

FIVE FORKS BRETHERN IN CHRIST CHURCH
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SCRIPTURE: Luke 1

DATE: 2018-12-02

Place: Auditorium

SUBJECT: Advent and Grief

Series: Heaven Came Down

THEME: Hope and Grief

SERMON: "Hope with a Risk"

Introduction

Good morning. So glad to see all of you here this morning. I trust you had a great season of Thanksgiving and have been learning and practicing the art of contentment that pastor Shaun talked to us about last month.

This is the time of year when we often switch gears. Unfortunately, some of us switch quickly from, "I am so thankful for what I have," to "I wonder what I'll get?"

The stores, the commercials, the decorations have to change almost overnight. Even at church we suddenly change our music and sing songs that we haven't sung for 11 months. We are in Advent season. In fact this Sunday is called, the first Sunday of Advent.

Let me ask you, "**What pops into your mind when you hear "Advent?"**"

One person said, a song, "O Come, O Come, Immanuel."

Perhaps it's **pink and purple candles** in a pine wreath and a solemn ceremony of lighting the candles, always wondering, "What's the right order again?"

Perhaps it's a December **calendar** with 24 little cardboard doors that you get to open, one each day. If you're a little kid it can be so exciting but at the same time excruciatingly painful because the doors are right there to be opened. But mom and dad said, "You can't touch the next one till tomorrow." (So when no one is looking, you take a sneak peek and open several of the doors and then try to put them back to look like nobody opened them. But it

doesn't work)

Or perhaps the announcement of advent for you is suddenly the alarm that goes off in your head that says, "**Christmas is much closer than I realized,**" and you have so much to get done in such a short time. You have shopping to do, decorating, cards to write and send, cookies to bake, cleaning to do, for when the family comes over. Time is running out and the pressure is mounting. Are you feeling any pressure from a sudden time crunch?

Perhaps advent season brings all of these and more to your mind. As we consider Advent here at Five Forks, over the next four weeks we want to talk and think, and hopefully take time to stop our busy activities, and meditate on some different stories we find in the Bible, that take place around the amazing, all important event that we celebrate on Christmas day – the **birth of Jesus**. The day heaven came down to earth. So we have chosen those words to focus our thinking: "**Heaven Came Down.**"

Heaven on earth is a common expression we use. You go on a **vacation** and sit lazily on the beach with the warm sun on your body and you think, "Ah, heaven on earth."

You sit down to a great **feast** topped off with your favorite dessert and at the end you lean back and think, "Ah, heaven on earth."

If you are **parents** with several young children and they are finally all asleep at the same time and you can relax on the couch you think "Ah, heaven on earth."

These are all good images but for us who embrace the Christian faith, we believe the best, most accurate and in fact most real, definitive **expression** of heaven on earth is a person, Jesus. This is why we celebrate his birth. This is the time God came and lived with people, physically, on the earth. It was and still is good news for everyone – so we sing, "Peace on earth, goodwill for everyone."

But in the time **leading up** to this magnificent event there is a season of **waiting** – expectantly, anticipating, full of hope. **And yet**, for many it is also accompanied by **grief** and all that grief brings with it – sorrow, heartache, painful memories, confusion, loneliness, what if's,

blame and sometimes even anger. Those aren't supposed to be Christmas season emotions.

If we are honest, these are some of the emotions we feel at this time of year. Advent – we want it to be a time of just joy, happiness, laughter, peace and goodwill. A time when everyone is home for the holidays and we are all together enjoying a good time. But the grief, the pain, the mess, the heartache, is also there. We may try to push it aside and pretend it is not there, or make up for it with activity or busyness, but it is still there.

The Bible stories of advent do not gloss over or leave out the painful, difficult stuff of life. Instead, they are so real that we can find ourselves in the stories. They relate to us and our situation.

See, the God who **meets** with people in the Bible is the same God who meets with us in our stories. This is what we want to talk about together as we consider that **heaven really did come down at Christmas time.**

So we start with Luke's account of Advent in Luke chapter 1.

Luke introduces Advent with the story of an Elderly Couple

Luke 1:5 When Herod was king of Judea, there was a Jewish priest named Zechariah.

Luke sets his story in an historical setting – the reign of **Herod the Great**. During this time in Israel's history, it was rather **bleak**. They had been in captivity and exile for ignoring God and rebelling against him, and then God had brought them back to their homeland but it had been a period of subjection to one conqueror after another.

They were currently under the efficient but very harsh rule of the **Roman Empire** and Caesar Augustus. The roads were getting better, but sometimes they were lined with corpses hanging on crosses, as a warning to those who would oppose the empire. Herod had been appointed ruler, and had done some things to help the Jews. He rebuilt the **temple** into a magnificent structure. He provided good **water** supplies for Jerusalem. He helped develop the **agriculture** of the area and made it **safer** for people to travel. But his rule was also **ruthless**

and he maintained his power by killing off his opposition. He was seen as a puppet of Rome and not the great liberator – or Messiah, the people longed for.

So the Jewish people were still looking for someone who would restore the nation to political greatness and prosperity like they had under David and Solomon.

Also, for Israel, they considered themselves to be God's **favorites**. But God had essentially been silent and far off for four hundred years. And so, generation after generation, the Jews waited and wondered, when would God once again step into their history and rescue them? Each generation hoping, this was when God would draw near.

Year after year people hoped, but then hopes were dashed when God never showed up, and the hardship, pain and suffering just kept on. It is in this setting that Luke introduces us to the elderly, childless couple:

Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Luke 1:6-7 Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous in God's eyes, careful to obey all of the Lord's commandments and regulations. They had no children because Elizabeth was unable to conceive, and they were both very old.

This is an elderly couple. They are people who love God. They are committed to him. They try to live virtuous lives. They obey the laws of God. These are good **faithful** people. Prayed regularly and often. Worshipped with others regularly and often. But there is a deep sadness and grief that inhabits their lives. Elizabeth is **barren** – hasn't been able to get pregnant – and now they are very old.

You know what that means don't you? She is not going to get pregnant, and one of, and maybe even the most important dream of her life, will go unfulfilled. The story may imply that both she and her husband had prayed long and hard for a child. But God did not step in to fulfill this longing, this desire – and yet they remained faithful to God.

Here is where the **grief and pain of advent**, that we may easily gloss over and then forget, is introduced. Elizabeth hoped and prayed and longed for a child, for years – but God

was silent.

This is the reality of pain and grief and loneliness of advent for more women than perhaps most of us realize.

Leanne writes:

I remember that Christmas when what I wanted most in the whole world was to be having a baby.

We had been hoping to have children for a while, but after some tests we were waiting for an appointment with fertility specialists. It was November when we got the news that conceiving on our own might NOT be possible, and I was devastated. As Christmas got closer, the last thing I wanted to hear about was pregnancy and babies – and here we were entering a season where a story involving those exact things was all around me.

She said:

Every pregnant belly made me jealous.

Every baby in a stroller made my heart ache.

And every mention of the miracle of the baby born at Christmas made me wonder why I couldn't have a miracle for me.

In the end, (she continued) we were one of those couples that cancelled the appointment at the fertility clinic when we found out we WERE having a child. We only knew the pain of longing for children for a short time, so I can't pretend to understand the experience of women who have been on a longer, harder journey than me.

However, that season of heartache did teach me something: Christmas (and Advent) can be a painful time for women who long to hold their children and are unable to do so. This includes women who have wanted children and have not been able to conceive, those who have miscarried, and those who have outlived the children they loved, and even those who are estranged from their children.

And this is what we must not forget during advent. Many want and long for everything to

be right but it isn't and may not be. Instead it is a miserable time.

What does advent say to those who are grieving in this time?

It is at this point of sadness in Elizabeth and Zechariah's journey of faith, that Luke introduces us to God, as God steps into the story.

And Luke shows us a God who is interested in and works in, the "little people." Those who are relatively unimportant as we might consider them, individuals, ordinary people. His plan is big. It's for the whole world. But it includes you and me – each one of us. What an **encouragement** – God is interested in you and your story.

Luke 1: 8-17

One day Zechariah was serving God in the Temple.

11 While (he) was in the sanctuary, an angel of the Lord appeared to him. Zechariah was terrified when he saw him. 13 But the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayer. Your wife, Elizabeth, will give you a son, and you are to name him John. 14 You will have great joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, 16 And he will turn many Israelites to the Lord their God. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly."

"God has heard your prayer" What a hope filled phrase.

Advent reminds us that God hears our prayers. Gabriel's words to Zechariah remind us of God's words to Moses at the burning bush in:

Exodus 3:6 "I am the God of your fathers. I have certainly seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their cries of distress because of their harsh slave drivers. Yes, I am aware of their suffering. ⁸ So I have come down to rescue them."

God heard their cries, and came down. He stepped into their pain, suffering and grief and rescued them. This is why Advent gives us hope. It is the story of God once again

stepping into our pain and hurt, with us.

So **Advent invites US into hope.** And **hope is when you take the risk that what you want to happen might actually happen.** That's hope.

Gabriel's message to Zechariah is: "What you have been hoping for, on both a personal level, a child, and a national level, that God will once again come among his people, will actually happen. God has appointed that now is the right time to do what he planned to do – come and live with people. Zechariah, your son, whom you don't think you can father, will be the one who prepares the way for God himself to come."

Advent invites us into such hope in God. I don't know what you are hoping for or longing for. Maybe you have been hoping for years and are about ready to give up. Advent reminds us we can still hope.

But every time we dare to hope, it comes with a risk and so, some shy away from the hope.

Both Moses and Zechariah shied away. You may recall in the Exodus story how Moses argues with God about what God has asked him to do. Zechariah also has doubts.

Luke 1:18 Zechariah said to the angel, "How can I be sure this will happen? I'm an old man now, and my wife is also well along in years."

¹⁹ Then the angel said, "I am Gabriel! I stand in the very presence of God. It was he who sent me to bring you this good news! ²⁰ But now, since you didn't believe what I said, you will be silent and unable to speak until the child is born. For my words will certainly be fulfilled at the proper time."

Poor Zechariah, he just wants to be practical and realistic. Isn't that the responsible thing to do? Well yes, very often it is. But essentially Zechariah is saying what we all think at times, when we sense God inviting us into hoping for something that seems impossible. "I'm not sure I want to take the risk of getting my hopes up."

Gabriel essentially scolds his lack of faith. “Ok. Just be quiet and let God show you what he will do. God has offered you the gift of hope.”

Hope is a gift but it is also a risk.

Interestingly Luke makes no mention of similar doubts on Elizabeth’s part.

Luke 1:23 When Zechariah’s week of service in the Temple was over, he returned home. ²⁴ Soon afterward his wife, Elizabeth, became pregnant and went into seclusion for five months. ²⁵ “How kind the Lord is!” she exclaimed. “He has taken away my disgrace of having no children.”

In fact, when Mary, the Mother of Jesus, visits Elizabeth, when Elizabeth is about 6 months pregnant, Elizabeth says, **“You are blessed because you believed that the Lord would do what he said.”**

Is Luke contrasting two responses to God and what he says he will do? Zechariah and Moses are the doubters and Elizabeth and Mary show us faith or trust.

The writer of Hebrews connects hope and faith – or believing God, this way.

Hebrews 11:1 Faith shows the reality of what we hope for; it is the evidence of things we cannot see.

Our trust in God allows us to hope. Advent invites us into hope.

Hope is the energy that moves us from where we are to where we believe we are heading. Advent is the story of God stepping in and saying to a barren woman, “You are not barren anymore. You were living in disgrace, but I am removing your disgrace.”

This is the God advent invites us to hope in and trust. A God who is still on the move. You are not abandoned, even if it feels like it sometimes.

What about our stories?

Have you ever felt like you couldn't handle any more, or you didn't have much more to give? There are so many situations where this could be true. It could be true in your marriage. It could be true at your job, your finances, your relationship with your parents or your children, your health. Even as you struggle with trusting God.

How do we sit with hope and grief or pain, recognizing the risk of hoping? We are tempted to say, "I don't want to get my hopes up." My loved one is gone and I can't get them back. I don't want to risk loving someone else."

I don't want to get my hopes up that I can reconcile with the family member I've been quarreling with. The other person may not accept my apology and it may just get worse.'

"I don't want to get my hopes up that this medication or procedure will help my condition and I will finally feel better." I don't want to get my hopes up.

Hope is risky and messy. We don't want to get our hopes up because we don't want another bad thing to happen.

Advent, Heaven coming down to us, says "**Hope is risky and it is worth it.**"

In advent we don't ignore legitimate grief. But the story of Advent reminds us that the world is not as it should be, or will be. And it reminds us that God sees us and hears us, and at the proper time will step in, so He invites us into hope. He invites us to **hope boldly**.

At the first advent Jesus came and lived among people. He promises to come again and make everything right. This is the direction of our hope now. In the meantime, he promises to step into our story and be there with us, even when the going is tough.

Here is the Risk: God's response may not be **what** we think it should be.
God's response may not happen **when** we think it should happen

Sometimes things do get worse – even when we feel we are at our wits end – that is the risk of hope. But if we choose to live life as if things will always be bad, or always get worse,

and stop hoping, we will live a life that predisposes us to a life of grieving.

God says, for now let me walk with you in your grief and pain. Trust me. My presence will go with you and I will show you there is beauty on the other side. I have placed you in a community of people who will also walk with you.

It is true, life may not be the same again. But the promise of the advent story is that life can be good again and so we dare to hope and dare to risk hoping boldly.

Kay Warren from Saddleback Church shared this story from her family. https://pastors.com/my-brother-rebuilt-his-life-after-heroin-and-my-family-had-to-learn-forgiveness/?mc_cid=54132f1b48&mc_eid=d227666dfa

I'll never forget the night years ago when my younger brother, Andy, told me he was addicted to heroin. We sat in my parked car near the beach, the darkness shrouding his face as he told me the story.

"I need to tell you something, Kay. I know you're going to take this hard. I started using heroin a few months ago and I can't stop." The world stood still for a few moments as I absorbed the news that my baby brother—the one whose arrival in our family eight years after I was born gave me the sibling I had longed for, the one I carried in my arms, the one I pretended was my personal walky-talky doll when he was 2, the one who used to snuggle in my arms and call me "Sissy"—was a heroin addict.

Through my tears I shouted questions at him: "Why did you start shooting up heroin? What's the matter with you? Are you stupid? What did you think would happen? Did you think you could play with heroin and not become a drug addict?" I was shocked and angry and confused. Mostly I was frightened. Was I going to lose him to a HepC or HIV infection? Would a violent drug dealer harm him? Would he die by an accidental overdose?

I don't even really remember how Andy answered my barrage of questions, but the conversation did not end well. For the next five years, our family rode the roller coaster of a substance-use disorder with him. My parents suffered bleak despair as they

watched a dearly loved child being wrecked by an opioid addiction. Their beautiful boy shrank to a pale skeleton who lied to their faces, stole and pawned their few prized possessions, wrecked their cars, destroyed their trust, and broke their hearts.

Yet their love never wavered. Not for a second. He was their son, and they would give their last dollar and their last prayer to see him whole and healthy again. The more heroin consumed him, the more they forgave and prayed.

Andy is one of the lucky ones. Today, my brother is the sweet brother of my youth—intelligent, warm and funny, a gifted musician and songwriter, a great dad, and a loving son. He will be forever grateful that our parents never gave up hoping and praying for recovery, and forgave the terrible pain he caused them.

If you are walking through a really tough stretch in life, don't give up. Keep praying, keep hoping, and keep forgiving. Because heaven has come down to us.

Lighting the Advent candle

_____ will come and light a purple candle and I invite you to reflect on hope as we pray together – responsively.

As we light our advent candle

We thank you for the hope you give.

As we prepare for Christmas time

Light of the world, shine on us.

In this world of pain and darkness

Bring hope to our hearts.

To all the people who don't know you,

Light of the world, shine through us.

Jesus, you are coming again,

Help us to live in the hope you bring.

As we go out from here today,

Light of the World, light the way.