



# Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina  
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

DECEMBER 9, 2018  
THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT  
LONGING TO BELIEVE

## Longing To Believe: Hope and Love Luke 3:7-18; Luke 1:26-35

A few weeks ago—the Sunday after Thanksgiving, to be precise—the *Telegram* carried a story on page A5 that I almost did not read. Although the headline was inviting—“Greenville Man Honored for Lifesaving Actions,” that was not what drew me to the article. I think it was the picture which caught my attention, although, to be honest, it is a fairly unremarkable picture. The picture is of a man holding his “Governor’s Award” while standing in front of his truck. There was a ceremony at the North Carolina Museum of History where Governor Cooper was handing out awards for extraordinary service by state employees. This man was honored for saving three lives, a remarkable feat, but this picture shows him standing in front of his truck, holding his award, looking very un-remarkable.

His story, however, is quite remarkable. Rick Dickerson came upon a crash involving a log truck and a car with four teenagers. He pulled the young people out of the car just as it caught on fire. His comment about what he did is also quite remarkable. He said, “I am not an extremely religious person but I do think God put me there that day to help.”<sup>1</sup> What is remarkable to me is that this gentleman, who does not claim to be religious, credits God with putting him in the right place at the right time.

What is remarkable to me is that, whether or not this man considers himself religious, he longs to believe that there is a God who, to some degree, is in control of the world. He longs to believe that God helps us when we need it. He longs to believe that life matters and hopes that his life matters as well. He longs to believe that there is more to life than we often consider and hopes that it is true. So do I! You probably hope the same things.

Advent is all about this longing to believe. For centuries the Hebrew people longed to believe that God cared for them and hoped day by day that God would send the Messiah to rescue them from the darkness and struggle

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<sup>1</sup>Ginger Livingston, “Greenville Man Honored for Lifesaving Actions,” *Rocky Mount Telegram* (November 25, 2018), A5.

that often characterized their lives. They longed to believe, but their hope often waned.

During the State Funeral for President George H. W. Bush, his pastor, the Rev. Dr. Russell Levenson, quoted remarks that President Bush made when the National Cathedral was completed and dedicated in September 1990. On that occasion, standing in front of that magnificent building, the President, who was himself a parishioner at the Cathedral, said: "From where we now stand, the rose window high above seems black and formless to some, perhaps; but when we enter and see it backlit by the sun, it dazzles in astonishing splendor and reminds us that without faith we too are but stained-glass windows in the dark."<sup>2</sup>

The prophets attempted to remind God's people that they were never abandoned, they were never forgotten, they were never left in the dark. "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you," declared Isaiah, "for darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will appear over you" (Isaiah 60:1-2). Look on the other side of the window, Isaiah urged. Look toward the light, not away from it!

Mr. Dickerson, President Bush, and the Hebrew people longed to believe that there is more to life than the collection of experiences we all have. They longed to believe there is a God who cares about them and you and me. In their longing, they found the light of hope—hope that God is with us, hope that God cares, hope that our lives do matter.

During Advent we hear stories from Luke and Matthew telling us that Jesus came just in time to save us—to save us from darkness and isolation, from sin and harm, and, sometimes, ourselves. But we have to ask ourselves if Christ's coming means that we simply hope to live another day. Is our hope anything more than to be rescued from the terrible possibilities that seem to be lurking around every corner? Earlier we heard John the Baptist say some rather terrifying things: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut

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<sup>2</sup>George H.W. Bush, "Remarks at the Washington National Cathedral Dedication Ceremony," September 29, 1990; Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, *The American Presidency Project*: <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/264771>.

down and thrown into the fire” (Luke 3:7b-9). Believe it or not, he was talking to people who had come to him to be baptized! Had you been there with your toes already in the water, how would you have felt? According to John, what is the hope God offers to us?

Fortunately, some brave, desperate soul, someone who was holding out for hope, asked John, “Then what should we do?” That is a good question. When you have been told the consequences that come with what you are currently doing, the logical thing to ask is, “So what is it that we should do?” John answered them, “Share your extra clothes and food.” Tax collectors, who typically took advantage of their fellow Jews, asked him what they should do and he said, “Collect no more than the tax prescribed by the government. Stop fleecing people!” And the Roman soldiers standing nearby asked what they should do. John said, “Don’t go about threatening people and extorting money. Be content with what you have and treat other people with dignity.” All of those folks were longing to believe and John told them to be generous and honest and good.

John had seen the other side of the window. He knew something that the rest of his people were still hoping for. He knew that the Messiah had come. He knew that God walked among his people as Jesus Christ. He knew that love had been born into their lives and that the way to faith is the way of love.

If we long to believe, we will find our faith in love. Luke records that amazing story of an angel appearing to a young woman named Mary and announcing that she will bear a child who is God Incarnate. And she did! That naive, trusting, love-struck maiden, just over the cusp of womanhood, delivered love to the world on the night we know as Christmas. As we know, everything that Jesus taught and did pointed to the simple truth that each of us is called to love. We are to love God. We are to love one another. We are to love ourselves. Like Mary, we are to birth Christ—love incarnate—to the world day by day.

Perhaps some of you heard the conversation yesterday on *The Peoples Pharmacy* between Joe and Terry Graedon and Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, a physician who has focused on the healing arts and who encourages us to share our stories with one another.

Dr. Remen talked about her grandfather who was a Jewish mystic, a Kabbalist. When she was four years old, her grandfather brought her a cup

of dirt and told her that if she watered it a little every day and kept it on the windowsill, something might happen. Living in an apartment in New York City, she had never considered that anything special could happen with a cup of dirt, but she loved her grandfather and was excited to see what would happen. The first few days she dutifully watered the dirt in the cup, but when nothing happened, she became frustrated and tried to give the cup back to her grandfather. "No, you must water it every day," he said. The second week was even harder and she became resentful, sometimes forgetting to water the cup of dirt. She would climb into bed and remember the cup and get up in the dark to water it. Finally, one morning she looked at the cup of dirt and saw that two tiny leaves had appeared overnight where none had been before. She was so excited to tell her grandfather, but he was not surprised. He told her that life is everywhere, often hidden in ordinary, unlikely places. She asked him, "And all it needs is water, Grandpa?" He answered, "All it needs is your faithfulness."<sup>3</sup>

Like Mary, our calling in the world is to bear Christ to the world, to water the seeds of God's creativity, to tease out the light that is otherwise hidden from view, to help each other discover the light of God that is within us all. If we long to believe, then we must love, for it is in love that God becomes known among us.

Sometimes that love is as remarkable as the sudden appearance of someone who rescues us from danger or the deliberate way a seed gradually opens to flourish with new life. Sometimes our love seems rather unremarkable, as common as a young woman giving birth to a child. But always, if we are faithful, if we long to believe and continue to hope and to love, we will see the light of God shine through the windows of our lives. If we long to believe, we must hope . . . and we must love. Amen.

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<sup>3</sup>Dr. Rachel Naomi Remen, "Why You Should Share Your Stories," *The People's Pharmacy* (WUNC, Show 1146, December 15, 2018). This story can also be found in Rachel Naomi Remen, *My Grandfather's Blessings* (Riverhead Books, 2001), 1-2.

December 16, 2018

## Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

All heaven and earth wait in hushed wonder, O God, to see a beam shining from the star which will lead us to the Christ child. We have spent these weeks watching and waiting in eager anticipation. We have adorned our homes and sanctuary, sung carols, and prepared elaborate celebrations, all in the hope of reflecting the joy of this season and the generosity of your abundant gifts to us.

But we confess, Gracious God, that too often the flurry of activities prevents us from hearing the angel songs of peace on earth. The excesses of food and gifts cause us to miss the good news of justice for the poor and oppressed among us. The obligations and expectations of the season begin to feel like fetters which bind us rather than a proclamation of freedom and joy. And even when we do focus our attention on Advent's promise, we set out, like the shepherds in search of the Holy Child of Bethlehem, as if, by our own efforts we will discover him, instead of recognizing that you have already journeyed to us, claimed us as your own, and offered to us gifts of hope, love, joy, and peace to fill and renew our lives. Help us, O God, as we approach the birth of our Savior, to fix our minds and hearts on the beautiful simplicity of his call to love God with our whole selves and to love one another. Help us to remember, in all our gift giving and celebration, that we rejoice today and every day because we have received the gift of your grace embodied in the coming of your Son who by his life, death and resurrection has redeemed us and set us free.

Even as we give thanks for your generosity to us, Merciful God, we pray that you would help us not to become too comfortable or so preoccupied with our own circumstances that we fail to see the needs all around us. We ask for your mercy on those who are not able to celebrate during this season. We pray for healing for those who are sick. We pray for comfort for those mourn, especially for those who have an empty seat at their holiday table for the first time, and ask that you grant peace to those whose burdens seem too much for them to bear. Holy God, reveal yourself to us again in the birth of your Son, that we may show mercy and love to your world and to one another. In the name of the One who comes to us, bringing light to dispel our darkness and offering good news of great joy for all the world, and even Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Elizabeth J. Edwards  
Associate Minister