

Aloha everyone,

You know the Bible tells us that, “¹² Hope deferred makes the heart sick, but a desire fulfilled is a tree of life,” (Proverbs 13:12 ESV).

As kids, many of us probably remember watching that pile of presents grow under the Christmas tree. Maybe you would look for the tags with your name on it and put those gifts in a special pile. Or if you were more kolohe, you might even look for a corner of wrapping paper you could peak under to see what was inside. Kids, don't try this at home!

Growing up we had this felt calendar that my Mom would bring out during the holidays so we could count down the days to Christmas, and it's a tradition I've continued with my own children. With each day that went by you would wonder, with great anticipation, what each of those presents might be. And, if you would get that one special gift.

Maybe you remember the feeling of disappointment when you opened each present only to discover you didn't get what you hoped for. You do your best to look happy but inside the wait wasn't worth it. But wait! What's this? Mom and Dad bring out one last present from its hiding place. And this one is from you-know-who. You peel back the wrapping paper and sure enough, Santa remembered exactly what you asked for. Christmas is saved! The wait was worth it.

And whether it's a gift on Christmas or something else — a job, a relationship, a marriage, your health, all of us know what it's like to hope for something and either be disappointed or relieved.

The Bible defines hope as a confident expectation that God will do what He says. It's more than wishful thinking or daydreaming and its power is not based on the strength of our desire but in the faithfulness of God's character. And in every generation there have been a remnant of people who wait on God's promises and live with the expectation that He will do what He said. How about you?

In many places today you will be asked to do a temperature check at the door. As we gather for services at the Hope Center, each of us will do a temperature check. But what if, instead of reading the temperature of your body, this device could read the temperature of your heart. What would it say? Do we still burn with the same fervency for God as before or has our hope grown colder in this season?

You see, at some point in our Christian life, every single one of us will go through a season where God seems inactive. We'll each go through seasons where God seems silent. And it's in these moments we'll wonder to ourselves, “Why am I doing this?” Why am I still holding on? Why am I still trying to live differently? Why am I still missing out? Why am I still believing? What am I getting out of this? And if you've ever asked those questions, the story of Christmas is for you.

At the beginning of the Christmas story, we're introduced to a couple who belonged to that remnant who dared to believe against all hope.

Their names were Zechariah and Elizabeth and we find their story in Luke 1.

“In the days of Herod, king of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, of the division of Abijah. And he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth,” (Luke 1:5).

So Zechariah and Elizabeth were both descendants of the Priestly line of Israel. Today we would say they were PK's (or Pastor's kids). But unlike the PK's you read about in the news, these two were doing it right. The Bible says,

“And they were both righteous before God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and statutes of the Lord,” (Luke 1:6).

To live righteously means to live rightly. So to be righteous before God means that when God looks at you He says, “They're doing it right.” To walk blamelessly means, that if someone were to hire a private investigator to try to dig up some dirt on you, they would have nothing to report.

So everyday, this couple would wake up and live their lives with the expectation that God would fulfill the promises He had made to His people. The only problem, was that for the past 700 hundred years, God had been seemingly silent. For generations God's people waited with eager anticipation but things seemingly went from bad to worse. Israel was conquered over and over and over again. Then, when Zechariah and Elizabeth were children, in 65 BC, Pompei the Great (The great Roman General) marched into Jerusalem, occupied the city, walked into the temple, marched past the temple guards and the priests into the most sacred place of the Temple called the Holy of Holies. This was a place that only the Jewish High Priest could enter, and only once a year, and to do so without the proper rights meant certain and instant death. The Jews believed God would strike you dead. And Pompei the Great walked right into the Holy of Holies, stood right before the ark of the covenant, and nothing happened to him. Then word spread amongst all the people that Jupiter the god of the Romans must be more powerful than Yahweh the God of the Israelites. And many Jews during that time turned away from Temple worship and their belief in God. After all, what was the point? God had seemingly abandoned them.

And Zechariah was a boy when this happened. His father a priest. And despite everything he witnessed and everything in his background, that little boy grew up to serve the Lord. And everyday, he and Elizabeth lived with the expectation that God would fulfill His promises.

And how do you think that went for them? Two people holding out hope in the Lord when so many had fallen away. How was that working out for them?

“But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were advanced in years,” (Luke 1:7).

Hold on! Wait a minute! You mean to tell me, that this couple is hoping in the Lord, they're waking up everyday with the expectation that Christmas is coming, that the Messiah is near, that God will fulfill His promises, when in fact everything seems to point to the contrary, and they can't have children? Mmhmm. And it wasn't as if they weren't trying. We're told later that they prayed for a child. See, in those days, if you couldn't bear children there was a religious stigma that you were cursed and that God was withholding that from you. So Elizabeth had lived with this pain and shame into her old years. And I'm sure they had hoped with great expectation that God would bless them with a child in their 20s. They probably kept praying fervently into their 30s. Just for the sake of it they kept praying into their 40s. Maybe they almost quit praying in their 50s. But now the Bible says they were advanced in years. It was too late.

And in those moments when we ask the question, “God are you listening? God do you see me? Does You even care? Christmas tells us that the answers is a resounding, “YES”.

⁸ Now while he was serving as priest before God when his division was on duty, ⁹ according to the custom of the priesthood, he was chosen by lot to enter the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And the whole multitude of the people were praying outside at the hour of incense,” (Luke 1:8-10).

After being introduced to Zechariah and Elizabeth, we are told that Zechariah went into work one day and was selected from amongst the Priests to burn the incense while the rest of the Priests waited outside. So Zechariah is alone in the temple.

¹¹ And there appeared to him an angel of the Lord standing on the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² And Zechariah was troubled when he saw him, and fear fell upon him,” (Luke 1:11).

For those of you familiar with scripture, you know that this is a typical response when an angel appears. You hear about people who have encounters with angels in modern times and it's always, “It felt like a warm blanket of light and the angel caressed my cheek with his feathers.” And not to throw shade on anyone's story but that doesn't sound like the angels I've read about. In the Bible, when an angel appears people are terrified.

¹³ But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard,”

Your prayer has been heard. How many of you need to hear that today? Just to know you've been heard. That your prayer hasn't fallen on deaf ears. God hears you. He's listening. Those prayers that keep you up at night, those prayers nobody else hears, God hears.

“and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. [And which John is this? John the Baptist] ¹⁴ And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great before the Lord. And he must not drink wine or strong drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. ¹⁶ And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, ¹⁷ and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared,” (Luke 1:13-17).

He's saying God has heard you! He's seen your faithfulness! And you're going to have a son — And not just any son. He will be set apart from birth. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit. And all those who fell away and lost hope, he will turn many of them back to the Lord their God. Like the prophets of old. And his mission will be to prepare the people for what comes next. You see, this is just the opening act. This is just the warmup. God's promises are coming to pass and you Zechariah and your wife get front-row-seats to the greatest event in history.

And even though it was the wrong thing to say, I love the honesty of Zechariah's response. Husbands take notes.

¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

I'm an old man and my wife, how do I put this, (you know these things tend to get written down), she's well along in years. I love the angels response!

¹⁹ The angel said to him, “I am Gabriel.

Hello? You're talking to an angel!

I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time," (Luke 1:19-20).

Read that last line once more, "Which will come true at their appointed time."

Hold on. You mean to tell me that God has had this day marked on His calendar all along? You mean He watched as His people abandoned Him? He was listening, He was working, He was moving, He wasn't inactive? He was planning this all along? There was an appointed time? Mmhmm.

²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people," (Luke 1:23-25).

And this is the dilemma that each of us face. This is the choice each of us will make. Will we stay or will we go? Will we continue to hope or will we walk away? Will we pass on the hope we've been given or will it end with us? Each of us will walk through seasons when God seems silent — when He seems inactive. I don't know if I want to keep being open about my faith because every time I do people get uncomfortable. I don't know if I want to keep pursuing God, I don't feel like I'm getting anything out of it. If you're a student maybe you ask yourself, "Why don't I cheat? Everyone else gets away with it." "Why am I waiting on God for a relationship? No one else is doing it." Every generation has a remnant of people who choose to live blamelessly before the Lord and live with the expectation that He will fulfill His promises. If you find yourself in a dilemma like this — welcome to the Christian life! That's normal! You are in good company! Following God means taking the unpopular road, making the difficult decision, walking away from the crowd, being misunderstood, living for an audience of One. If you're part of that remnant, I want you to know, your faith in God is not misplaced. God hears your prayers. God is not inactive. He is working all things for good. He sees your faithfulness. Your hope is not in vain.

²⁶ In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary," (Luke 1:26-27).

This is the story of Christmas. It's God's story. It's our story. It's a story of struggle and hardship. We find people in their darkest night. But in the midst of the darkness God shines His glorious light. And I pray that this Christmas you would take hope in what God will do. Because all of God's promises are yes and amen.

⁹ And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up," (Galatians 6:9).

Closing Prayer.