

Elizabeth and Zechariah (People of Hope)

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church November 29th, 2020 – Luke 1)

An older couple – Elizabeth and Zechariah living in the hills.

A couple who have spent their lives waiting. A couple who have spent their lives hoping.

Waiting and hoping for a child. Waiting and hoping for the promised Messiah.

A good couple – righteous, blameless, obeying all of God's commands. Zechariah a priest. Elizabeth descended from Aaron.

A faithful couple – faithful to God and each other.

Today is the first Sunday in Advent. The Christian calendar sets aside this month to wait, to ponder and prepare ourselves for the Christmas season, to meditate on the child who is born and grows up to be our Lord. Each week we follow a theme – hope, peace, joy and love. Today is hope.

Hope says Archbishop Desmond Tutu – is being able to see that there is light despite the darkness.

Henri Nouwen¹ in an advent reflection has some principles for waiting, for waiting in hope. These principles are derived from some observations he makes from the Christmas story. The Christmas story he says, is full of characters that are waiting in hope – Elizabeth and Zechariah wait with hope, Anna and Simeon have spent decades waiting with hope, Mary waits and hopes and they all represent Israel as she waits in hope for her Messiah. They are all people who wait in hope, they are attentive and live expectant lives.

Nouwen says waiting in hope means:

1. Waiting with a sense of promise - the secret of the waiting is that the seed has been planted, that something has begun.
2. Waiting is active – active waiting means to be present fully to the moment, in the conviction that something is happening where you are and that you want to be present to it.
3. Waiting takes patience – it takes a willingness to stay where we are and live the situation out to the full, in the belief that, something hidden there will manifest itself to us.
4. Waiting is open-ended – we don't know exactly when, where or how the promise or hope will be fulfilled, but we nurture the moment and wait to see what will be.
5. Waiting is filled with hope – hope is trusting that something will be fulfilled.
6. We wait together – Mary and Elizabeth, suggests Nouwen, wait together, they create space for each other to wait. They affirm in each other that something was happening that was worth waiting for.

So, what were Elizabeth and Zechariah hoping for? An older couple who are childless. Barren-ness at that time was shameful, children were a blessing from God, so having no children was shameful. However, Elizabeth is not alone, the history of God's people has

¹ 'Waiting for God' by Henri Nouwen in Watch for the Light – Readings for Advent and Christmas, The Plough Publishing House

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other women who it seemed, were barren, but eventually had children who became great leaders – Sarah and Isaac, Hannah and Samuel. Is it possible in her older years that Elizabeth would have a child?

Zechariah a priest. He would have shared in the hopes of Israel as they awaited a Messiah who would save the people, a Messiah who would bring peace and justice. He would have known the scriptures, that there would be one who came to prepare the way for the Lord, for the Messiah. Zechariah is also a man who would have hoped for a child, if only for the reason to take away his wife's shame. Is it possible that they could have a child in their later years?

Chosen to enter the sanctuary one day to offer prayers and incense. He is in there for an extraordinarily long time, the people outside are waiting and wondering what is going on. In that place Zechariah is met by the angel Gabriel who gives him almost unbelievable news – his wife will have a son called John. Did he dare believe? Was he imagining this? The realist in him thinks this is impossible. Struck mute after the encounter he can only sign or write for almost one year. Waiting in hope but with a touch of cynicism and disbelief.

Elizabeth, how she hoped for a child, to take away her disgrace. Is it possible that the news Zechariah tells her will come true or was he hallucinating – all that incense might just have affected him. Sure enough, she becomes pregnant. Worried though – about what people might think, worried about Zechariah and what people might be thinking about him, worried about the safety of her child and pregnancy, so she hides away for five months. I wonder what she hoped for this child – a child they had been told would prepare the way for the Messiah for whom they hoped and prayed. A child who wouldn't drink wine, who would turn people back to God. Did she imagine his lifestyle – eating locusts and honey, living out in the wilderness and meeting an untimely death because of his actions.

As she waits and ponders what will happen, she receives a visit from a distant relative – Mary. A younger relative of hers who seems to have got herself into a bit of trouble – young, pregnant and unmarried. Mary also had had an encounter with an angel, not dissimilar to Zechariah (in fact the same angel – Gabriel) – told she would have a child who would change the world. She too was afraid and a little bit disbelieving but she came to accept her new reality. As Mary arrived Elizabeth was six months pregnant and she felt the baby leap with joy when she heard Mary's voice. A sign perhaps?

Elizabeth delivers her son and the neighbours rejoice with her. Going against custom they do not name the child Zechariah, they do, as the angel had said and call him John. Zechariah has to write this down as he was still unable to speak. Once named, the father of John utters or sings his praises and offers a prophecy about this child.

Elizabeth and Zechariah have voiced the hopes of their people.
What are your hopes this Advent?

What hopes do you have for the world?

What hopes do you have for the church?

What hopes do you have for yourself and your loved ones?

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May our waiting be active, done with a sense of promise, be open-ended, patient, done together and hope filled.

As we approach Christmas may each of you be filled with expectancy, joy, peace and hope as you ponder the great gift that God gives us in Jesus the Christ who was, who is and who will be. Amen.