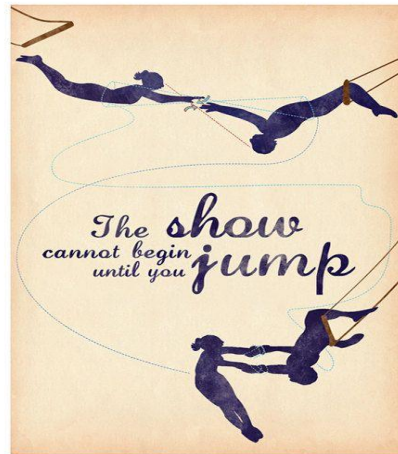


“Great Expectations – Daring to Fly”

December 2, 2018
Luke 1:5-13, 18-25

Rev. Kimberly Heath
Wall Street United Church



Today we've begun the season of Advent. Advent is all about waiting and preparing not just for Christmas, but for the rebirth of Jesus in our lives. The Bible story for this morning, about an unexpected birth, is the prequel, the lead-up to the Christmas story.

Zechariah is a priest and his wife Elizabeth is from the daughters of Aaron. They tell us this just to give us their credentials: they're from a good family. Not only that — the scripture goes on to say that they were righteous before God. But their lives were not perfect.

I often say that if you scratch the surface of any life you will find pain — and Zachariah and Elizabeth were no exception. They were not able to have children. That is an incredibly difficult and painful challenge for any couple, but in the days of the Bible it was often seen as a curse from God.

In other words, you must have done something to deserve this punishment. So, on top of the pain of not being able to conceive and bear a child was the pain of the stigma that others placed on Elizabeth. Elizabeth probably asked more times than we could count “Why me, Lord?” And no doubt Zechariah had prayed many prayers, but with no answer.

In spite of this ever-present pain that once was acute but had now become dull over the years, Zechariah and Elizabeth continued to serve God faithfully. One day it was Zechariah's turn to go into the most sacred part of the temple and light the incense. I can't help but wonder what

Zechariah was expecting as he went in to perform that sacred duty. This was not just a routine everyday thing even for him a priest — it was an honour to be the one to go in and light the incense, so I imagine he approached the place and the tasks with reverence and an awareness of the Holy. It is at this time that the angel Gabriel appears to him and tells him that his wife, Elizabeth, is going to have a son who will be called John. We know him today as John the Baptist, the first to recognize Jesus as the Saviour of the world.

Now I don't think John's father would have seen or heard the Angel had he not had his eyes open, looking for and expecting God's presence. As the Bible says: '*May you have ears to hear and eyes to see*'.

But he wasn't expecting the news that the angel gave. Elizabeth was past childbearing years, so he was no longer pleading, praying and clinging to that particular wish to have a child, but nevertheless his faith in God, his hope that God is good all the time is there.

Henri Nouwen talks about the difference between a hope-filled waiting and just wishing:

Waiting is open-ended. Open-ended waiting is hard for us because we tend to wait for something very concrete, for something that we wish to have. Much of our waiting is filled with wishes: "I wish that I would have a job. I wish that the weather would be better. I wish that the pain would go." We are full of wishes, and our waiting easily gets entangled in those wishes. For this reason, a lot of our waiting is not open-ended. Instead our waiting is a way of controlling the future. We want the future to go in a very specific direction, and if this does not happen we are disappointed and can even slip into despair."

Zachariah may have had a wish at one point, but he was now filled only with hope, hope that God would be present, hope that God would be good.

Life is hard, and naturally there are things that we wish for that we'd dearly like to be God's will also. It is not wrong to want and to pray for specific things. Do you remember the story of when Jesus healed the blind man Bartimaeus? Jesus called him forward and asked him "What do you want me to do for you?" and Bartimaeus says to Jesus: "My teacher, let me see again," and Jesus does indeed give him new sight. So, it is OK to ask Jesus for specific things in prayer. But when we ask for those specific things we have to do so with an open hand, not a hand that clings to that one thing. We have to be always open to God's will, not just our will. I think the difference lies in whether we are trying to follow God and be servants of God, or whether we are asking for God to follow us and to be our servants.

That's what the genie in the lamp is — a servant of the owner of the lamp. As wonderful as a genie in the lamp might be to have, it is not at all what God is.

It can be very painful when God does not answer our prayer the way we wish it to be answered. In our Forgiving class, we have noticed that there are even times where we may need to forgive God for the disappointment we have experienced. (To be clear, God does not cause bad things to happen. Life is not perfect and bad things happen. But because we don't fully understand God's ways, it can feel like God has let us down, and therefore we need to enter a process of forgiving God.) When we surrender our will and our lives, we discover that in the struggles and in the joys, God really *is* good. We discover a relationship that is far deeper than having our wishes fulfilled.

Alexander Soljenezhen wrote a book called *A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. In this book, Ivan is in a Soviet prison camp. The conditions are awful, and yet Ivan keeps his faith. On one occasion Ivan is praying with his eyes closed when a fellow prisoner notices him and says with ridicule, "Prayers won't help you get out of here any faster." Opening his eyes, Ivan answers, "I do not pray to get out of prison, but to do the will of God." That is a beautiful and incredibly mature response. Ultimately our Christian lives should not just be focused on getting out of our challenges, but somehow finding ways to serve God and therefore experience God within them.

When Zechariah goes in to the temple and sees the angel, and the angel tells him his prayers had been answered, as faithful as he was, he wasn't ready for that possibility. Anyone who has had the experience of having a baby knows all too well how it shakes up your life. You can try to create a schedule, but that life is really beyond our ability to control. A new baby radically changes anyone's life, *and when Jesus is born into your life it is no different!* That joy is worth the shakeup and the letting go of control in your life! Serve and follow the Lord, and accept that God's way, God's will and God's time are so different from ours. Be prepared to be *astounded* at the goodness and abundant life that a relationship with Jesus offers.

I started with Henry Nouwan and I want to close by telling you one of his stories.

"The Flying Rodleights" are trapeze artists who perform in the German circus Simoneit-Barum. When the circus came to Freiburg two years ago, my friends Franz and Reny invited me and my father to see the show. I will never forget how enraptured I became when I first saw the Rodleights move through the air, flying and catching as elegant dancers.

The next day, I returned to the circus to see them again and introduced myself to them as one of their great fans. They invited me to attend their practice sessions, gave me free tickets, asked me to dinner, and suggested I travel with them for a week in the near future. I did, and we became good friends.



“One day, I was sitting with Rodleigh, the leader of the troupe, in his caravan, talking about flying. He said, ‘As a flyer, I must have complete trust in my catcher. The public might think that I am the great star of the trapeze, but the real star is Joe, my catcher. He has to be there for me with split-second precision and grab me out of the air as I come to him in the long jump.’

‘How does it work?’ I asked.

‘The secret,’ Rodleigh said, ‘is that the flyer does nothing and the catcher does everything. When I fly to Joe, I have simply to stretch out my arms and hands and wait for him to catch me and pull me safely over the apron behind the catchbar.’

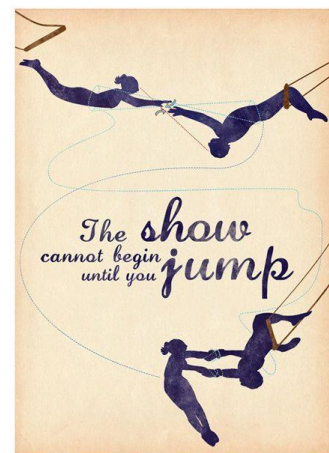
‘You do nothing!’ I said, surprised.

‘Nothing,’ Rodleigh repeated. ‘The worst thing the flyer can do is to try to catch the catcher. I am not supposed to catch Joe. It’s Joe’s task to catch me. If I grabbed Joe’s wrists, I might break them, or he might break mine, and that would be the end for both of us. A flyer must fly, and a catcher must catch, and the flyer must trust, with outstretched arms, that his catcher will be there for him.’

“When Rodleigh said this with so much conviction, the words of Jesus flashed through my mind: ‘Father into your hands I commend my Spirit.’ Dying is trusting in the catcher. To care for the dying is to say, ‘Don’t be afraid. Remember that you are the beloved child of God. He will be there when you make your long jump. Don’t try to grab him; he will grab you. Just stretch out your arms and hands and trust, trust, trust.’ “

Henri Nouwan saw it as an illustration for death, which is the ultimate of letting go — but it is just as much an illustration for life.

This Advent season, amidst all the hustle



and bustle of this time, in the midst of some of the pain of this season which can highlight all that we don't have; I pray that you will hope in the Lord of Life. I pray that you will let go and trust that God will catch you and hold you. For God has plans to fill you and redeem you, and bless you with life.

Thanks be to God. Amen.