

## “Hope is Worth the Risk”

*Matthew 1:18-25 & Luke 1:46-55*

Pastor James York

December 22, 2024

**Prayer for Understanding** Holy God, the stories of Advent are stories many of us have heard before. We have arranged the nativity scenes. We have read the children’s books. We have seen the movies. We have sung the songs. 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.

Hope is worth the risk. Hope is vulnerable and can feel like a tremendous risk, especially when you are grieving loss or suffering from trauma. Mary shows us a resilient hope that takes risks—she risks her body to bear a son who will become the hope of her people. Similarly, Joseph makes a risky choice to stay with Mary, dismissing her quietly would have kept him safe. But instead, he chooses hope. Joseph chooses to trust the angel and it makes all the difference. It can feel safer and easier to be a cynic. The world does not need more cynics. The world needs people who say, “All will be glorious,” and make it so. The world needs people who see the mess and strive to perceive God. And point to how God is lovingly cleaning up the mess. And say, “Here I am, send me.” And partner with God in cleaning up the mess, healing everyone, and bringing more of heaven to earth.

It is easy to give hope a bad rap. Have you ever found yourself resisting hope because you fear that if you get emotionally invested, then you might “jinx” the situation and be disappointed? Have you ever endured a deep loss or trauma that made you cynical or hopeless? What if hope is not a flimsy emotion dependent on outcomes, rather a robust spiritual practice? Could we instead think of hope as a muscle we can flex and strengthen? We recognize that the practice of hope is not easy, especially if you are enduring unthinkable suffering. Can we practice hope on behalf of those who are weary and worn down? Can our expressions of hope become a life raft for others? Today’s scriptures give us examples of hope in action. Both Mary and Joseph each have a lot they could lose, respectively. Yet, they choose radical acts of hope—and the world is more glorious for it.

A reading from the gospel of Matthew: **Matthew 1:18-25 NLT** “**This is how Jesus the Messiah was born. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. But before the marriage took place, while she was still a virgin, she became pregnant through the power of the Holy Spirit. Joseph, to whom she was engaged, was a righteous man and did not want to disgrace her publicly, so he decided to break the engagement quietly. As he considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. “Joseph, son of David,” the angel said, “do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife. For the child within her was conceived by the Holy Spirit. And she will have a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for Jesus will save people from their sins.” All of this occurred to fulfill the Lord’s message through God’s prophet: “Look! The virgin will conceive a child! She will give birth to a son and they will call him Immanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’” When Joseph woke up, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded and took Mary as his wife. But he did not have sexual relations with her until her son was born. And Joseph named him Jesus.**

A reading from the gospel of Luke: **Luke 1:46-55 NLT** “**Mary sang, “Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! For God took notice of God’s lowly servant girl and from now on all generations will call me blessed. For the Mighty One is holy and God has done great things for me. God shows mercy from generation to generation to all who revere God. God’s mighty arm has done tremendous things! God has scattered the proud and haughty ones.**

**God has brought down princes from their thrones and exalted the humble. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away with empty hands. God has helped God's servant Israel and remembered to be merciful. For God made this promise to our ancestors, to Sarah and Abraham and God's children forever."**

Farming taught me how to hope. We endured an awful summer. Frost killed the corn in June, on Father's Day. A draught followed causing a sparse alfalfa harvest. Desperate for feed for the livestock, we went into swamps harvesting swamp grass. Everything we were able to harvest had little nutritional value. I remember my parents having intense debates. Mom wanted to cut our losses and sell the farm. Dad was determined to keep going. As the snow melted, we used up the last of any available feedstuff. The silos, hay mow, even the ground around the barn, anywhere there was a fork full of feedstuff was utilized. We sold all but our finest cows. The livestock were thin. We turned the animals out into the swamp to forage the first green sprigs of food. We tilled the fields. We borrowed every penny every bank would give us to plant seeds. We worried that our efforts would be in vain. We desperately needed an above average year or we would lose the farm. My Dad kept urging everyone to have hope. My Mom pointed out that numerous farmers had hope in the past, invested it all, then another poor year brought it all to an end. My Dad countered that hope is worth the risk. We may lose it all. And let us choose hope, going all in, for if we lose the farm at least we will know that we did absolutely everything we could have done. Rain came. The alfalfa came back. Come fall we had enough to get us through winter from a banner harvest. It took another 3 years of hopeful labor to fully recover, to get our livestock numbers back up and get some reserves in our mow and silos. It was arduous, gritty, hopeful work. A couple of our neighbors did not make it. With tenacious hope we were able to make it through.

Sometimes one is hopeful, does all the work, and does not make it. And sometimes hope is able to endure the journey. Sometimes hope gets us to a good place. Sometimes hope makes the world glorious. I believe no matter what the outcome, hope is always worth the risk. If you hopefully try and fail some sort of good will come from your hopefulness, perhaps a learning, a friendship, a joyful journey or in the least being able to cross off one way not to do something.

In her book, *Hope: A User's Manual*, Dana McKibben distinguishes between optimism and hope. She writes: "Optimism relies on external circumstances lining up in a certain way. Hope is not mathematical. Hope is philosophical, physical, maybe even musical. True hope defies cause and effect and has impact regardless of outcomes." In your own life, what does it look like to put hope—instead of optimism—into practice? How does Mary's song point us to hope and not to optimism?

Hope motivated Moses to climb a mountain where he saw the Promised Land. Hope inspired a beleaguered group of 40-year wanderers to journey into the Promised Land. Hope invites you to see the coming promised kingdom of God, heaven enjoyed by all, forever. Hope desires for you to lovingly serve to bring heaven to earth.

In *The First Advent in Palestine*, Kelley Nikondeha points out that Mary and Joseph were legally engaged; and so, breaking off the engagement would require involvement from the law putting Mary on public display. With the divorce, Joseph could have received economic compensation. Kelley writes: "In Joseph, a different economic practice was at work. Joseph valued Mary as a person, beyond what sum of money he could demand." Mary mattered to Joseph so much that he was willing to sacrifice personal gain and endure public disgrace. What does Joseph risk? What does Mary risk? How did hope enable them to choose love and journey into an unknown future together?

*Lessons From the Schoolyard* a poem by Sarah Speed. "A baby bird fell out of her nest. She cried and pattered about on the sidewalk below. We children formed a circle, amazed at how small her bobbing body was. Eventually a sixth grader scooped her up. Held her tenderly in cupped hands. She

said, You have to be gentle. You have to be steady. You have to let her grow, so that one day she can fly. Hope is a lot like that baby bird. Hold it with both hands. Let it grow. One day, it will fly.”

Hope is worth the risk. The following section is inspired by Kayla Craig. Hope is not flimsy. Hope is a force that propels us to join God in redeeming everyone and the cosmos forever. Hope and love involve being vulnerable, taking risks. The more we hope and love, the more we can be disappointed. For those of us who bear scars from the hurt of this world, hope can feel scary—too risky, too unrealistic. Cynicism seems like a safer, more straightforward path. But cynicism does not change the world, hope does. Hope challenges us to declare, “It can be better,” and empowers us to make it so. Our weary world does not need any more cynics and scoffers—but as wars rage and divisions heighten, we desperately need hope-bearers who point us to a more loving way, one where life is made new and lies of shame and fear do not have the final say. Our hope is a reflection of God’s plans for the world, plans for renewal and restoration in the face of death and despair. Joseph and Mary hoped against hope. In the face of impossibilities, they believed in the possibility of a more loving world. They placed their trust in God alone. Their lives are testaments to the transformative power of hope still accessible to us today. Joseph acts with hope. Mary acts with hope and proclaims hope. And their choice to trust God has reverberations that echo into eternity. When an angel appears to Joseph in a dream, he is told not to fear taking Mary as his wife. Joseph’s decision to embrace this divine assurance, rather than succumb to societal expectations to untangle himself from his pregnant fiancée is a radical act of hope. Bishop Michael Curry said: “The language of a dream is the language of hope.” Propelled by this hope, Joseph uses his position not just for personal faithfulness, but as an act of profound communal responsibility by choosing to protect and stand by Mary. Instead of living out of fear for what others may say or think, Joseph places his hope in something bigger than himself. Every day, we have the chance to choose hope and enter into God’s redemptive dream for the world, even when it disrupts our understanding and expectations (perhaps especially then). Mary’s response to her calling is equally revolutionary. In light of all that has been foretold, she sings a hopeful anthem for the ways God turns our world upside down and brings the world right side up by bringing down the arrogant and exalting the humble, by transforming oppressors into people who share. As Mary sings, she weaves a vision of the world as God intends it, stitching together a pattern of justice and mercy. Her hope in the promise of God transcends time and space, extending a sacred invitation and inspiring us today to live out our faith in tangible, transformative ways. Mary’s words hark back to imagery seen throughout the Hebrew Bible. Theologian Walter Brueggemann writes: “The hope articulated in ancient Israel is not a vague optimism or a generic good idea about the future, but a precise and concrete confidence in and expectation for the future.” Reflect on how you can embody hope in uncertain times. How can you, like Joseph, use your influence to protect and uplift? How can you, like Mary, voice a hope that challenges the status quo and sings of a reality where justice and mercy reign? As you light the final Advent candle, let it symbolize the hope that Christ brings into our world, a hope not just for peaceful times, but also for moments of darkness and difficulty. May the steady flame of hope renew your courage and inspire you to act as you enter into an extraordinary story of redemption and love. In this season of hope, may you find the courage to hold onto hope and act on it, to let the divine trust of Mary and Joseph weave through the fabric of your life.

Lauren Wright Pittman writes: “Mary is a brilliant, shining, hopeful example of radical faithfulness in the face of every possible earthly fear. Mary is resilient in the face of an impossible task, and in many ways, the entire story of the people of God is reborn through Mary’s bravery.”

Hope is worth the risk. Mary dreamed of a more loving world and with hope, tenacity and service brought more love into the cosmos.

Kayla Craig is praying a blessing for us: “Lies of cynicism are loud, and so are the voices of others—but, beloved, 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."

Hope is worth the risk. Amen