

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
“Do You Hear What I Hear: Hoping in God”
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Isaiah 61:1-6; Luke 1:46-55

It appeared to be hopeless. They were surrounded with no way out. The temperatures were well below freezing, the snow was flying and the Germans had Ben and his comrades surrounded at Bastogne almost exactly seventy years ago this week. For those of you who don't know the story, in December of 1944, at almost exactly seventy-four years ago next week, the German army counterattacked the advancing Allied armies in the what we call the Battle of the Bulge. As the Germans rapidly advanced, they cut off a great number of soldiers from the 182nd Airborne, including Ben, a member of my former congregation, who would be severely wounded in the battle. Many of the men retreated to the city of Bastogne where they were, as I said, surrounded. I'm not sure how his participation in the battle came up in conversation and so I asked him about it. He described just how hopeless it seemed and yet, he said, no one gave up hope. I asked him how that was possible. He thought for a moment and then said, “We had hope because we knew that we were not forgotten and that help was on its way.”

That conversation has been swirling through my brain as I thought about how Mary could have had the hope necessary to burst into her song that we call the Magnificat. In that song, she proclaims that God has shown the strength of God's arms. That God has brought the high low, and lifted the low to a place of honor. The rich have been sent away empty and the empty have been filled. This is a song of hope, which would not seem to fit considering that Mary was in a hopeless situation. Her situation was hopeless because domination by Rome was not a possibility but a reality. And the Romans did not simply want to occupy, but like the Borg of Star Trek fame, they wanted to assimilate the people into the Roman way of life. They told the people that resistance was futile. So how was it that Mary found the hope to keep her going? The hope to proclaim a victory that had not occurred? I would argue that this hope came from the fact that she learned that she and God's people had not been forgotten and that help was on the way.

To understand Mary's hope, we should return to the angelic visitation that she had experienced prior to her song. What this visitation said was, God has not forgotten you. On the surface, this visitation might not seem like much in terms of the Biblical story. In scripture, angels seem pop up all over the place. But even for Mary, this was a big deal because an angelic visit was not simply an extraordinary thing, but it was a sign, a signal that God was back in the game. That God may have been away for a while but now God was in the house. That God was listening to the cries of God's people, even as God had heard the cry of God's people in Egypt.

To have an angel arrive, regardless of the message, meant that God's silence was being broken and that God was about to do something amazing.

This takes us then to the second part of the angelic visit. The angel let Mary know that help was on the way, and that help would be coming from her unborn son. The angel said, "*And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.*" This was the message for which she had been waiting. This was the message that said she could be filled with hope. This was the message that allowed her to burst forth into her song where she could proclaim, "*He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy.*" God had not forgotten God's people and help was on the way God had always promised it would be.

This message is why Advent matters. Advent matters because there are moments when we want to give up hope. When we want to say, chuck it all. Nothing will ever change. Why bother. We think and say these things in part because we feel ourselves surrounded and cut off, without a way out. It is into those moments that Advent comes; that Mary's Magnificat comes. They come as a reminder that we have not been forgotten. God may appear to be silent, but God is not gone. And God will send us help; help in the form of friends, forgiveness, restoration, eternal life and a host of other ways. For God is the one who fulfills God's promises according to the promises made to Abraham, long, long ago.

My challenge to you then is this, to ask yourselves, How am I allowing Advent to give me hope, that I might continue to live as a child of God, in even the most difficult moments of life?