

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS NOW HOPE LIKE A RAINBOW NOVEMBER 29 2009  
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
M. KENT MILLARD

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. Advent means "coming" and today we begin the preparation for the coming of Christ into our lives at Christmas.

The theme for the first Sunday in Advent is "hope" because the coming to Christ into our world gives us renewed hope for the future and the birth of a baby is always a sign of hope for the future.

Luke begins his Gospel by telling us about the amazing and miraculous births of two baby boys.

In Luke chapter one, Luke tells us about Zachariah, an elderly priest in the temple in Jerusalem, and his wife Elizabeth who had no children. An angel of God appeared to Zachariah and told him that even in their old age, Elizabeth would conceive and bear a son who would be named John and the one to prepare the way for the coming of the Christ.

Here is what Luke says about John's birth in Luke chapter one.

Read Luke 1:57-58; 66. *Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbours and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.* FOR, INDEED, THE HAND OF THE LORD WAS WITH HIM.

Then Luke tells us about how an angel of the Lord also came to Mary and told her that she also would conceive and bear a son and would name him Jesus. Luke also tells us that Mary visited her aunt Elizabeth and stayed with her while they were both going through their pregnancies.

In Luke 2 we are told about the actual birth of Jesus to Mary.

Read Luke 2:6-7; 10-12. *While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.'* TO YOU IS BORN THIS DAY IN THE CITY OF DAVID A SAVIOUR, WHO IS THE MESSIAH, THE LORD.

LET US PRAY.

Do you remember the moment when one of your children or grandchildren was born into this world?

When our son, Kendall, was born I got dizzy and faint and the nurse asked me to leave the room before I passed out so I wasn't in the room when Kendall was born. I was down the hall lying on a sofa and drinking water to avoid fainting. I was not the strong husband supporting his wife that I had hoped to be during the birth of our first child.

However, our daughter, Koretta, invited Minnietta and I to both be in the hospital room with her and her husband when their children were born. It was a special gift in our lives to be there and to see each new born baby and to hear them cry. And this time I didn't faint.

When Koretta and Eddie's third child, Taylor, was born she gave a good loud cry, was wrapped in a blanket and taken immediately to a bassinet near her mother's bed.

I went over to the bassinette where Taylor was and she just looked at me intently with her big, bright, beautiful brown eyes. It was a holy moment for me as it seemed like an angel from God was looking intently at me and blessing me with her presence. I was overwhelmed with a feeling of thanksgiving and joy for this beautiful angel sent to us from God.

The first thing that came into my mind was to say these words to her:

TAYLOR, JESUS LOVES YOU THIS I KNOW FOR THE BIBLE TELLS ME SO  
LITTLE ONES TO HIM BELONG, THEY ARE WEAK BUT HE IS STRONG.  
YES, JESUS LOVES YOU, YES, JESUS LOVES YOU, YES, JESUS LOVES YOU,  
THE BIBLE TELLS ME SO.

I was in tears by the time I finished saying these words to Taylor because I felt the love of God coming to us through her life and I felt the love of Christ for all the little children of the world.

Do you remember how you felt when you first saw your new born son, daughter or grandchild? I suspect that most of us have feelings of awe and wonder when we see a new born child for the first time.

I wonder how Elizabeth and Zachariah and Mary and Joseph felt when they first saw their new born sons. What did they think when they first held these babies in their arms and looked into their eyes?

The Gospel of Luke tells us that John the Baptist and Jesus were related to each other through their mothers. Luke simply says that Mary and Elizabeth were relatives but some early traditions say that Mary's mother and Elizabeth were sisters so that would make Mary a niece to Elizabeth. Luke also tells us that Mary came to stay with Elizabeth when they were both pregnant so John and Jesus were born close to the same time and were related to each other.

Luke also tells us that both the birth of John and the birth of Jesus were a sign to hope to the people around them.

The people in Jerusalem rejoiced when the elderly couple Elizabeth and Zachariah gave birth to John and they believed his birth was a sign of hope for the future and that God would do something great through him.

When Mary gave birth to Jesus in a stable in Bethlehem, angels appeared to shepherds in a field and told them that the birth of Jesus was a sign of joy, hope and new life for the people of Israel because he would be the long awaited Messiah born to set his people free.

You see, when John and Jesus were born they were both seen as signs of hope for a better future for the people of Israel and ultimately for all people.

I once read that every baby born is God's sign of hope for the future. God keeps sending new babies into the world to give us a vision for a brighter future because every child has the potential to bring new life into our world.

During Advent, we thank God for the gift of a baby named John and the gift of a baby named Jesus who God used to bring new hope into the world and to help us experience the living presence of God in our lives today.

The people of Israel lived in discouraging times and they needed a rebirth of hope. Today we also live in the midst of discouraging times and we also need a rebirth of hope.

The people of Israel lived in the midst of war and conflict and today we live in the midst of war and conflict around our world. The people of Israel lived in the midst of economic problems and poverty and we live in the midst of economic problems and poverty. The people of Israel lived in the midst of serious divisions among themselves and we live in the midst of serious divisions among us as well.

It is in times like these that God reminds us of the birth of a baby who came to give us hope for a better future, and the gift of hope helps to create a better future for everyone.

What does our world need now? The truth is that we all need a rebirth of hope in our lives.

Our problem today is that so many people have become so cynical, critical and bitter about everything that it seems like they are trying to pull us into the pit of despair.

We need Christmas again this year. We need to experience a rebirth of hope in our lives as individuals, as a nation and as a world.

Emily Dickinson once put it this way: WHEN HOPE DIES, LIFE IS A BROKEN-WINGED BIRD THAT CANNOT FLY.

When hope dies, when we become cynical and critical about life and the future, we become like a broken winged bird that cannot fly. We cannot soar and reach our full potential unless we have a rebirth of hope in our lives.

Hope is fundamentally an attitude we choose to take about the future. Hope is not based on how well things are going now. Hope is the attitude we choose to have about the future and the attitude we take toward the future becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

On the one hand if we say the future is hopeless; that things are bad and they will probably get worse then, guess what, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We expect things to get worse and they do.

On the other hand, if we have hope for the future; we realize that things are currently bad for many people but we have the strong belief that things will get better this also becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We expect things to get better and they do.

Jesus came into the world to give us hope so that no matter how bad things might be, there is always hope for a better future.

Sometimes we hear people say that we don't want to give someone false hope. However, I don't think there is any such thing as false hope; there is either hope or hopelessness and we are either bringing hope to the people around us or we are bringing hopelessness to the people around us. The choice is always up to us.

You see, there is a life giving power in hope itself.

The placebo effect in medical studies is evidence of the power of hope alone to transform lives.

You are aware that the scientific method requires researchers to conduct what they call double blind studies to show the affect of certain medicines in our healing.

If Lilly Pharmaceuticals wants to put a new drug on the market, they have to conduct years of clinical trials with double blind studies.

For example they might take 200 people who are suffering from a particular disease and give 100 of them the new medication for a year or more to see if the new medication is effective and what the possible side effects might be.

They will take the other 100 people who suffer from this same disease and just give them a placebo, that is, a sugar pill which has no medicine in it at all for a year and compare the results between those who had the real medication and those who didn't.

Now, the trick is that no one knows which patient is in which group. If you were in this study you would have no way of knowing whether you are getting the real medication for your condition or if you are just receiving a harmless sugar pill.

Now, after conducting these studies for a year or more when they look at the results, they might discover that 30% of the people who took the real medication saw their medical condition improve and therefore the medication might be helpful for 30% of the people who have that condition.

However, what is always surprising is that maybe 10% to 15% of the people who took the sugar pill also improved during the study. However, in some medical studies, the people who take the placebo do as well as those who take the actual medicine.

Lynne McTaggart in her book *THE INTENTION EXPERIMENT* tells about a recent study of 46,000 heart patients who were involved in a study about a new heart medication. Half of the patients received the new heart medication and half received a placebo.

Doctors gave them all the same instructions, which were to take their pills three times a day. Those who took the drug three times a day did equally well whether they were taking the actual medicine or taking a sugar pill. This study showed that the consistency in taking the medication and believing it would help you was more important than the actual pills taken.

Now, why would that be the case? Logically, shouldn't you expect that the people on the real medication would improve but that no one in the group receiving the sugar pill should improve because they are not receiving any medication at all to help their condition?

So why do any of the people who take the sugar pill in medical drug trials also improve? Because they are given hope. They don't know that they are only receiving a sugar pill. They believe they might be receiving the real medication and just the belief they are receiving the real medication helps them to get better.

I think that the scientific studies going on at pharmaceutical companies around the world with placebos are scientific proof of the power of hope itself to heal. The patients on the placebo are just receiving a dose of hope, and that simple hope that they will get better actually makes them better.

Isn't that amazing! Just the hope that we are getting better helps to make us better. That is why we always need to keep hope alive in our hearts. Hope heals; what we hope for becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I want all of us to think about our own lives. Where do we need a renewed sense of hope in our lives?

You see, we always have the choice. We can have a hopeful or cynical attitude toward the future and the choice we make has a powerful influence on the future we will experience.

Recently, I was talking with some other pastors about the financial situations in our congregations. Some of the pastors were very cynical and negative about the future. They felt that because of the economy and unemployment and the conflict over the current health care legislation, that the future for their congregations is not very bright. Some of the pastors were talking about the cuts they will have to make next year in their staff and programs because of increasing costs of health insurance for everyone and of decreased income from the congregation.

I just listened for awhile and then someone asked me what I thought. I simply said that I am very hopeful about the future here at St. Luke's. Yes, we face the same challenges that everyone else is facing but I simply live with a deep and abiding hope that God will be with us in the future as God has been with us in the past and God will work out some way. I don't know how it will work; I just put my hope in God and know that God will bring us through these challenging times as God has brought us through challenging times in the past.

Some people look at the negative conditions around them and then begin to sink into the pit of despair. I always look at the challenging conditions around us as opportunities for spiritual growth and an opportunity to put our hope in God who will lead us from darkness into light and from scarcity to abundance.

Think about your own life. Whenever you find yourself becoming cynical or negative about life, about the government, about big business, about labor, about peace in the middle east, just realize that your negative energy and hopeless attitudes are picked up by the world and become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

If on the other hand, you have the same concerns about the government, business, labor, war, or anything else, but you bring a hopeful attitude to it, you become a part of that growing group of people who believe that with God all things are possible and that in every situation there are the seeds of hope.

Even in the darkest of situations there are seeds of hope and when we water those seeds, pull out the weeds of cynicism and despair, they will begin to grow and produce good fruit for us and for all the people around us.

The rainbow has often been seen as a sign of hope.

In the Genesis 6 to 9, there is the story about Noah and his family, the ark and the great flood over all the earth. After the flood has subsided, God tells to Noah that he will set a rainbow in the sky as a sign of hope of the covenant between God and the people that he will never again destroy the world with a flood.

Since the earliest days of our faith, the rainbow has been seen as a sign of hope. You see, the rainbow comes after the storm. A storm comes with high winds and a hard rain. When you are in the midst of the storm, you might be filled with fear and wonder if it will ever end.

Have you ever been through a tornado? When we lived in South Dakota a tornado hit the edge of Mitchell, South Dakota when we were in college. Minnietta and I were studying in the library when the sky turned black, a hard rain fell, strong winds rattled the windows, and we heard a sound like a freight train coming. Then in just a few of minutes it was gone.

We looked outside and then all we saw was a beautiful bright rainbow which was the sunlight reflecting on the drops of water still in the air.

The tornado touched down on the edge of town and damaged a motel and some farm buildings but no one was hurt.

What amazed me was the contrast in our experiences. For a few minutes there was a dark and dangerous storm around us and it was followed almost immediately by a beautiful multi-colored rainbow.

To live with hope is to know that even in the midst of the dark and dangerous storms of our lives a beautiful, multi-colored rainbow is coming. When we are in the midst of dark and dangerous storms in our lives, we are people who live with hope because we know a beautiful multi colored rainbow follows every storm in our lives.

Let the rainbow remind us to never give up hope no matter how dark the storm might be.

A few years ago I conducted the funeral service for a family who had lost a teenage daughter in a car accident. You can hardly imagine the pain and suffering they went through as they said goodbye to a lovely talented young lady with a bright future.

It rained on the day of the funeral but the rain stopped just as we were going to the cemetery. When we arrived at the cemetery the sun had started peeking through the clouds.

Then when we were having the committal service at the graveside, a big rainbow appeared right over us. Everyone noticed it and I stopped talking and we just looked at the beautiful rainbow. I explained

that the rainbow was a sign of hope in the Bible and that perhaps God was giving us a sign of hope in the midst of this terrible loss.

The mother of the daughter who died later told me that her daughter loved rainbows and had pictures of rainbows all over her room. The mother wept when she told me that she thought this was her daughter's way of telling her that she is okay. She also said that whenever she saw a rainbow in the sky, it would remind her to give thanks for her daughter's life and her eternal life.

God gives us continual signs of hope. Every time a new born baby arrives in this world it is a sign of hope for the future and that God still loves us and is with us. The births of John the Baptist and Jesus were given to us by God to give us hope for the future.

Every time you see a rainbow in the sky or even a picture of a rainbow, let it be a sign of hope for you.

To conclude this message, someone will sing *I'VE GOT HOPE LIKE A RAINBOW* and invite us to join in.