

Hope is Happening Now

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Preacher: David Meredith

[0 : 00] Luke chapter 1. Many have undertaken to draw up an account of the things that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed down to us by those who from the first were eyewitnesses and servants of the word. With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the certainty of the things you have been taught. In the time of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah.

His wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all of the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly. But they were childless, because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old. Once, when Zechariah's division was on duty, and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshippers were praying outside. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and gripped with fear. But the angel said to him, Do not be afraid, Zechariah. Your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine and other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord. Zechariah asked the angel, How can I be sure of this?

I am an old man, and my wife is well on in years. The angel said to him, I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time. Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he was staying so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them.

They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them, but remained unable to speak. When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this, his wife Elizabeth became pregnant, and for five months remained in seclusion. The Lord has done this for me, she said. In these days, he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people.

[3 : 29] Amen. Joe, thank you so much. We're going to look at that passage now together. It's the advent of hope we're talking about, and just a reminder that because of the coming of Jesus in our world, God's Son in his incarnation, hope is happening now. Hope is not just something in the future, as far as the Bible is concerned, but it's something that God is working out right now in our lives, in our circumstances, in the world around us, because of the great work of Jesus.

So hope is happening now. I've got a picture that I took myself. I don't have a lot of slides this morning, but I've got a picture that I took myself in Ardermurkin. And it's actually a sunset. I don't know if you can see that clearly or not, but it's a sunset at Ardermurkin Point, the most westerly point of the British mainland. I go there on holiday often, and I'm guaranteed the most amazing sunsets. And I love dusk. I love that part of the day when the light begins to fade, and the sun begins to set, and the darkness begins to come. So I love dusk. I'm not such a fan of night, you know, as the darkness encroaches further and further and reaches deeper until night blankets everything. It's okay for a while. Don't mind looking at the stars and the moon for a wee bit.

But of course, towards the end of the night, I'm always looking forward to the coming of a new day, the coming of the morning. And if we think about the nation of Israel at this time, which is what we're reading about there, the sun had set for Israel a long time ago. These were dark times for the people that we're reading about in this story. God had not sent a single prophet to lead and guide them for over 400 years, 400 years of night, 400 years of silence. And now this was the time we read in the passage of Herod. So that's right there in verse five, the time of Herod, king of Judea, Herod the Great, as he's known in history. And he did a lot of great things. He was really a great builder, a lot of great architecture, but he was also greatly violent. And the slaughter of the innocents in Matthew chapter two shows his bloody ruthlessness. The word in the street was that it was safer to be Herod's pig than his son, because he had several of his sons murdered or assassinated and his wife. So the time of Herod was a dark time in the history of Israel. When people read about the time of Herod, as Luke's readers read about that later, they would think, oh man, these were dark, difficult days, like our days. People are going to look back on 2020. And remember, that was the time of the pandemic when so much of the world was shut down due to this illness. And it was a dark time for many people. A lot of loss, a lot of suffering. So it's a dark time for Israel. It's also a dark time for the people who are at the centre of the story. They're an elderly couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth.

Things are hard for them. One of the things we read about them is that they're elderly and childless. And that mattered a lot, because for them in that day and age, children were first of all, seen as a sign of God's favour. So, you know, if you didn't have kids, what had you done wrong to deserve that kind of thing? Because kids were also your pension plan. They were your health insurance and they were your nursing home. So to not have children was to have a pretty bleak old age.

[7 : 35] And so there's not a lot of good news in the wider culture because of Herod and because God has been silent for so long. And there's not a lot of good news for this couple personally.

All is not well with them and all is not well in the world in which they live. So we look at this time and we think all is not well in the world. And we probably feel that all is not well for us personally. There are restrictions we're facing, hardships we've gone through, worries we're carrying about how things are going to turn out. It doesn't feel like a time of good news, does it?

So we too are sitting in darkness and might feel as if God is silent. We might feel glum about our situation. But I want to tell you that hope is happening. God is at work in our world carrying out his great promises, his plan of salvation. That's what this story teaches us. God is at work carrying out his promises and his plans. Sometimes we can see how that's going. Sometimes we can't, but it's always happening. That's the story of Advent. Jesus coming to our world, bringing light to those who live in darkness. A German pastor during the time of the Nazis, Bonhoeffer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote this. He said, the celebration of Advent is only possible to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect and look forward to something greater to come.

So, you know, the recognition of what's wrong and what's hard and what's difficult for us, that's what makes us long for light and for the coming of God into our world and into our lives.

It prepares us for the coming of Jesus Christ. So I want to talk about that, first of all, about how, as we try to understand the story of Advent, we need to look forwards and we need to look backwards.

[9 : 47] My phone's got a Strava app on it and that Strava app helps me to map my runs. So, you know, I like to go running. The app, after I've run, I can see where I started, where I went, where I ended up, how long it took me, how fast I run, how high I climbed, all that kind of stuff.

So I like to see where I've been and where I'm going. Sometimes, especially through lockdown, been out for a lot of walks in the Pentlands. And when I'm out running or walking, I do like to be able to locate myself. Where am I now? Where have I come from? Where am I going to end up?

How far have I got to go? So always looking forwards and backwards, forwards and backwards. And that's a great way to read the Bible, to read the Bible forwards and backwards, trying to locate where are we in this story? It's a big book, isn't it? Of 66 books, 40 authors written over 2000 years in three languages. And yeah, it's one big story. So where are we? How do we locate where we are in this story? And how do we relate when it comes to us?

So when we try and locate what's happening at the beginning of Luke, we can, in Luke chapter one, we can look forward. So if you look forward to the end of Luke's gospel, he, you know, what Luke does is he can hand you a key to help you to understand what he's written and to understand the whole of the Old Testament that comes before it. So in Luke chapter 24, verse 45 to 47, if you've

got a Bible, you know, look it up or check it in your phone right now. So Luke chapter 24, 45 to 47, Jesus with his disciples. And it says he opened their minds so that they could understand the scriptures. He told them, this is what is written. So what's in the Old Testament, Jesus says, what's this? What are all the different parts of the Old Testament about? This is what is written.

The Messiah will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day. That's the mission that Jesus came to fulfill the Messiah. And then repentance for forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations beginning at Jerusalem. So the Old Testament is about two things, the mission of God sending his son to rescue his people, and then the mission of his church, those people going into the world to preach forgiveness in his name to every nation. So Luke is right into the nations saying there is good news to be found in Jesus Christ. So Luke shows us the Bible is one book about the one true God with one great plan of salvation. It's not lots of different bits and pieces just jumbled together, lots of myths collated in some kind of random way. One book about the one true God with one great plan of salvation. And John the Baptist here in Luke chapter one is the figure who brings one chapter to a close and then opens the other. He's the last of the Old Testament prophets and the first of the New Testament prophets. God has been silent for 400 years. The darkness has got deeper.

[13 : 04] But now John the Baptist comes to turn the lights back on and say, God is heading your way. Get ready because hope is happening now. So that's the story we need to grasp in order to illuminate our lives.

Sinners in need of a savior, we need to look up and see what is God doing to rescue us, from our failure to love him and obey him, and our failure to love our neighbor and care for them.

As we try and experience and live life without reference to God, God comes and says, no, be reconciled to me. That's where hope will happen. So if you look forwards, we've got this key that Luke gives us at the end of his gospel. If we look backwards from the New Testament into the Old Testament, the last book of the Old Testament is a book called Malachi. And in Malachi chapter four, it says this, see, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. So we read about John the Baptist, and it says he will go on before the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, to the disobedient, to the wisdom of the righteous, to make a people ready, prepared for the Lord. Malachi says, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before the great day and dreadful day of the Lord. You will turn the hearts of parents to their children, the hearts of the children to their parents, else I will come and strike the land with all destruction. So Luke is referencing back here, or the angel is referencing as he speaks to Zechariah, back to Malachi. This is the second Elijah. Elijah was a great Old Testament prophet. This is going to be a prophet like Elijah who will come and make the way ready for the day of the Lord, the coming of the

Lord for the day of his advent. So the way John the Baptist is described to us in Luke chapter 1 verses 16 and 17 references back into the Old Testament. So we understand John the Baptist much better if we see that Old Testament background. He's saying he has come to turn us towards God, to prepare us for God's coming into the world. If we're not ready, then God's coming will be a dreadful day for us, a day of judgment.

But if we are ready, it will be a day of blessing. Hope will happen. So we get ready. If you're not a Christian, I'd kind of like to ask you this. Who is God sending to you to prepare the way for Jesus in your life?

[15 : 55] So if you're listening to this, it's more than likely that you've got a Christian in your life who's tuned you into it. So in what ways is God sending that person to prepare you for Jesus to come into your life? It's not an accident as far as I'm concerned, as far as the Bible's concerned, as far as God's concerned. So if you're not a Christian, who's in your life that God has used or is using to prepare you for Jesus? A husband, a wife, a child, a parent, a friend, a colleague.

If you are a Christian, I want to say, who is God sending you to to prepare the way for Jesus in their life? We all need to get ready. So that's the first thing. Look forward, look backwards.

Locate where we are in the story. We understand much better why John the Baptist matters as we look forward through Scripture and back through Scripture. Second thing I want to talk about, though, is landing at Jerusalem Airport.

So landing at Jerusalem Airport. You know, I'm not the most widely traveled human being in the world. I'm not the least widely traveled human being in the world.

But I remember the first time I went to Eastern Europe, I was a little bit apprehensive. I was flying to Sofia in Bulgaria. And I didn't really know what to expect at the airport.

[17:21] I wasn't quite sure what the signage would be like or how I was going to find my way. And so for a few days before I flew to Sofia, I was trying to teach myself the Cyrillic alphabet so I could decode signs and read because I wanted to be ready if there were signs that I couldn't understand to try and begin to decode them.

Well, imagine flying back in time into Jerusalem Airport where all the signs are in Hebrew. It's going to be quite confusing for a while, trying to work out what's happening.

Where do I go? What do I do? Not sure what the right path is here. In a way, what Luke does to his readers, who were, first of all, people living towards the second half of first century AD and then down through the ages onwards, people have read Luke's gospel.

He's taken them from their location back to Jerusalem and into a Hebrew world with Hebrew signs and Hebrew symbols and Hebrew customs.

And we all have to go there. That's the thing. We all have to travel. We all have to fly into Jerusalem if we want to hear God's good news story of salvation.

[18:42] Even if we don't know the place or the language, even if it's all a little bit unfamiliar to us, what Luke writes about here, we have to go there because God chose to unfold his story of salvation in a particular time in history, in a particular location in history.

Luke was really interested in history. We know that in verses one to four, he says to his friend Theophilus and to all his other readers, this is a carefully researched and accurate, dependable source of information about Jesus.

I've gathered eyewitness testimony. I mean, how do we know what happened to Zechariah in the temple? Because he told people he was the eyewitness source for what Luke writes.

So Luke's interested in the history, in the accuracy of what he tells us. He wants us to know that Jesus is the promised son of God who has come in line with God's plan shown in the Old Testament.

And so he has to locate what he's writing in a real place, in a real time with real people. First century Jerusalem is the place and the time.

[19:56] The people are this old couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth. And that shows us that what Luke's doing is he's not just writing a story or telling a myth or a legend.

It doesn't read like that at all, does it? These are all checkable facts, real names, real places, real events. But nevertheless, for us now, even for people in the Greek and Hellenistic and Roman world of the first century, later first century, traveling back to Jerusalem felt strange, strange name, Zechariah, Elizabeth, much more familiar.

And then they're from priestly families. And what's going on? Well, these priests were told that he's from the division of Abijah, Zechariah.

So the priests apparently were divided into 24 divisions. And Abijah was one of those divisions of the priesthood.

And each priestly division was asked to go up to Jerusalem and serve in the temple twice a year for a week.

[21:06] So they spent two weeks overall in the year at the temple serving. And while they were there during one of those weeks, lots would be drawn to see who got to go into the holy place and offer incense.

Well, there's 18,000 priests and you were chosen by law and you only got one chance. If you were chosen, you were taken off the list. So it was not guaranteed that you would ever get to do this.

And to be allowed to do what Zechariah does in this story, to go into the holy place where the Israelites knew God to dwell, was an enormous privilege. It was a massive moment.

So here's Zechariah going into a temple, into a holy place before an altar, offering incense. And then this angel, Gabriel, appears and starts talking to him with a message from God.

He's going to have a child. A bairn will be born. John the Baptist, his son, who won't drink wine, but will be filled with the Holy Spirit.

[22:07] So this is an alien world for us in many ways. Jerusalem, temples, altars, incense, angels, Holy Spirit, and no wine from waitrose.

That's a hard world for many of us to enter. It's distant. It's far away. And it's full of the supernatural. And as 21st century human beings, the supernatural tends to grate with our skepticism and our

experience of life.

But what I want to say is we all have to stop here on our journey. We need to travel to this time and place with Luke. If we want hope to happen for us, we need to get in these waters and start swimming.

Because this is the place in history where God chose to bring his promises to pass, his plan to save a people for himself. It's here that God comes and breaks into the world in the most remarkable way, in the incarnation of his son.

And John the Baptist is here to say it's happening. Get ready. Hope is happening now. And that hope is the hope of a new people who live in fellowship with God himself.

[23 : 20] God is making a new family. Right back at the beginning of the Bible, if we're doing our looking back bit, we see that God promised that in the ruin of the world after the fall of Adam and Eve into sin, God promised he would create a new people for himself through Abraham and Sarah, who would be a blessing to the whole world.

Now, the amazing thing about Abraham and Sarah was that they were childless, just like Zechariah and Elizabeth. So in Genesis chapter 12, God said, I'm going to create a new community of people, not born naturally, but born out of the power of my work in the life of these two people, Abraham and Sarah.

And here again in Zechariah and Elizabeth, he said, supernatural intervention to create a new community of people, born in the power of the Holy Spirit.

There is a new humanity coming, a new family that God is creating out of grace. That's what it is to be a Christian, to be part of the family, the people of God.

And he calls us to be his people so we can be a blessing to the world. We're to go and preach the good news of Jesus as savior, repentance and forgiveness in his name to all the nations.

[24 : 39] So God's gold standard for life is not the nuclear family. That's not the ultimate. That's not what we're supposed to dream of and aspire to. The human families we have point us to an even better family, the family of God, where we become brothers and sisters together.

It struggles like every family, but we learn and we grow. Jesus comes to deal with our sin and to bring us back into the family of God.

What a great thing it is that God has done then. That he gives us a new hope. He brings us out of our loneliness and our lostness and our isolation and our broken, fragmented human relationships and reintegrates us into relationship with himself and each other.

And John the Baptist is saying, get ready for what God is going to do in your life because what God will do through the coming of Jesus is an amazing work. Hope is happening.

So John the Baptist, here he comes. First time in 400 years that God has spoken. God has not forgotten his promises.

[25 : 54] Don't know if you love football, but, you know, great celebration in Scotland a couple of weeks ago. It was for the Tartan Army, the first time in 22 years that Scotland had qualified for a major soccer tournament or a major football tournament.

So 22 years without being at the Euros or the World Cup, it felt like ever to the Tartan Army. 400 years felt like a very, very long time for Israel.

Has God forgotten? That's a question we all ask from time to time, isn't it? Has God forgotten me?

Has God forgotten us? Has God forgotten our world?

Has God forgotten our promises? John the Baptist, the coming of the son of God that he points to, it's all a reminder. We can depend on God's promises, even if we have to wait a long time and be very patient.

What God says he will do, God does keep every single promise that he gives in scripture. And what does that do? What does the keeping of God promises do?

[27 : 08] Well, it puts a smile back in our face. Verse 14, to Zechariah and Elizabeth, to them personally, God says, this son will be a joy and a delight to you.

So there's joy for this couple and the hardship of their own personal circumstances. There is joy for you and me personally and the struggles we face because Jesus is coming to be with us.

That's the Advent story. He's coming as a savior who will one day deliver us from every sorrow, every struggle, every suffering, and every sin. Verse 25, just the end of the story where we read it, is great.

Elizabeth says, the Lord has done this for me when she becomes pregnant. In those days, he has shown his favor. He's shown me his favor and taken away my disgrace, my shame, the shame of being childless in her culture.

He's taken that from her. In the face of deep personal disappointment, God is faithful. God is gracious.

[28 : 19] We learn so much of God in the hard things. We see so much more of his promise-keeping love in the difficulties that we face. Elizabeth sees this.

Second ayah, not so much. Despite a priest, he has hardened his heart to hope. He doesn't really believe what the angel has to say. How can this be? He says, I'm old and my wife's ancient too. And so God has said, be quiet and just watch. Maybe that's a good word for some of us today. Stop questioning. Be quiet.

Just watch. Questions are good. Thinking is important. Investigating. Studying. Learning. But sometimes, good just to stop.

Listen. And watch what God is up to. So there's joy for us personally and there's joy in our world. Joy in our world. So verse 14, he will be a joy and delight to you, but also many will rejoice because of John's the Baptist's birth.

[29 : 26] In verse 19, the angel says, listen, I'm Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. So there is joy, not just for the personal story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, but there is joy for the big story of a world that's in trouble, a world that's experiencing darkness.

And to that, good news comes. Where does good news come from? It comes from the presence of God, himself. We feel the darkness. There's plenty of bad news in the media, isn't there?

But you know what? If you've got to go and stand in the presence of God right now and hear what has been talked about in heaven where he dwells, you would hear good news.

God has good news for the world. The good news that God has is the darkness doesn't win. Hope happens here. God is at work saving his people, blessing the world, restoring all things in line with his unchanging plan and promise.

So I just want to say, let's finish with looking forward, looking back. Not through scripture, but through your life. Matt, my life, where are you?

[30 : 46] Where are you in life? Where have you come from? Where are you headed? How far are you along the way? And where in the journey of life do you stand in relation to God?

How far have you strayed from him off that path? God says, follow after me. Don't turn to the left. Don't turn to the right. Follow me. How far have you gone from him?

John the Baptist was sent to turn us back to God. Verse 16, many will he bring back to the Lord their God.

Maybe you need to be brought back this morning to the Lord your God. the light of Advent comes so that you will have grace and truth and light and mercy from God to turn you back to him.

So this Christmas, what does God want from you this Christmas? He wants you. He wants you back. He wants you to turn back. Look forward, look back. Where are you in life and where are you in relation to God?

[32 : 05] Pay attention. In this moment to the truth about who God is and what he's doing in this world because that's where hope will happen. Let me say a short prayer.

Then we're going to sing Psalm 19. Joe's going to pray. We're going to sing another new kind of Christmas carol type song and then benediction. So let me pray briefly. Lord, we do need to locate where we are in life to see where we're going, what's happening with us.

Have we lost our way? How confused have we become? How disorientated. Help us to reorientate ourselves back to you, back to your truth, back to your goodness and your love, back to the story of hope that we find in the coming of the Lord Jesus.

May that be real and personal for all of us today. In Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.