

I love this gospel lesson... First of all, can't you just picture Mary and Elizabeth together? We have Elizabeth who is advanced in age, six months pregnant with John the Baptist. And we also have the teenager Mary who is pregnant with Jesus-- both incredible stories of divine intervention.

We have the wise Elizabeth full of the Holy Spirit, proclaim the blessedness of Mary. We have John the Baptist, the unborn baby of Elizabeth leaping at the sound of Mary's greeting; already a connection between John and Jesus.

We have Mary full of joy; she bursts out with the Magnificat; the prayer that was uttered when Hannah was pregnant with Samuel. We know that song so well, I understand we sing it during our Lenten services when we do the Holden Evening Prayers. There are a lot of connections in this story, and a lot of joy and wonder.

Of our four Gospel accounts, this story only appears in Luke. And Luke is a wonderful story teller. Luke is about details and the pace of the narrative is slower. Can't you just imagine these two pregnant women coming together, sharing their hopes, and sharing their joy? There is just something universally celebrated in this kind of coming together. I guess you could say the story is pregnant with meaning...

Quick story... It was a long time ago, but I remember when Kris and I were expecting our first child. We were organized and so optimistic... We had other friends who were also pregnant. We planned showers for each other. We accumulated lots of stuff: diapers, pacifiers, onesies, footsies, blankies, car seats-- it takes a lot of stuff to care for a baby!

And of course, since Kris is a labor and delivery nurse, we had all kinds of birth plans. We got to know our nurse-midwives very well, we went to all the prenatal appointments together, and we attended Lamaze classes...

We owned a small home in south Minneapolis... I remember finishing a new bed room; hanging sheet rock, and painting. We also had to buy a lot of baby furniture... One of the things

I remember that we purchased was a rocking chair—ya gotta have a good rocking chair! We were really prepared...

I guess today we call all that busy activity “nesting.” It’s all about anticipation, and it’s all about getting ready. And believe me; men do this just as much as women!

And so, can’t you just imagine Mary and Elizabeth together, a thousand things to talk about, a thousand things to plan for.

One of the things I remember so vividly about that time of “nesting,” was the sheer power of hopes, possibilities, and change. It’s amazing how the mind suddenly grasps onto how a new baby will alter things!

I remember reflecting about my career, thinking about our home, wondering if we needed a four-door sedan instead of our two-door hatchback, speculating about how much sleep I would get. Babies change lives; it just seemed prudent to prepare for these things.

And along with all the upcoming change, there was an amazing sense of awe and wonder, and an incredible feeling of anticipation and joy. I remember wondering what this new life would be like: who would this person grow up to be-- the values, the friends, what kind of work would this person accomplish.

It was as if the whole world was new opportunity, and this new baby was a blank canvass entering the world, rich with exciting possibilities. I think that’s partly why we love our children so much-- we not only love their reflection of us-- we also fall in love with their hopes and possibilities.

And truth is, it’s not only our children, it’s all the children. The children in our church, our neighborhoods, our community... Every baby that is born, is new hope...

And so, it seems so appropriate that during this season of advent when we wait for the coming of Jesus, that we should use this pregnant opportunity to do some reflecting on those things for which we hope for, a time of nesting and anticipation.

Can't you just relate with Mary as she launches into the Magnificat? Isn't it palpable, and don't we see a glimmer of that hope and joy in our own yearning?

In a very real way, Mary's song is also our song. It speaks the universal hope of belonging, of the redemption of the lowly and the lofty, of strength and mercy, of the hungry being filled, of the leveling and humanizing of all people. These are things that I hope for, for my children. And I trust that you also long for these things.

At the foundation of all of us is a primal trust in the goodness of this creation, the goodness of God's purposes... And I think this is a universal hope shared around the world. Where-ever there are babies being born in this world, there is living hope, this breathing insistence that somehow life can and will be better.

Hope is an amazing thing... It's truly miraculous... Hope imagines a better world, and hope reaches into our hearts to bring that world into being. Hope is like human energy; it stirs us to action. Hope is like the wind in our sails... And again, this is not Hocus Pocus religion, hope is as real as you and me...

And as wonderful as Hope is, as we've talked about before, it's also risky and dangerous. We've all been terribly disappointed in our lives... We all know what it's like to hope for something and then have it crumble apart. Frankly, sometimes hope takes courage and persistence and stubbornness.

Another story... It was the same year that Kris and I were expecting our first child, that our best friend's son died of sudden infant death syndrome. Talk about devastating. It was horrible... It was a time of weeping and gnashing of teeth; absolute despair. Sometimes the line between **incredible hope** and **devastating anguish** can be so very thin. It's at times like these that we

need each other; we need others to be present to our pain; we need others to carry the hope of our hearts, because frankly, there are times when we simply can't.

Sometimes life can be wonderfully exciting and hopeful; and sometimes life can be devastating. And to be truthful, this is where we live our lives, always teetering between hope and anguish...

And this is why the advent or the coming of Christ is such good news. In all of our human experiences, in all the heartache, there is still this trust in the goodness of God's ultimate purposes and intentions. You see at the foundation of all of us, is this pregnant belief that tomorrow will be better than today. With every generation, hope is carried forward...

You see this hope can only come from God. This hope is insistent; this hope is unrelenting, and it is stronger than all our despair. What we deeply long for is Emmanuel, we want God to be with us. To be present to our pain, to take us by the hand and lead us back into the light and hope. Frankly, I don't know how anyone could get out of bed in the morning, without some hope...

And this is why church is so important... We are a community of people holding hope for one another when sometimes we can't... We covenant to love one another... We covenant to journey together, to share in our hopes as well as our disappointments. And it's exactly because of this love, that we come together and worship the God who created all things.

In this season of advent, when we wait expectantly for the coming of Jesus, this is a time to be nesting, a time to reflect about our children, to dream big dreams, and articulate the hope that our hearts yearn for... It's also a time to pray for courage.

Change is coming and it might be prudent to think about. Imagine a world where all people are valued, all people contribute. Imagine a world where mercy triumphs over judgment; a world where all people are rich in generosity and servant hood... Imagine a world where hunger is no more and where terror is replaced with peace.... To use the words of the Prophet Isaiah, imagine a world where the lamb lays down with the lion...

I hope for my kids, a world where God's kingdom comes on earth as it is in heaven. And despite all the wars and rumors of wars, my confidence is high... The God who is, and is yet to come is a God who creates hope in our hearts, a God who brings hope into reality, and a God who is relentless...

What are your deepest hopes and dreams for this world? What are your hopes for your children, for all our children? Christmas is close, just a few days away, as we contemplate this birth, as we prepare the nest for future generations, what new hope might be born in your heart? What new courage will God give you?

On Christmas day we will read that the "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it..." Believe me, the light that was born so many years, keeps coming and coming, and thanks be to God...

Amen.