

Hope
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Luke 3:1-6

3:1 In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, ²during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. ³He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, ⁴as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. ⁵Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; ⁶and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

John the Baptist shouldn't be in the Advent story. At least, not as an adult. John is only a few months older than Jesus.

Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, and Zechariah, John's parents, should be in the Advent story... if Advent were solely focused on the events leading up to Jesus' birth. You see, John is Jesus' second cousin... maybe once removed? Which we know because Luke chapter 1 -- where all the Advent action happens -- begins with the story of an older Elizabeth becoming pregnant with John after years of infertility and Zechariah losing his voice because he dared to question the angel Gabriel. Then, after Mary's encounter with Gabriel, which she just totally accepts at face value, Mary goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth and John starts doing back flips in Elizabeth's womb. Then Elizabeth and Mary start singing, because apparently Luke's Christmas story is a musical.

Seriously, it's a musical!

(prop: Luke is a Musical: CHANGE MY MIND)

- Elizabeth sings out: "Hail Mary, full of Grace!"
- Then Mary sings, "My soul proclaims your greatness oh God, and my Spirit rejoices in you!," at least according to composer Marty Haugen (Lk 1:46-55)
- Then when John is born, the first thing Zechariah says when he gets his voice back is, "Blessed be the Lord God, of Israel!"...if Bob Fitts wrote the music. (Blessed Be the Lord God Almighty, Maranatha)
- The Angels sing, "Glo- oooo-o-oooo-o-oooo-oria to Go-od in the highest," to the Shepherds, (Lk 1:8-14) according to a traditional French carol.

- Then, Anna and Simeon praise God when Jesus is named and presented in the Temple. (Lk 1:21-38) “Lord dismiss us with thy blessing, fill our hearts with joy and peace” (UMH 671)

So it should be zero percent surprising that John comes on the scene in chapter 3 singing, “Pre-e-e-pare ye the way of the Lord! Pre-e-e-pare ye the way of the Lord!” At least according to Godspell.

Because what is more hopeful for a “people living in darkness who have seen a great light” (Is 9:2) than a musical!

Hope my friends, is an act of defiance of the systems of injustice that would prefer that we give up.

You see, it would be easier, FOR THEM, if we gave up.

It would be easier if we gave up, for the real estate investors who wrote a loophole into our tax laws that allows them to write off the value of empty, overpriced, luxury apartments that few can afford, rather than having to lower the rent.

It would be easier if we gave up, and just accepted mentally ill folks living on our streets instead of pushing our lawmakers into adequately funding mental health care and supportive housing.

It would be easier for the corporations who don't want to invest in green technologies, if we ignore the suffering that climate change is already causing and accept our doom as inevitable. Did you know that, “this summer, the people in the nation of Jordan, named after the river in this week's scripture, experienced unprecedented shortages of fresh water as a result of drought, population growth, and geopolitics. The Jordan River itself is running at less than 10% its usual levels, and much of that is diverted by Jordan's upstream neighbors, Israel and Syria. The wealthy in Jordan are purchasing additional private water tanks to store the life-sustaining liquid, but those who can't afford it are left to beg for water from neighbors and ration hand-washing. (Nichola Torbett, *Enfleshed Commentary* for 12.4.2022).

It would be easier if we gave up, for those who run our American “justice” system, who don't feel like doing the hard work of addressing crucial issues like gun control and qualified immunity. And for those of you who might think I'm being too political, my husband was a law enforcement officer for 23 years, he carried a badge and a gun. Bad cops make everyone unsafe, including the good cops.

Whenever we are tempted to despair an excellent question to ask is,
Who benefits from us giving up?
Who benefits from us giving up?

And

Who benefits from us continuing to hope?
Who benefits from us continuing to hope?

Because, you see, hope is the emotional jet fuel that gets us out of bed to volunteer at Family Promise all night.

Hope is believing that God can, even when we can't... yet...

Hope is the song that we sing when the paths are crooked and rough and mountains are impossibly high, and yet we sing:

“We shall overcome, we shall overcome, we shall overcome someday!” (UMH 533)

Hope is proclaiming, “The King of love my shepherd is, whose goodness faileth never, I nothing lack if I am his, and he is mine forever” (UMH 138) because David wrote the 23rd Psalm when he was hiding in a cave from King Saul and starving.

Hope is watching everything on earth go wrong and still choosing to sing,

“I know that my redeemer liveth, and that he shall stand at the later day, upon the earth, upon the earth.”

Hope is looking with clear eyes upon the truth of what is happening: death, violence, injustice, climate destruction and choosing...

“Yet I believe beyond believing,
that life can spring from death;
that hope can flower from our grieving;
that we can catch our breath;
and turn transfixed by faith” (Each Winter as the Year Grows Older, William and Annabeth Gay, 1971 United Church Press)

As a meditation on hope, I offer you the complete text of this song, Each Winter As the Year Grows Older.