

The gospel of Luke begins with the birth narrative of God’s good news and gift of Jesus. A birth narrative is a natural place for a story of life to begin. We can resonate with birth stories because we have all been apart. However, when you listen and take in the whole of Luke’s telling of the birth of God’s good news and gift of Jesus it is uniquely evident in its inclusion and celebration of characters often overlooked and left in the shadows of God’s glorious Son by many. Luke holds the birth narrative of Jesus alongside the birth of John the Baptist, a societal outcast living on locusts and honey and dressed in camel hair, and celebrates the roles of both Mary as Jesus’ mother and Elizabeth as John’s mother. Luke celebrates the prophecy of Zechariah connecting the birth of God’s good news and gift of Jesus to God’s chosen people in Israel. Luke’s telling of the birth includes the lowly shepherds in the field. Luke’s telling of the birth recognizes the joy of Simeon and Anna, a couple living into their late years of life (many of which have been relentlessly hoping for God’s revelation for God’s people)- finally meeting the coming of God in Jesus as an answer to their prayers for redemption and salvation. Luke’s narrative of Jesus’ life is also where we encounter Jesus’ teaching in the temple at a very young age. All this in just the first 2 chapters. Come to chapter 3 and Luke celebrates the ministry of John the Baptist as Jesus is baptized in the Jordan River. John’s testimony places emphasis for all to prepare the way for the one who will baptize with the Spirit. Chapter 4 then begins with Jesus’ time in the wilderness for 40 days and the embodiment of his divinity to overcome the temptation of the devil, not just once, but three times. Upon Jesus’ return from the wilderness, Luke lays out the foundation of Jesus’ purpose and passion throughout this life and ministry.

Read Luke 4:16-21

These few verses nestled here in the fourth chapter of Luke’s gospel pack a punch. These verses define the essence of Jesus’ mission within the Isaianic hope for the restoration of Israel. You see, Israel had a need, a deep desire, to be restored and as far as anyone truthful enough to the reality around them could tell, God was their only hope. This is what Isaiah prophesied. Only God could release them (forgive them of their sins) and restore sight to those blind (physically as we would read about Jesus doing but more so spiritually). Only God had the willingness and humility to include all the “poor” and “marginalized” and “outcast from social and religious intercourse” within the gift of salvation. God is not a God of exclusion but inclusion. God’s love, power, grace, mercy, forgiveness, sanctification, and salvation are for all. Only God could deliver hope like this.

Some might argue we need not look any further than these verses to understand why God sent Jesus and what Jesus' purpose was to fulfill. As a matter of fact, Luke shares Jesus' words, "Today this scripture (Isaiah's prophecy and hope) has been fulfilled in your hearing." What does that mean? Jesus said, "Here I Am! I am he who will do all these things." And because of Jesus' fulfillment and teachings, it would only be natural for us to then inherit from Jesus this mission as God's children, as Christ's church, for ourselves.

**The Spirit of the Lord has anointed us to do what Jesus was sent to do:
bring good news to the poor
proclaim release (forgiveness of sins) to the captive
proclaim recovery of sight to the blind
let the oppressed go free
proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Isaiah 58:6, 61:1-2)**

Wow! What a mission!

How are we doing living into this mission?

How are we doing living into this hope embodied by our Lord and Savior?

Did you know this is the foundational mission and driving force of the Presbyterian Church (USA), the denomination in which we as First Presbyterian Church of Lynchburg are connected. From June 24 through July 5, I was honored with the privilege and call to serve as a commissioner to the General Assembly of the PCUSA. The General Assembly meets every two years to act as one church united in mission and call to serve our Lord and Savior Jesus through worship, fellowship, discernment, prayer, and polity. In my preparations to participate, I was asked on several occasions what I was interested in or excited about learning at GA. What I was most hyped up about was being a part of the National (World) conversation of the Church. You see, it is pretty easy to get bottled up in our small particular bottle here at FPCLY, and even within our neighborhood of the Presbytery, that I forget sometimes just how big and connected Christ's Church is. From the small and rural churches that make up roughly 78% of PCUSA congregations to the large corporate sized churches taking up an entire city block to the mission coworker serving in Guatemala or Malawi or South Sudan to the advisory delegates lobbying within the Office of Public Witness or United Nations or World Council of Churches. And this is just a snapshot of the PCUSA. We are also in communion with several other denominations like Disciples of Christ and Presbyterian Churches in Korea and Africa. You got it, the PCUSA has a voice and hand and witness and a mission in all of these and so much more.

And did you know they all have one thing in common? The desire to relentlessly pursue and work toward the good news of Jesus and faithfully embody, as Jesus fulfilled, justice and righteousness to all- no exclusions, no excuses. Why? Because to do so is to live into and share the hope only God can provide.

The apostle Paul writes in his letter to the Ephesians a reminder, **“remember that you were a time without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But... But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it.”** (Eph. 2:12-16)

Jesus was revolutionary. Jesus was infectious. Crowds recognized him and followed him. People desired to but touch and get a piece of his cloak. Why? Because Jesus embodied the power and peace and love and hope of God.

Here is what I hear God asking me in this: Are you there? Do you recognize your need of God and so desire after Jesus- even for just a piece, a sliver, a glimpse?

I think of the efforts I have made to simply catch of glimpse of a celebrity artist or athlete. I think to myself, if I can just get a glimpse of what they look like, see them in person, maybe even shake their hand, my life would be changed forever. I had this thought when I attended a dinner a few years ago and had the chance to meet one of my baseball idols growing up, Johnny Bench.

Who is it that I want to meet and to what length would I go to make it happen? Taylor Swift, Messi, Lebron James, Simon Biles, Ledecky, Keith Urban, The President of the United States... I don't know, who? And for what?

And then, after I have answered whether I am there and recognize my need of God and desire for Jesus, what next? What do I do when I come face to face with God and Jesus, because there is no doubt I will indeed meet God and Jesus, because there is nothing more God wants than that? How will I respond? Big eyes. Mouth open. Speechless. Paralyzed in my shoes. Will I be so overcome with stardom that I forget my name and basic functions? Will I fall to my knees in worship? Will I thank God? Will I feel fear or shame or guilt? Will I feel empowered and strong and inspired to “Go!”? Will I experience an

unshakable power and peace and hope? Will I thank God for God's good gifts and then when it comes time to do what God has asked of me turn the other cheek and look to others to do it.

We have a need, our world has a need for restoration. Are we there as a church, in which our only hope is to turn to and rely on Jesus? Do we have a desire for God to bring that restoration and salvation to us? If yes, how will we live into Christ's purpose, passion, and mission as a way of living into that hope, not only for ourselves, but in such a way that every one- even the poor, captive, blind, oppressed- can witness and experience the hope of the year of God's favor.

The hymn "Live Into Hope", hymn number 332 in the blue hymnal, also our charge and benediction for today, marks the very beginning of the section of the hymnal labeled "Life in Christ." Coincidence? I think not. To have and to experience life in Christ requires living into hope. Hope that only God can! Hope that only Jesus can! Hope that only we can through the Spirit of the Lord swelling up inside of us and pouring from us to others!

The Spirit of the Lord has anointed us to do what Jesus was sent to do:

bring good news to the poor

proclaim release (forgiveness of sins) to the captive

proclaim recovery of sight to the blind

let the oppressed go free

proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Isaiah 58:6, 61:1-2)

Live into this hope. Live into hope that can only come from our Lord.