



Sunday, December 3, 2023

Speaker: Pastor John VanderWindt

Scripture: Luke 2:8-20

Sermon Title: Hope and Loneliness

Hope. It's something which we all need. It needs to be part of our life. For this Advent season as we look at preparing ourselves for the birth of our Savior, we want to look at hope and how hope plays into the lives of different people within scripture. Also we need to see how hope plays into our lives and our situations as well? I invite you to turn with me this morning to **Luke 2**. We're going to begin today looking at this concept of hope by looking at the life of the shepherds. The story in which we just heard our shepherd who had this great desire to meet a king and how God chose to begin His introduction of His Son, the King of kings, to some shepherds nearby. In Luke 2, we're going to begin in verse eight, which is where the story of the shepherds begins. So just before that, we have the birth of Christ already.

Luke 2:8-20

8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. **9** An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. **10** But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. **11** Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. **12** This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, **14** "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." **15** When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. **17** When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, **18** and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. **19** But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. **20** The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

This is the Word of the Lord. Let's pray. Dear Lord, we thank You for Your Word. Lord, we thank You that within Your Word, You demonstrate Your great love for us. Within your Word, You show us how You come to where we are to change us to who You've created us to be. Lord, this morning we ask that You may also meet each of us here in this space. We know, Lord, that You are here. Lord, may we see You. May we hear You. May our hearts be molded by You, that we too may live in hope. Lord, may the words I speak be of You and may nothing of me come out, Lord. That You may be honored and glorified through all of this because You deserve all the glory. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Before we get to the story of the shepherds, we need to talk a little bit about this word hope. It is, after all, the name of our church, Living Hope. We have this word 'living' in front of it because hope is not something that is dead. In fact, when we look in scripture and we turn to **1 Peter 1:3&4**, it says, "**3** Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, **4** and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you,"

It is that living hope. But what does hope mean? When we talk about hope, many of us in today's world get into this concept of... You know, for me, I can only say I was alive the last time the Leafs won the Stanley Cup, but I hope they win it again someday. Right? That's a wish. Or we can say, "I hope for Christmas this (whatever you wish for) happens this year." And hope has become common with or synonymous with the word 'wish.' Like, "Maybe this will happen. Maybe this will come true." And so for many people, hope is this thing which is like, "Yeah, we can dream about it but we don't really expect it to happen." But in scripture when God says the concept of hope, it is a real expectation because this is coming from God.

In **Romans 15:13**, we read this, "**13** May the God of hope... " May the God of hope. Let that sink in for a moment. God is our source of hope. When we think of hope, we need to think about what God hopes for. What does God know is going to happen? What is God going to promise us? So going back to **Romans 15:13**, it says, "**13** May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." So if we really want to build our hope into a true expectation of what God has in store for us, we need to begin with God.

Some of you might be thinking about last week when Bob talked about solitude beginning with God and spending time with God. When you are in that place of solitude with God, the God of hope, then you too are filled with hope. And God's Word comes to us. In John 1:14, we read that Jesus is the Word and the Word became flesh. And in Luke 2, we read the story of Jesus being born and the shepherds are told about this birth. They are told about the Word of God and they have an opportunity to meet Him.

But we first need to talk about the shepherds and the sheep. If you raise sheep, I don't think we have any sheep herders in our congregation, sheep are beautiful animals. Most of us benefit from it. How many of you are wearing something that's made of wool? Right? We benefit from sheep. But there is something about sheep. Sheep are very easily distracted and they will wander off wherever and sheep need direction. The other thing about sheep is that sheep don't really have much of a natural protection zone. If you come across a sheep, they're not going to... I don't know what they'll do... they'll baaaah. But that ain't going to scare anybody off, right?

Sheep also need protection. And yet, when we think of who we are as people, we realize that we, as people, are easily distracted. We easily wander off from what we should be doing to other things which kind of catch our eye and we go, "Oh, that's kind of cool. Let's go over here." We are also easily preyed on, maybe not physically, but spiritually we are easily preyed on. So in scripture, we are often referred to as sheep.

For example, in **Psalm 100:3**, it says, "**3** Know that the Lord is God. It is he who made us, and we are his people, the sheep of his pasture." So I want you this morning to kind of imagine yourself as a sheep, understanding that you need direction, understanding that you need protection. Then I want you to imagine our Father, the Lord, as our shepherd. In **Isaiah 40:11**, it says this, "**11** He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young." **Ezekiel 34:11,15&16** says (paraphrase), "I myself (God) will search for my sheep and look after them... I myself will tend my sheep and have them lie down, ... I will search for the lost and bring back the strays. I will bind up the injured and strengthen the weak."

God here in Ezekiel is already telling the people, "I will come and I will search you out. I will find you. I will hold you. I will keep you. And we know **Psalm 23**, which says, "**1** The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing." Or some other version says, "I shall not want." God as our shepherd. And we celebrate Christmas coming up and in **John 10:14-16** Jesus himself says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and my sheep know me. Just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd."

Here's the amazing thing about shepherds. Shepherds lead their flocks. And here's the amazing thing about sheep. Sheep know the shepherd's voice. The shepherd does not need to run after them like cows and herd them from the back. A shepherd will walk in front of the sheep and will lead them to the places where they need to go. And when sheep get distracted, the shepherd will call them and the sheep will know the shepherd's voice. But how do they know the shepherd's voice? It's because they've spent time with the shepherd.

So here we are now in **Luke 2**. We're in this place in which the shepherds are in this field and, as was portrayed, they are lonely. There is a group of them. But they are, as was said, outcasts. They are not welcomed within society. They're seen as unclean. So people often avoid the shepherd.

But here's the unique thing about the shepherds, especially the shepherds who were around Bethlehem, is that the sheep which they took care of were the sheep used for sacrifices at the temple. So people coming to Jerusalem and would want to bring a sacrifice before the Lord of the temple, would purchase sheep that were raised in Bethlehem.

So here are the shepherds who are seen as outcasts but yet they have one of the most significant jobs within all of Judaism because they are raising the sheep for which the sacrifice can be made. And God, in His wisdom, understands that that person needs to be told about the king because Jesus will become the sacrificial lamb. And so it is appropriate that the first people to hear about the sacrificial lamb that is being born are the shepherds. They are the first to know that the Messiah has come. That the sacrificial lamb of God is first introduced to the shepherds. And there they are.

So they are at that space in which they are there but yet they are also in a place in which they're very lonely. In **Micah 7:7**, it says this, "7 But as for me, I watch in hope for the Lord, I wait for God my Savior; my God will hear me." That's the life of a shepherd. But maybe for some of us, that's our life as well. Maybe we are at a place where we are thinking, "Lord, it has been so long." And I am in this place where I go, "Lord, I am lonely. I am disheartened. I am saddened by what's happening around me. It seems like everything in life is against me. I am battling an illness which cannot be cured. Lord, where's the hope? Where's the hope in that space? How, Lord, can this be? If you are my Shepherd and things are not working, why, Lord?"

And sometimes, as Bob said last week, loneliness or solitude is forced upon us and we are alone in that space. But it is a space in which we are invited to meet the God of hope. Many of us, when we are alone, try to escape. And there are many ways in which we can escape. Social media. Other addictive behaviors. And we look for something to bring us out of this piece and say, "There's got to be something better. How do I get out of this?" And God at Christmas says, "I invite you to come to meet a child. A child who promises to walk alongside you in those places of loneliness. A child who promises to be there and to say, 'You need to understand there is a hope. There is a living hope. (As we read 1 Peter at the beginning.) And it is stored up for you.'"

And for some of us, that might be the hardest part of waiting. Waiting is something we don't do very well nowadays. Many of us are not very patient anymore. You know, there was a time when you just knew that when you sent something to someone else, it would take time to get there. We know how fast the postal service worked. And if it had to cross the border, it would take even more time. And you just knew that. Now we have email. So we send an email out and we're waiting and going, "Well, how come they haven't responded yet? Well, maybe they haven't opened it yet. Well okay, I'll give them another 10 minutes. Like, this is pretty urgent. I need a response! I need to know what they're doing tomorrow!" We don't wait well. Sometimes God says, "You need to wait. Wait in that place where you are and allow me to fill you with hope. Allow me to come to you and to show you what I am doing." In fact, many of us are so busy that we don't even see what God is doing around us anymore.

This past week in our youth group, we also began an Advent series and each of our youth were given a jar. On the front of the jar, there are two words... waiting and watching. We learned that for the average person, we spend up to six months waiting at red lights in our entire lifetime. And you're thinking, "Well that's depressing." If you think about the amount of time that you spend each day waiting for things, how do you use that time? So our youth were encouraged to say at the end of the day, "Where were you waiting?" And then they had a second question. "Where did you see God working today?" You know, those times when the light wasn't red and was green. Maybe God was working so that you could get through.

There are times of waiting. And Advent is this season of waiting. So often when we're lonely and when we're hurting and when we're sick or when we're in grief, it is a time of waiting. And the God of hope says, "I want to give you hope. I want to give you an expectation to know that I am there and that I will always be there." We read **1 Peter 3:15**. It says this, "**15** But in your hearts revere Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect."

We have met the Savior. When the shepherds heard the angels singing, they gathered together and in **Luke 2:15**, the last part says, "**15** ... the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

After God revealed Himself to the shepherds, they had a choice. They could have said, "Wow, that was amazing! What a wonderful concert. And to think, we are the special invitees.. the VIPs... front row seats, and we got to see it all. That was amazing! Now back to the sheep." They didn't have to go anywhere. They could have just stayed in awe that they were there. "Like, wow." And I think for most of us, we would go, "Whoa. I just had a chorus of angels singing to me. Like, I need to just bask in that for a little bit, reflect on that, and just absorb that because that was amazing!" But that's not what the shepherds did. They said, "Let us go to Bethlehem and see what happened."

Here's one of the difficult things. We think about the shepherds just going there and it's like, "Okay, sure." But for the shepherds to go to Bethlehem and to walk into this place was not an easy thing. They would not have been welcomed in Bethlehem. They would not have been welcomed into a place like this. For them to go there it's not like, "Hey, this is great! Let's go! I'm sure we can just show them our VIP tickets. We took a screenshot of the angels singing so here we are. We got our tickets. Come on in." Right? They are going to a place where they are not welcome. Or at least they think they are not welcome. And for some of us, that is the challenge. To go to another place to meet the Savior.

Every Sunday, we gather here in church as a community to meet God and to hear from Him. For some of us, it takes a lot of work to come into community and to be present with other people. And God says to us this morning, "You need to hear that I know. You need to hear that in your space where it's hard to come together, I am with you. And I will give you what you need and I will meet you there." God invites us to that place.

God invites us to a place, when we are deeply in sorrow or in pain or in loneliness, God says, "I want to meet you. I want you to go into this place that you've been forced to and I want you to know that I am there with you." In **Psalm 42** and in **Psalm 43**, David ends both Psalms with this verse, "Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God."

The hope is not a wish. The hope is a promise. Putting your hope in God is a promise from God that says, "I will be there." And David wrote this Psalm before Jesus came. The other verses which we read from Isaiah and Ezekiel were long before Jesus came but they knew the promise of the Messiah was coming. And they put in their hope, knowing it would come.

God says to us this morning, "I invite you to put your hope in me. No matter what is going on in your life. If it is a joyous moment, celebrate and praise with God. If you are in a place of pain or a place of sorrow, or wherever you are now, God also says, "I invite you to put your hope in me and I promise I will meet you." And sometimes it's hard for us to see that promise and to know that it is there, but let's go back to the story of the shepherds for a moment. The angels came to the shepherds and they told them about the promise. And then there was this huge choir singing together, which says in **Luke 2:14**, "14 Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

When we come to the God of hope, God says, "I promise I will be with you." But God also says this, "There will be peace within your heart." The situation may not be solved. You may still be lonely, but there is a peace there that comes from knowing that your hope is not a wish. Your hope in God is a promise that He will meet you where you're at. He didn't tell the shepherds, "Hey, shepherds, come to Bethlehem and then I'll let you know what's going on." He met the shepherds in the fields where they were. And He said, "I've got to tell you. My promise has come. Go check it out. And when you do, you will know that there is peace for you as well." So put your hope in God.

There was a list of questions which go out every week. In these lists of questions, last week, Danielle included a quote by Henri Nouwen which says this, "To live a spiritual life, we must first find the courage to enter the desert of our loneliness and change it by gentle and persistent efforts into a garden of solitude. However, the movement from loneliness to solitude is the beginning of any spiritual life because it is the movement from the restless senses to the restful spirit, from the outward-reaching cravings to the inward-reaching search from the fearful clinging to the fearless play."

God is inviting us this Christmas to spend time with Him during this Advent time of waiting. Also, be watching and restoring your hope in Christ. At the beginning of the service, we lit a candle, as we will every week for Advent. But maybe you have candles in your house. It may be a helpful reminder for you during this Christmas season. You too can be intentional about lighting the candle. Within the Advent wreath, we have in the center what we call the Christ candle, which we light on Christmas Day.

As we wait, you too can have a candle and you can light a candle which allows you to be in that space, which allows you to sing with the group of angels in **Luke 2:14**, which says, "**14** Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." May you too this Christmas strengthen your hope and feel God's peace. But you need to know this. We can't do it on our own. We need Christ to walk with us every day. And we know that, "When I fear my faith will fail, Christ will hold me fast. When the tempter would prevail, He will hold me fast. I could never keep my hold through life's fearful path. For my love is often cold. He must hold me fast. He will hold me fast. For my savior loves me so. He will hold me fast."

Let's pray. Dear Lord, we thank You that You hold us. Lord, we thank You that You are the God of hope. Lord, you are our source of hope. Lord, You invite us to meet You in that space. In whatever space we may be in. Lord, we thank You that You meet us in that space as well. And Lord, that You are the giver of peace, that we too may experience that when we put our hope in You, we may experience the peace of knowing that You are with us, no matter where we are or what we're doing. Lord, thank You for loving us so much that You came as your Son that we may love You in return. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Know that whatever you are going through, Christ will hold you fast. Last Thursday, some of us were here to watch a film called, 'I Still Believe.' In that film, Melissa Camp, who was suffering, said this, "I have learned that suffering doesn't destroy faith. It refines it." And that's what hope is. Hope is the refinement of faith. Maybe some of us this morning find ourselves in a place thinking, "I would really like to know more about this hope. This hope that can give me peace. This hope that can give me life." And if that is you, then I invite you after this next song or after church, to come on forward. There'll be some people here who will meet you and we'd love to share with you about having that hope. We invite you now to extend your hands and to receive this blessing from God.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Him. So that you may overflow by the power of the Holy Spirit. And to Him who is able to keep you and to present you before His glorious presence, without fault and with great joy to the only God our Savior be glory, majesty, power and authority through Jesus Christ our Lord. Both now and forevermore. Amen.

Transcribed by: *Liza Perry*