

## Are We There Yet? Part 1 (Hope)

Preached FCCW December 1, 2019

Isaiah 40:1-11 and Luke 1:5-17

Zechariah had served God faithfully as a priest in the Temple for all his life. In fact, he and his wife Elizabeth were descended from priestly families whose roots stretched back to the time of Moses and Aaron. Both Zechariah and Elizabeth were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord.

There was, though, one holy act of service, that had eluded Zechariah. Until this day. When the lots were cast to determine which of the Temple priests would be the one to enter the sanctuary and burn the sacrificial incense on the altar, it was Zechariah's name that came up. Most priests only got this opportunity once in a lifetime, if at all.

Through the years of asking God, "Am I there yet?" when it came to being worthy of this sacred task, the answer had seemed to be, "Not yet. Not quite. But don't give up hope." Now, that hope was about to be rewarded.

But another unfulfilled hope hung over Zechariah and Elizabeth. The hope that the long lineage of priests from which they came, would not come to an end with them. For, Elizabeth was unable to conceive and they both were "getting on in years" and any chance that a new generation of priestly servants would come through their marriage was fading fast.

Still, they prayed daily, hoping for the blessing of a child. And, if in those prayers they asked God, "Are we there yet? Is this the day that we will discover that we are blessed with a son or daughter?" the only reply from God was silence.

Until, Zechariah ascended the steps to the sanctuary, lit the incense on the altar, and an angel appeared before him, saying, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. He will turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

And before long, all the things the angel promised that God would do, did indeed come to pass. Elizabeth became pregnant and gave birth to a son. They named him John, which means "God is gracious" because any doubts about God being anything but gracious were now a thing of the past.

John did not follow in his ancestors' footsteps by serving God in the Temple, though. His calling led him instead to the banks of the Jordan River where he preached a message of self-

examination and preparation for the coming of God's chosen Messiah. His mission was to make ready a people prepared for the Lord, when he arrived. Those that believed in his message would wade into the waters of the Jordan to be baptized by him, as a sign of their readiness for what lie ahead.

When some of the religious leaders got wind of this, they went out to the Jordan to investigate. They asked John who he thought he was. This is the answer he gave them. "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord.'" Those were familiar words and they knew what they meant. That the hope for a messiah who would usher in the Kingdom of God, was about to be fulfilled.

About four centuries before, a prophet named Isaiah had spoken those same words to the Jews who had lived in captivity and exile in Babylon, ever since the Babylonians had conquered Judah, and left Jerusalem in shambles. Few of those exiles still remained who could recall the homeland they left behind. Generations of them who had been born in exile didn't even have memories to cling to at all. All of them shared a hopelessness of ever returning to the place they came from.

Until Isaiah rekindled their extinguished hopes for a homecoming. He prophesied about a highway cutting through the miles and miles of desert that stood between Babylon and Jerusalem. Isaiah cried out those words that would one day echo from the lips of John the Baptist: "In the wilderness prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight in the desert a highway for our God." He painted for them a picture of every valley being lifted up, and every mountain and hill being made low; the uneven ground would become level, and the rough places a plain. God would lead them homeward like a shepherd, gathering them in the safety of His arms and cradling them tenderly in His bosom. But, before God could lead them out of captivity in Babylon, they needed to be made ready by having their abandoned hope restored.

Isaiah compared the fleeting hopes of the people, which is like grass that withers, to the word of God, which stands forever. Which was exactly what John offered to those he invited to be baptized into God's hope for them. That is what Advent offers us, as well.

It is fitting, that an Advent sermon series on the theme of "Are We There Yet?" should begin with a passage about a highway. Because Advent is a journey towards hope that we are all invited to take. Whether it is hope for ourselves or hope for the future of our world. Or both. Advent is the route we take to prepare ourselves by acknowledging the rough terrain of our hearts, that gets in the way of God making His home there.

Hope is indispensable to this Advent journey. Without hope we can't see the road through the wilderness God has prepared for us. Are we there yet? Maybe not, but we are traveling together on the highway that leads through whatever wildernesses we face, to find ourselves at last standing before the manger where the steadfast Word of God becomes flesh.