

The Way of Jesus: A Journey Through Luke
Part 7: Leap

Countryside Community Church
Rev. Chris Alexander
November 29, 2015

Scripture: Luke 1:5-20

I. Advent

Today is a whole new year! And I can really feel it this year, can't you? The snow and ice fell over the weekend, and somehow all the deacon elves came in over the weekend and magically decorated the whole place for us to walk into this morning! It's wonderful isn't it?

Advent is that season in the church calendar that gets us started. The color changes from the green we have been seeing for the last 26 weeks, to this beautiful purple. In my last congregation, Advent was celebrated in this beautiful shade of blue instead of the purple, but whatever color the congregation chooses, it's a great relief from the green we see for the majority of the church year! And that's one of the clues that tells you something exciting is about to happen! Anticipation is in the air!

This Advent wreath helps us mark our time during Advent. The Advent wreath originated among German Lutherans in the 16th Century, but the modern version of the wreath that we recognize wasn't developed until the 19th century. The wreath we recognize has 4 candles that surround the white candle in the middle, which is the Christ candle. The 4 surrounding candles on the wreath represent the 4 Sundays within the Advent season, and three of the four are purple (or blue).

The third candle is always pink, because it represents the week where Mary sings her response to the message from the angel that she is about to give birth to the "Son of the Highest." This song is called "The Magnificat," which literally means "My Soul Magnifies." This third Sunday in Advent is traditionally called "Gaudete Sunday" which literally means "Rejoice!" which is the first word of the latin mass for the third Sunday in Advent, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice." This is from Psalm 85.

Originally, in the fifth century, Advent was a 40 day season to prepare us for Christmas, making it the counterpoint of Lent, the season that prepares us for Easter. The season was reduced to 4 weeks in the ninth century, but the sense that it is a season of preparation and waiting still continues. Gaudete Sunday is the Sunday where all are encouraged to celebrate and rejoice in the upcoming redemption through the breaking in of God into the world. In church language, this upcoming event is called the incarnation, which literally means embodied in flesh, or taking on flesh. In other words, becoming human. The fifth candle on the Advent wreath is the white, Christ candle, which is lit on Christmas Eve and throughout the twelve days of the Christmas Season to commemorate this incarnation of God.

There are many variations how Advent is celebrated in the history of the church and throughout the differing cultures of the world. In some churches, the advent wreath candles are all red. Some churches include the middle Christ candle and others do not. In some Protestant churches, the candles represent *hope, peace, love* and *joy*, with the third candle, representing love as the greatest of all the qualities of life.

While we listen to some marvelous music from our guest Bill Ritchie, let us feel ourselves embraced in the splendor of these advent decorations and think about our own family traditions for celebrating the season of advent...

Music offering: Arioso from Contata BVV 156 by Bach.

Scripture Reading: Luke 1:5-20

II. Believing the Unbelievable

"There is no use trying," said Alice; "One can't believe impossible things." "I dare say you haven't had much practice," Said the Queen. "When I was your age, I always did it for a half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast!" - Lewis Carroll

So Zachariah is a priest. Carrying out his priestly duties in the temple. It was finally his turn to burn the incense in the Holy of Holies of the temple. A once-in-a-lifetime event. He was excited. What an honor. He goes in to light the incense, and an angel of the Lord appears there beside the incense. And what does Zachariah do? He is paralyzed in fear. What? Isn't he a priest? Isn't this what he has trained his whole life for? What did he expect to find in the Sanctuary of God? But he is paralyzed in fear.

The angel says to him, "But the angel reassured him, "Don't fear, Zachariah. Your prayer has been heard. Elizabeth, your wife, will bear a son by you. You are to name him John. You're going to leap like a gazelle for joy, and not only you—many will delight in his birth. He'll achieve great stature with God." Wow, how's that for good news? You and your wife have been unable to have children this whole time and finally God has answered your prayer. You are expecting a child, a son, who will be called John. "You will leap for joy like a gazelle," the angel tells him, but does he? Nope. Zachariah responds, "Do you expect me to believe this? I'm an old man and my wife is an old woman."

How astounding is this? A priest, trains his whole life for his one shot at the Holy of Holies, he finally gets it, and he's paralyzed with fear, and then on top of it all, dishonors the angel by not believing what God has in store for he and his wife. In response, the angel strikes Zachariah speechless until the actual birth of the baby. Can you just imagine the scene when Zachariah comes out of the sanctuary, and everyone asks him to tell them how it was, and Zachariah, so badly wants to tell them, but can't speak? He's probably all flailing his arms and pointing to his vocal chords, trying to play a type of charades with the crowd, trying to get them to guess that he actually saw an angel of God, and that he's going to be a dad! I always wondered how he told Elizabeth the good news! She probably already knew!

But that's the whole point of Advent, I think. Practicing believing in the unbelievable. I remember coming to Countryside well trained in theology, church history, worship, preaching, and pastoral care, several years of practical ministry behind me, and 5 years experience as a pastor of a congregation. I had lots of experience in prayer, and led many through instruction of prayer. I knew God was out there somewhere listening to all these prayers, but I had not ever really experienced the power of prayer, and listening for God to speak to me, before I came here and learned that from all of you. I remember

telling a story about how important prayer was becoming to my life to everyone at a staff meeting one day, saying "Prayer! Who knew?" It wasn't until I actually started practicing believing in the unbelievable that prayer became so powerful in my life.

I think many of us are like this. As a concept we're good with the whole God thing. In fact we think being a Christian is a really good thing for all parts of our lives. It's great to know that God is out there somewhere loving us and keeping us safe, healthy and happy. But what happens when you actually come face to face with God? How do you think you would react if it were you in the Holy of Holies standing with the angel Gabriel? I gotta tell you, I nearly fainted at meeting Don Henley from the Eagles, I'm sure I would not have done well meeting an actual angel of God. But maybe, just maybe, it's all true! Then what?

Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister and author, has written a book called *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Comedy, Tragedy and Fairy Tale*. Buechner tells us that we view the inevitable part of life as the tragedy, while the unexpected part of life is the comedy. The fairy tale part is that the unexpected actually happens; That the Divine actually see the comedy as the inevitable and the tragedy as the unexpected; That God seems to constantly be doing impossible things with impossible people. Buechner writes,

"It is perhaps this aspect of the fairy tale that gives it its greatest power over us, this sense we have that in that world, as distinct from ours, the marvelous and impossible thing truly happens. ...Beasts talk and flowers come alive and lobsters quadrille in the world of the fairy tale, and nothing is apt to be as it seems. And if this is true of the creatures the hero meets on his quest, it is also true of the hero himself who at any moment may be changed into a beast or a stone or a king or have his heart turned to ice. Maybe above all, they are tales about transformation, where all creatures are revealed in the end as what they truly are."

Zachariah needed practice in believing the unbelievable, and the angel Gabriel gave him nine months of silence to do exactly that. How do we practice believing impossible things? While the music plays, let us practice a little ourselves. What change in your life or in the world would you like to believe can happen?

III. Hope, Watch, Prepare, Wait

Our world is so messed up – there are so many changes I would like to see - but there is still hope. It takes time, but the unbelievable happens, all around us, all the time. Eric spoke in a sermon recently about how things like marriage equality, once believed never possible, became possible in a very short amount of time once our minds became open to the possibility that it *might* happen. All kinds of impossible people are living into impossible transformations in life, everyday.

Ty Schenzel and his wife Terri are great examples of practicing the impossible. Ty and Terri started the non-profit organization called Hope Center for Kids in an attempt to transform the north Omaha area, by helping kids find hope in themselves and their community. Ty believed that when you give kids hope then they have a future, and relationships are possible again. Ty says,

"Kids who struggle with hopelessness have to have the hope that what they see today is not how their future will look. The future has to look a bit brighter in their heart. I think that's how God wired not only the hearts of children, but the hearts of adults too. I want every kid I meet to have hope about the future. I want them to think of the future and be excited. I want them to have hope

about marrying someone they love and want to spend the rest of their lives with. I want them to dream about what professions they want to pursue and actually believe it can happen. I want kids to have hope in their little hearts about a being a dad or a mom someday. I want kids to think about the house they'll live in when they grow up. I want the kids at the Hope Center to be dreamers. I want to throw kerosene on their ideas and make them burst forth. Dreams do come true, and I want to see their dreams become reality. I want to be known as a man who believes in hopes and dreams, even impossible ones. I remember one Sunday when my family and I went to Chilies after church. As we were being escorted to our table, someone from church recognized us from a distance. She said, "Hope Man!" like, "Hey, there's the Hope Man." I like that, because that's what I feel in my heart. Hope is Life. You have to have hope."

Ty and Terri Schenzel were killed in a car accident earlier this year and they are greatly missed in the community as people who practice the impossible everyday. During their funeral at Christ Community, this video was played as part of their memorial. Let's listen to Ty himself: *Ty Schenzel Funeral Video*
Amen. Let us go in hope, practicing the impossible, throughout Advent, and always. Amen.

IV. Communion (11:00)

Communion remembers and continually practices the impossible: that God loves us and desires us to be restored to that which we were created to be. Calling us by name to be most fully who we are. Frederick Buechner writes, "Yet for all of it's confusion and wildness, it is a world where the battle goes ultimately to the good, who live happily ever after, and where in the long run everybody, good and evil alike, becomes known by his true name."