

Pastor Jamie's Sermon

Good Shepherd Church, December 22, 2024
"Hope Is Worth the Risk"

The Message

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, the words we're focusing on as part of our Advent sermon series are "Hope Is Worth the Risk."

This is a really tough one to preach on because it is incredibly vulnerable to hope.

Hope can feel like a tremendous risk, and the more hope we have in something, the greater the risk of disappointment.

Disappointment isn't the only risk, either.

There is the risk of heartbreak – of giving yourself fully to someone or something and then having your heart shattered when you dared to hope.

Have you ever found yourself resisting hope because you fear that if you become emotionally invested, you might "jinx" the situation and then be disappointed when it doesn't work out?

Of course! I think we have all been there.

And yet, if we aren't willing to take the risk - to be vulnerable and allow ourselves to hope - we become cynical.

Cynicism *feels* like a safer, more straightforward path.

But cynicism doesn't change our lives, nor does it change the world. *Hope* changes our lives, and *hope* changes the world.

I'll give you an example.

When I finally started thinking about becoming a pastor, I was incredibly cynical.

I was cynical about the process, I was cynical about my abilities to do the job, and I was even cynical about my decision to even try to seek ordination.

It was so much easier for me to tell myself it was unlikely that I would make it through the process because it would hurt less if I failed.

I was putting a lot of time, money, and energy into walking this path, and I wasn't even certain anything would come of it.

In fact, I wasn't even overly optimistic about it, and I didn't even dare to hope, at least initially.

But, my first meeting with the ordination committee went better than I could have expected, and some of those cynical thoughts I had started to ease a little.

And then my second meeting went fairly well too.

And then the third. And before I knew it, I was becoming more confident that they weren't going to boot me out of the program.

And finally, I began to dare to hope that maybe all of this work I was doing and the risks I was taking would be worth it.

And of course, now I know it was.

But interestingly, it's easier now to look back at that period in my life and recognize that what I thought was cynicism was actually hope.

If I had no hope and I hadn't put that hope into action and kept moving along the path, I would not have made it this far.

This past week, I attended something called a "Clergy Cluster" with some pastoral colleagues from the Lutheran church.

We discussed the passage we read today – Mary's song, also known as the Magnificat.

And we talked about the hope that Mary had, despite the incredible risk of opening her body and her heart to the idea of bearing the child of the Holy Spirit.

But, I'm not sure that Mary saw it as hope at the time.

I think Mary was scared. She was an unwed teenager, and I guarantee she, like me, thought more than once "why me, God? I am nothing special, and I am not sure I'm strong enough or brave enough to do what you're asking of me."

And yet, her actions, her willingness to accept her role despite her uncertainty, demonstrated radical hope and incredible vulnerability.

I can only imagine that resisting hope felt easier in the moment.

But by the time she sings her song, it is a beautiful song of hope and of courage.

Mary voices a hope that challenges the status quo and sings of a reality where justice and mercy reigns.

She sings of bringing down the mighty, exalting the humble, filling the hungry, and leaving the rich empty.

She and Elizabeth share their hopes and their fears with one another. They cry, they sing, they lament, and they hope beyond hope that everything will work out in the end.

Mary weaves through her song a vision of the world as God intends it, stitching together a pattern of justice and mercy.

Mary reminds us that hope is worth the risk. We can choose cynicism because it's the easier path, or we can choose hope because it is the courageous path.

We can choose hope because, even though there is a possibility that we will be disappointed, we do not have a chance of changing ourselves, our lives, or our world without hope.

We must be willing to take the risk, like Mary and Joseph and Elizabeth, because our hope is a reflection of God's plans for the world – plans for renewal and restoration in the face of despair and hopelessness.

Practicing hope is not easy, we know this.

There are people in the world who are suffering more than we could ever imagine. It feels disingenuous to tell those who are suffering to simply have hope.

We know it is not that easy.

But, what if we who are able practiced hope on behalf of those who are weary and worn down and becoming hopeless?

Could our expressions of hope become a life raft for others?

Could we actively work to set aside our cynicism, or at least become aware of it when it penetrates our consciousness? Could we instead make hope a meaningful spiritual practice?

Could we think of hope as a muscle – one that can be worked, flexed, strengthened, and stretched?

If we imagine hope as action, rather than mere optimism, it becomes easier to see how hope is worth the risk.

Doing the work and being vulnerable to hope allows us to change our lives, the lives of those around us, and perhaps even the world.

So, hold onto hope despite the risks.

The voice of cynicism can be loud, but cynicism also often lies to us.

But, hope is worth fighting for.

May the Spirit of God surround you this season so that you might trust like Joseph and sing like Mary.

The same hope they held is still alive today, transforming creation into God's will for justice and peace.

As you prepare your heart for Christ's arrival, may you make room for God's presence, and may your actions reflect God's hope for humanity. Amen.

Let us pray:

Holy God, The stories of Advent are stories many of us have heard before. We've arranged the nativity scenes. We've read the children's books. We've seen the movies. We've sung the songs. But as we come to your scripture this morning, we pray: help us begin again. Clear the distractions from our minds. Center us in this space. Move through the protective barriers we surround ourselves with and speak to us here and now. We are listening. We are hopeful. Amen.

Sermon References:

Commentary by Kayla Craig | A Sanctified Art LLC | sanctifiedart.org.

Prayer by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed | A Sanctified Art LLC | sanctifiedart.org.