we can't do, the circumstances we can't change, the problems that are too overwhelming. It's not to say that there aren't real struggles and real pain. But we also can't sit back and believe that God doesn't need us to participate.

Perhaps we're like Zechariah who had given up hope for a child - and even for the Messiah. Except that the angel breaks into everyday life and tells him that he's a part of God's work to bring hope to the world.

There was a point this week when hope felt really hard to grasp. I know I'm supposed to be a person of perpetual hope, but with the reality of potential world conflict, allegations of sexual harassment and misconduct by people in power and authority, and many people I know hurting and struggling, hope seemed particularly elusive.

And then Wednesday night came. We had a prayer service here in this space prepared for this Advent season. Besides a calming space, there's something very calming and solemn about gathering together, speaking our hearts' truth, and lighting candles. It was hopeful. Even as we shared lots of prayer requests, I felt God's presence and was grateful for the witness of those who gathered.

I was grateful that we could lift up those stories and encounters that offered us hope. Steve Hill became a messenger for me when he mentioned La'Darius Jefferson. You may know the name or maybe you've heard the story. Jefferson is the quarterback of Muskegon Big Red football. You probably have heard by now that the Big Reds are state champions after their win against Farmington Hills Harrison last weekend.

I know that means a lot to a lot of people, but I found a reminder of #morehope - not because of the game, but because of what happened afterwards. La'Darius Jefferson made a point to go to the Farmington Hills team after the game and offer words of encouragement.

And it wasn't simply about losing a football game; it was about the reality of his community - our community. Jefferson has lost games before, but he also lost his friend to gun violence. He said to the other team, "We know how it feels to lose. In my city, we lose people every day – gun violence, gang violence, a lot of bad stuff going on...but it's an amazing and beautiful place." Jefferson told them to "Love each other up, stick together, be a brotherhood."

La'Darius Jefferson was a messenger who brought good news, and there was another story that touched me. Mikayla Holmgren won two awards in the Miss Minnesota pageant. She is the first person with Down Syndrome to enter the pageant, and her presence made an enormous impact. Her message of perseverance and overcoming obstacles - many times from the comments of other people - is inspiring.

I found hope in watching our local students sing joyfully at the Singing Christmas Tree. Yesterday, Ana was a part of a string quartet that spent the morning touring some local care facilities to share music of the season. Brad and Janice Hilleary sent a picture of little Amie reunited with his parents. In all of it, people were bringing hope, and I was reminded that our their gifts really can make an impact.

So I'm hopeful, but I realize again that you and I have a part to play in bringing more hope. This season - this holy Advent time - can be a time to remember that God is making a way and that God is making us ready for what's ahead. And in the midst of the changes or uncertainties, we are messengers of more hope.

Yes, I believe there are angels among us. God is making us ready to be messengers of hope, flying in the face of fear, in an ever-changing world. May God help us.

Let's pray together as we prepare to come to the Lord's table: Paul's letter to the Hebrews includes a wonderful word: "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it." As we enter this season of Advent, it is right and good that we gather at the table of Jesus Christ, whose ministry was centered in showing hospitality—inviting us all, no matter whether we feel at home in our faith or at times feel like strangers, to know the grace of God that is already and always awaiting us if we will but open to it. Let us set aside any hesitation, any obstacle to the invitation. In this silence, we offer to God our confession of the ways we turn away from the fullness of love.

Silent prayer of confession

Know this: The things you have confessed before God, and even those things you have no words for at this moment, are all being lifted away on the wings of God's love. Be assured of your freedom as forgiven and beloved children of our Most Gracious God, Thanks be to God! **Amen!**

BEFORE "HARK!"

Each week we start our worship with an Advent hymn/song and we close with a Christmas carol. Traditionally the church waits until Christmas to sing these songs but in our day, these songs ring through the air on the radio, in stores—just about anywhere

holiday tunes are happening. So we will take our encounters with these as “messengers,” foretelling the good news of the presence of God coming once again in Jesus Christ.

This week, when you hear “Hark! the Herald Angels Sing,” stop for a moment and breathe a prayer that hope will invade the world like a chorus of angels descending on humankind.

Let's sing together #240...

Mission to the Messengers - SHOW SLIDE

Every week we'll have a mission if we choose to accept it. It is a mission with a message. So I'm inviting you to be “hash taggers of hope” and to share our quote meme for the week from our church Facebook page to your Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or Snapchat accounts and hashtag it #morehope. If that all sounds like Greek to you and you are not into social media, I invite you to share these words with someone: write it down and mail it to someone, give it to someone, take a photo of it and send it in a message—whatever you can do in whatever channels of communication are available to you.

"We must accept finite disappointment, but never lose infinite hope." - Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. #morehope #donotbeafraid