Hope: Unfolding Possibilities

Welcome to the first day in the circle of the church year. Each new church year begins with Advent – this season of preparing to, once again, receive the light of Christ at Christmas – to receive it so fully that it changes us in some way – opening us to new ways of experiencing hope, peace, joy and love – which will sustain our faith in the year ahead.

I invite you to wonder with me this morning: Do you consider yourself to be a hopeful person? On this first Sunday in Advent, let's contemplate what hopefulness requires of us as we lean into a God of unfolding possibilities.

As we enter into this time of reflection, we recognize with gratitude our freedom to be gathered for worship – on the live stream and in this place on land loved across the ages by First Nations and others and where we are now building our community. I invite you to join me in a moment of prayer – closing your eyes if that helps to ground you in the present moment.

Holy, loving Spirit – We know that faith involved a balance between belief and doubt. So we trust you to keep our spirits open and nimble, able to embrace the unexpected and do discern and face into next steps with courage. We ask this as disciples of Jesus. Amen.

So what would you say – are you a hopeful person? To be completely honest, I have not typically considered myself to be very hopeful. I <u>have</u> and do consider myself optimistic. And they are not quite the same thing. I would consider optimism to be a mindset. Hope has been considered and described by many a poet – rarely the same way twice. Perhaps hope is described in many ways because it is a deeply personal experience. Hope can appear, being, grow, be lost, die, be reborn. Hope can be known through our emotions, our intellect, and our gut intuition. Hope is powerful.

Having claimed to be an optimist, I would like to briefly explore three mindsets toward life and two approaches to engaging in life.

I invite you to locate yourself among the mindset and approaches so that you will be able to more clearly discern how you access hope.

With which of these mindsets do you most identify most of the time?

- Optimistic is to be *"inclined to expect good outcomes."*
- Pessimistic is to be *"inclined to expect poor outcomes."*
- Realistic is to be "*recogniz[ing] what is real or possible in a particular situation."*

I wonder, how might each of those mindsets - an inclination to expect good outcomes, an inclination to expect poor outcomes, an inclination to recognize the real or possible in the present moment – how might each contribute to or detract from our capacity to experience and develop hope?

Now, which of these approaches to engaging in life do you most identify with most of the time?

- An idealist – I think I've been using the term incorrectly, but an idealist is: "*one guided by ideals, especially one that places ideals before practical considerations."*

Is that more you or is this more you?

- A pragmatist is – *"one who deals with the problems that exist in a specific situation in a reasonable and logical way instead of depending on ideas and theories."*

Well, if the mindsets of optimism, pessimism, and realism each have an impact on one's potential for experiencing and developing hope, I think that those two approaches also have significant impact on our potential for experiencing and developing hope.

I wonder: do you hear pragmatic optimism or idealistic optimism in linguist and philosopher Noam Chomsky's words, which we shared as our opening words from a neighbor? Again, Chomsky wrote:

"*Optimism is a strategy for making a better future. Because unless you believe that the future can be better, it's unlikely you will step up and take responsibility for making it so. If you assume that there's no hope, you guarantee that there will be no hope. If you assume that there is an instinct for freedom, there are opportunities to change things, there's a chance you may contribute to making a better world. The choice is yours*."

My question was a bit of a trick question. We need not box ourselves in completely. To say the following by Chomsky is quite idealistic: "*If you assume that there is an instinct for freedom, there are opportunities to change things, there's a chance you may contribute to making a better world."*

And for him to say this is quite pragmatic: "*Unless you believe that the future can be better, it's unlikely you will step up and take responsibility for making it so. The choice is yours*."

Let's shift our gaze to this morning's story about Zechariah's encounter with the Angel Gabriel and wonder about how his instincts, his mindset and approach and the experience of the moment all converged in his developing hope.

Elisabeth Johnson is a Lutheran interim minister in the twin cities area. She offers a commentary on the story of Zechariah, which does not occur in our three-year cycle of stories but which is so familiar from my childhood in a Lutheran grade school that I thought I would bring it forward. She also finds insight in this story.

She writes: *"From the outset, the biblical story is one of God choosing unlikely candidates and unexpected ways to accomplish God's purposes…in the Bible, we are encountered by a God for whom there are no dead ends—detours, perhaps—but not dead ends. In Scripture we are encountered by a God who always works for good, even when we mess things up, a God who specializes in making a way in the wilderness, opening up a future when none seems possible."* (Working Preacher 2019) Words form Elisabeth Johnson.

So, I wonder, was Zechariah a hopeful person?

We heard this key moment of words from Angel Gabriel: *"Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard… You will have joy and gladness…"*

In his faithful, dutiful living, was Zechariah seeking and receiving the gift of God – of joy and gladness? We heard about a dashed experience of hope – a crushed experience of hope. He and his wife Elizabeth had hoped for a child. And it seemed that that particular outcome had not occurred for them. And yet the angel promised that God would bring them joy and gladness. That was the "what" in the heart of God – the joy and gladness. The "how" is often up to both our capacity and the way our experiences unfold.

Was he hopeful at the time? Zechariah questioned, even argued against possibility. We heard, *"Zechariah said to the angel, 'How can I know that this will happen?'"*

"The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'"

Zechariah's story invites us to consider for our own lives what impact this oft spoken phrase may have: Let go and let God. Zechariah was offered the opportunity to have a radical pause in his communications while wondering about the promise of joy and gladness – imagining placing his hope in what God would unfold in his life.

And Jan Richardson takes us deeper into that realm of gritty hope. We heard her say:

"I can move and breathe easily in the gaping darkness… Each tunnel spills out into a clearing of light. I have to choose whether to stop in the light or to find the next dark tunnel that lies beyond…

There is never just one choice in the clearing. There are always several passageways farther along. I have to choose without seeing what's ahead."

Are you standing at the opening to a tunnel?

Are you moving through a tunnel?

Are you enjoying or struggling with the wide-open brightness of a clearing at this time in your life?

With Zechariah, with Jan, may we embrace the unfolding possibilities experienced in the tunnel and in the clearing. We will be born on wings of hope. And Love is counting on our hope. Amen.

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Luke 1:5-25, "Choosing"
Definitions quoted from Meriam-webster.com