

Title: Let There Be Hope

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Scripture: [Isaiah 11:1-9](#)

Text: [Luke 1:5-23](#)

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If you hope for something this Christmas, what is it? What do you want so much that you'll dream about it in your sleep, you'll wake with it on your mind, and you'll think about it every day until Christmas? What is your deepest hope of Christmas?

Questions about Christmas hope are easy for children. Maybe you remember hoping for a BB gun or a GI Joe. Maybe you wanted a Barbie Doll or an EZ Bake Oven or a My Little Pony. How about Star Wars Lego sets or American Girl doll? I heard this week that there aren't any hot toys this year. There is another Tickle me Elmo, the must have 1996 toy that is supposedly cuter and has an off button. As a parent who gave the original Tickle Me Elmo, I have to tell you that is a much needed improvement. There is Star Wars gear because of the movie's release and a big L.O.L surprise ball which requires an outlay of serious cash. But none are hard to get or hot commodities, at least in the minds of marketing experts. They may not think so but if a child hopes for it, it is a hot item. Children have a lot of hope around Christmas gifts and lots of parents will go to great extremes to make sure that their hope is fulfilled.

This Christmas, what do you hope for? It is my experience that adults have a tougher time publically acknowledging their deep-seated, wake-you-up in the night hope. It's not that there isn't hope present but much of our hope is so personal it can't be shared in public. I've heard them in private conversations over the last month and they sound like this:

- I hope our marriage stays together.
- I hope I see another Christmas.
- We hope our daughter comes to her senses and stays in school.
- I hope I can find a job.
- I hope he can stay sober.
- I hope we can manage the financial strains of Christmas.

You may own one of these hopes. Maybe I named yours. Or you may have one equally profound that is too hard to express publically. It is there, on your mind, in the back of your head, present. All of us have deep hope even if we can't name it out loud. What do you hope for? And, what gets in the way of your hope? In a word doubt. Doubt is the enemy of hope. "It won't happen, it can't happen, it will never happen."

The Christmas story begins with hope. "I hope I get pregnant." The line wasn't uttered by Mary to Joseph. Mary's pregnancy was a surprise and a scandal. Their relationship was just getting started, too early for intimacy. Her pregnancy broke the Hebraic laws.

"I hope I get pregnant" are the words spoken by Elizabeth to Zechariah. You can't find them in scripture but they are there. After a short preface, the Gospel of Luke begins with longing, telling us the story of two faithful priests named Elizabeth and Zechariah who lived faithful, blame-less lives. "But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years." (Luke 1: 7) Their hope has turned to doubt. As the years past, Zechariah and Elizabeth were convinced that it just wasn't going to be their lot in life to have a child.

Hope is rekindled in worship when Zechariah and Elizabeth were fulfilling their bi-annual priestly responsibilities in Jerusalem. There were 24 divisions of the priests in the house of Aaron and they took turns serving in the Temple in the Jerusalem. During their rotation, one priest is chosen by lot to burn incense on the altar in the Holy Place. While performing this task, a group would gather in the outer court to pray, waiting for the priest to return and bless them. You only got chosen to perform this duty once. Priests could spend a lifetime serving without being chosen. Zechariah hits the lottery. He is chosen and the crowd, along with his wife Elizabeth, waits for his return.

When he enters the Holy Place, he is shocked to find an angel standing by the altar. "When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him...." Can you blame him? The first and only time Zechariah gets to perform this task and he runs into an angel. In first century Judaism, angels were considered mercurial creatures. You never knew what they were going to do or say. This angel is going to say, "Let there be hope" and does. "...Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.'" (Luke 1:12-13)

What happens when an unrealized hope re-emerges? There is amazement, surprise but doubt is still present. Zechariah can't believe it and says so. "How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting

on in years." (Luke 1: 18) That sounds an awful lot like someone who has given in to doubt so much that all hope is gone. How do you convince someone that is given into doubt? The angel whose name is Gabriel does it two ways. First he name drops. "God and I were just talking about this." And because you don't believe me, you are going to think about this for nine months before you say another word. He strikes Zechariah mute.

By this time, the crowd outside the sanctuary had begun to worry about Zechariah because it has taken him too long. When he finally comes out he was unable to speak and they knew he had a vision. When they got home, Elizabeth conceives and the truth of Gabriel's vision was confirmed. They *will* have a son who will, as the angel promised Zechariah, "...turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God..."and "... make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luke 1: 16, 17b)

Nine months later, their son is born. On the eighth day, as is the custom, they took him to the Temple for circumcision and naming. It's a wonderful scene when Elizabeth, over the protests of others who wanted to name the boy Zechariah Junior, names him John. Zechariah confirms it by writing the name on a tablet and then, is suddenly able to speak. Out of his mouth comes a song of praise a loud declaration of "Let there be hope." He offers two reasons for hope and none have to do with the birth of his son and everything has to do with the birth of his son.

The first thing out of Zechariah's mouth is God is good to His word. Hope is claimed in the promises of God. Israel hoped that God would act on their behalf but so many years had passed that many doubted that a Savior would ever come. Zechariah believed again in God's promised covenant and says, "Let there be hope for "...the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them.... he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant." (Luke 1: 69, 72) Hope comes in believing that God's promises are true even if it doesn't happen as fast as we want or expect them to happen.

Seven hundred years earlier, the prophet Isaiah promised that a Savior, would spring forth from the house of Jesse and when this happens "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them." (Isaiah 11:6) It was something that the people of God held onto tightly. It was what shaped their identity and gave them a sense of their destiny. Someday, He will come. Their hope was in this promise but as the years past, hoped slipped away. Their hope had turned to doubt. With the birth of John the Baptist as the one who will point to the coming Messiah, the

promise was renewed, the covenant remembered and Zechariah's hope is reclaimed. He knows who he is and where he is going.

Billy Graham turned 99 just last month on November 7. He doesn't get out very often these days but when he does, he likes to tell a story about Albert Einstein. They met once traveling on a train as the conductor came down the aisle asking for tickets. Einstein couldn't find his ticket anywhere -- his pockets, his briefcase, the seat beside him. The conductor said, "Dr. Einstein, I know who you are. Everyone knows who you are. I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it." Einstein apologized and thanked the conductor.

As he moved down the aisle, the conductor looked back and saw Einstein on his hands and knees searching under the seat for his ticket. He went back and said, "Dr. Einstein, don't worry about your ticket. I'm sure you bought one. It's no problem. I know who you are." The great physicist looked up at the conductor and said, "Young man, I too, know who I am. The problem is, I don't know where I am going."

Billy Graham then points out that he is wearing a brand new suit and says "This is the suit in which I'll be buried. But when you hear I'm dead, I don't want you to remember the suit I'm wearing. I want you to remember this: I not only know who I am; I also know where I'm going."¹

Hope cannot be formed or claimed without knowing who you are and where you are going. Hope disappears when identity falters. Hope fades with the direction seems unsure. It is why this season is so important. As pilgrims to Bethlehem, we reclaim our identity as those who get hope by seeing the baby in the manger. When we see him again and we know who we are and where we are going. We even know who is driving the train!

Zechariah owns this, claims it and then adds it the second reason. "Let there be hope" because God has "raised up a mighty Savior for us..." His son John will point the way to this Savior and in him, the Savior will "give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins." (Luke 1:69, 77) We don't only know who we are and know the way we are going, when know what it will be like when we arrive. Hope is claimed in our future with God. In the child of Bethlehem, we know what will happen we get there, we have knowledge of our salvation and the forgiveness of our sin. Or as Zechariah says as he sings his song of hope "the darkness of sin and death will be given over to light" just the way Isaiah predicted. We can live in hope.

What does it mean to live in the knowledge of our salvation, to believe in the forgiveness of our sin? What does it mean to claim that hope? I think it is a lot like your childhood hope of about what is under the tree. Did you try to figure out what was there? Did you crawl under the tree, find the package with your name on it?

Did you shake it, smell it, feel in, and try to figure out just what you are getting? Did you ever figure out what one of the presents was?

One Christmas J. Daniel Baumann was doing that and figured out that the large package with his name on it was a set of golf clubs. It's pretty hard to wrap up a set of golf clubs, he says in his book *Dare to Believe*. But it was what he really hoped for, wanted more than anything. It was what kept him up at night, what he woke up thinking about in the morning. So he said, "When Mom wasn't around, I would go and feel the package, shake it, and pretend that I was on the golf course. The point is, I was already enjoying the pleasures of a future event; namely, the unwrapping. It had my name on it. I knew what it was." It was his, but he would have to wait until Christmas for it to be handed over to him. But waiting didn't take away from his hope because he knew this gift was exactly what he wanted. ²

I hope this gift is exactly what you want. It was what Zechariah and Elizabeth hoped for, not just a baby that they could call their own but a Messiah who would live out the promise of God. Their child begins the story of **the** child, the baby born in Bethlehem, God's only son. He comes down from heaven and is wrapped in swaddling clothes. There is a tag on Him that has your name on it. You can hold Him, talk to Him and get to know Him. But the unwrapping of his gift comes in our salvation, the moment when light shines into the darkness of our death and there is the forgiveness of our sin. Until then, we wait with hope, enjoying the pleasure of the future event.

I asked you as we began, "If you hope for something this Christmas, what it is?" Children hope for gifts that they dream about it in their sleep, wake with it on their minds, and think about it every day until Christmas.

We all come with a deeper desire. It may feel like it is a hope for a marriage to survive or a job to be offered. It might feel like hope for another year, or a better year or different year is your greatest and deepest hope. In truth the greatest and deepest hope that we all have is that hope that the promise of God is true and real. That type of hope is not dependent upon other people, circumstances, or possessions to confirm it. Instead, it is confidence in God's promise and future. Hope is claimed in the promises of God. Hope is sure of a future with God. If you have this, all of the other deep felt hopes of life can be managed if not realized.

God's first gift of Christmas is hope. You'll find it if like Zechariah and Elizabeth, when you have a clear sense of who you are, where you are going and what it will be like when the hope is unwrapped.

I hope you'll own that, claim it. Live by it. When you do, you declare "Let there be hope."

¹ John Huffman, "Who Are You, and Where Are You Going?", Preaching Conference 2002, PreachingToday.com.

² Christmas Gift Revelation @ <http://www.sermons.org/xmasillus.html>