

Hope when Heaven is Silent

Emily Dickerson wrote, “Hope is the thing with feathers that perches in the soul, and sings the tune without words and never stops at all.” Hope is a wonderful thing. A person with hope has a grittiness and determination that cannot be stopped. Because the bird just keeps singing. A child who is hoping to do something or receive something pesters and pesters and pesters. Mom can I have this. Dad can we go there. Can we go now. I haven’t seen Frozen 2 yet, but I remember Frozen 1 when Anna is hoping to build a snowman. She keeps coming, keeps hoping her sister will play. Do you wanna build a snowman. Such is the persistence of hope. It’s the hope of newly weds who are entering in this union with a ton of hopes and dreams that they will beat the statistics of divorce and the news of unhappiness. It’s the hope of new parents who look at what life will be like with this child in the world. There’s hope in a new job and business venture - so you go at it again and again because you’re compelled by what could be. When you have hope you have everything and can do almost anything believing that something will happen. Some times you meet people where bird called hope is perched well and singing strong.

But then there are those who have lost hope, and the singing of the soul has turned to silence. And hopelessness is crippling. When you lose hope it feels as if you lost everything, and can’t do anything. It’s the sports team getting crushed, and you can see the faces on the sidelines or the players on the bench. The game isn’t over, but it’s over - they’ve given up. It’s the student who is pounding his head against the wall trying to learn in a class he doesn’t understand. Throwing his books saying, “What’s the point anyway.” It’s the cynicism of adults who figured out dreaming is cute as a kid, but perhaps unsafe as adult because honestly some dreams die. Because they got sick or someone they loved is gone, because the kids they prayed for never came, and if we’re truly honest it just didn’t turn out the way they hoped. A classic picture of hope lost is George Bailey who gave up going to Europe and college for a job at the bank, and when that his shaping up is considering taking his life. The Bible speaks about what it feels like when hopes don’t pan out, “Hope deferred makes the heart sick.” (Proverbs 13:12) Another Bible commentator said about this that “hope deferred is the common old of the soul.”

But that is why I love this time of year. You can finally put the lights up without HOAs getting upset and turn on the music. Decorate the tree and put up those stockings. It’s the most wonderful time of the year and perhaps the most magical. And something I believe is this *Christmas is the story of hope fulfilled*. And we have gathered in church to consider who God is and what he has done. Consider what the prophet Isaiah says about those who hope in the Lord, “But those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.” The people of God have found that hope in God is different than worldly hope. In fact hope in God has a completely different connotation. I can say I hope I get a Lexus for Christmas or get to go here for vacation. And I really will never know for certain. When I say I have hope in God and what he will do.

It's a confidence. Hope in God is like saying I hope for Friday. Friday will come it's just a matter of time. God will do what he said, it's just a matter of time. Hope in God takes doubt out of the equation.

Another reason I believe in this series is because I consider the people God wants us to be? I believe that with him there is reason for hope on the darkest day. With Him there is a optimism over what he has revealed that leads us to hope and relentless singing in praise of him. I was inspired listening to a sermon that had as it's title two simple words, "Dream again." And I ask why can't every Christian, every cynic, every person who lost hope, why can't they dream again in God? Why shouldn't we dream again God is with us. Why shouldn't we dream God is on our side. Why shouldn't we dream again he loves us more than we know. Why shouldn't we dream again he can do immeasurably more than you can ask or imagine. Our inspiration for dreaming and what God can do for us is his Word. And today we get to hear the beginning of the Christmas story when an angel Gabriel appeared to Zechariah the priest. An incredible word. "Hope is alive."

There is the story of man who went to Wheaton college on the quest for God and served him well. Philip Yancey was able to read and edit a book he wrote on Job. And as Yancy met with the man before the book was released the man blurted out. I hate God. I don't mean that. I don't believe in God. How could someone at a Christian College dedicating his life to serving God, and writing a commentary on Job turn so quickly? Some dreams had died. He had a job lined up after college, that fell through and the employer reniged on some promises giving his position to someone else. He had a fiance named Sharon, and they would spend time praying about their lives together and dreaming of serving the Lord. But Sharon recently called things off unexpectedly. These moments reminded him of wounds of the past, feelings of rejection when his parents separated. Broken dreams of past and present bubbled to the surface and blocked any hope - so he hated God or no longer believed in him. Philip Yancey tells this story in his book Disappointed with God.

You know it's an interesting thing walking with God. As pastor I must say humility before the Almighty is needed. But at times we forget this. At times we even feel if we are following really well, he'll make things easier on us. Like he'll give just to the really good Christians a problem free pass. You ever think this? And explains why the good Christians are always happy. I am from a family of pastors who married into a family of pastors. People who love the Lord sincerely and dedicated their lives to him. I have friends who are pastors and pretty much think I have my ear to the ground knowing the life of workers. And something I have noticed is this. The problem free pass doesn't exist. These servants in full time ministry have problems regardless of the level of their faithfulness or the sincerity of faith. Pastor friends whose children have died, spouses have died. Children of abuse and houses of alcoholism. Financial struggles, bankruptcy and crippling debt. Diseases and disabilities that strike all. What I find is that there is *no pass for great obedience*. No get out of jail free card. No trouble and problem free pass for those of great faith.

And if anyone could speak to this it is Zechariah and Elizabeth. Look at them again, "In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. 6 Both of them were righteous in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commands and decrees blamelessly."

What we find is that Zechariah is from a class of priests. People who dedicated their lives to serving the Lord. Elizabeth had a great ancestry from the line of the priest Aaron. It says they were righteous, in good standing. They lived above reproach, no one could find a fault in their walk with God. And we would expect v7 to say, "They lived a charmed life with no problems. They secured every door buster on Black Friday. They had all they wanted and knew no disappointment." Not what it says, "But they were childless because Elizabeth was not able to conceive, and they were both very old." To be barren in that society was a great slight. Now today we know God is in control and gives to each their own specific grace. But in that age Jews even believed barrenness that you were considered to be cursed. And yet in spite of this we see great obedience.

The older I get the greater I esteem mature rooted faith. Because in a world where we strive for the trite trophies and goals that serve little good, mature faith matters. Reminds me of the difference of children's obedience. You ever observe a child try to be really good because they are convinced if they are good they will get something. Mom and Dad cleaned my room, did the dishes, and folded the laundry - can I get an iPad. I wonder how many Christians - God I prayed, I worshiped, I even invited someone to church can you do this for me. But then there is the obedience of a child who loves. What do you need Mom and Dad - you don't need to pay me, you've done so much for me. This is the faithlife of a mature Christian. God I serve you not because of what I want, but because of who you are. Elizabeth and Zechariah serving God. And I think they would tell us, *Remain faithful to God even when circumstances are not in your favor.*

And that's the way it was until. Zechariah is chosen by lot - a lottery system really to go serve in the temple, and an angel appears. Anyone think it would be cool for an angel to appear to them. Do you know most people where this occurs in the Bible think they are going to die. The first words out of an angels mouth are always don't be afraid. And what does the angel say. v.13 "Your prayer has been heard." Into the silence of their obedience the angel speaks - heaven has heard.

Now this is such an important word. To consider this I wanted to bring you back to Old Testament History. Earlier this year we did a series called the Good Work, and we looked at the book of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was sent to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem in the 400s B.C. But from about 432 B.C. to 5 A.D. we have no revelations from God. No words of the prophets. Malachi is the last in 433 BC. Pure silence from heaven. And coupled with silence was huge oppression. Under Alexander the Great the Greeks came in at 332 B.C. Greek culture came after and a great effort was made to eradicate Jewish culture and religion. Under a man named Antiochus they tried to get rid of the Torah, and require offerings to Greek God Zeus. This led to a revolt and the Jews were able to gain independence under Judas Maccabeus. Perhaps you've heard of the Maccabean revolt. Until 63 B.C. Jerusalem falls to Rome. General Pompey takes Jerusalem by siege and when he gets to the temple kills priests simply performing their religious duties. A huge offense to the worshippers of God. No prophet since Malachi. No word from God, and seemingly no hope. *Until* Gabriel. And heaven breaks it's silence. Heaven comes down to tell a simple prophet Zechariah - the Lord has heard and the Lord has plans.

Here's why this matters. Heaven can seem awful silent at times. We pray to God, worship God, serve God. We know obedience is good even when it seems not to be working in our favor. We go about our lives and in the midst of silence there can be suffering. What's

reassuring about this story is that if you've been there wondering what God is doing or thinking or what he would say but don't know - you are not alone. That's normal. But what you also need to know is this *when heaven seems silent, heaven hears*.

You know this series is about faith, and how many times has our faith limped. We don't hear from God and we suffer, and we may even say what's the point to my obedience. Maybe there are some who can relate to Richard's story - things got so bad that maybe you were tempted to write off God or did for a time. But if our hope is to be renewed, if we are to be a people of hope we need to begin with repentance. For all the times we have not trusted beyond our feelings and our own understand.

Because we might have periods of misunderstanding, confusion over what God is doing, and even disappointment. But let me tell you the story of Christmas. The story of Christmas is that heaven hears, and heaven answered. Into a world of silence and confusion heaven roared, And a bright light shown for the world to see to what God was up to. God put a great light in the sky to shine the way to a manger, where laid the greatest light, the light of the world Jesus. And the heavens were filled with noise. Angels broke out in chorus singing, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." And peace came to a people of shame. Jesus this baby came to walk and talk and move - so we would know without a doubt what God was like. How he loved, how he healed, how he taught, how he glorified the Father. And yes how he obeyed though it wasn't so easy or good for him. His cross speaks of obedience in the face of the world's disappointment - and he did it anyway. He did it to fulfill the words that had been spoken long ago, and to become the Savior of the world. Christmas is the story of God breaking the silence and telling the world how he feels. In Christ he loves us, he loves us, he really loves us. You have yet to search out how wide and long deep and high is his love. And *Christmas means those who hope in God do not hope in vain*.

So in a certain sense I can say to you if right now heaven feels silent. I can say heaven has spoke. How great is the love of the Father that in Christ we should be called the children of God. I can remind you heaven has not really been silent ever for God has preserved his Word for us. But if periods of silence come a consideration of what we can do.

I heard a story of a patient having open heart surgery. And during the surgery the staff was unsuccessful at restarting the patients heart. When the surgeon did something strange. The surgeon leaned over and spoke into the ear of the unconscious patient saying, "We need your help. We cannot get your heart restarted. Tell your heart to start beating." Can you guess what happened next? Incredibly the patient's heart started beating once again. Though unconscious the patient obviously heard the words, and just speaking out what needed to be done helped it to happen. Her spirit took hold of the words and there it was.

When we get stuck in disappointment and despair. It's like we need our hearts to beat again, something that will restart life and breath and hope. And what can we do? I have an idea. *When heaven is silent, speak for it* See our God had promises from the beginning of time, and will to the end. They are promises they tell us how he feels about us, what his plans are for us. They are words that guide decisions and grant peace. If you are in a period of confusion and disappointment and need to hear from God - speak what he already spoke. Break the silence with the promises of his Word. And maybe not your heart but your hope can come alive once again.

To close I wanted to share the story of a woman in Ohio in the 1970s. She was a mother of 11 children, and her husband a farmer was just killed as the tractor overturned on him. The bank was foreclosing on their house, there was only a loaf of bread left to eat, and Christmas was 2 weeks away. In such despair and disappointment this woman was going to the Ohio River to jump in. Until she saw it. A coke bottle with a note inside. She took out the cork from the bottle and read the note. It contained many Words of God from the Bible including one on hope, "But for him who is joined to all the living there is hope, for a living dog is better than a dead lion." Ecc 9:4. This coke bottle traces back to 1965 when Mrs. Gause from Cocoa Beach released over 200 coke bottles with encouraging notes, and this one came at just the right time to this woman in Ohio. How it got there we don't know, and the path it took unknown. But into her doubt, disappointment, and confusion - God spoke and at just the right time.

This Christmas I pray the Word of God does the same for us. If you've been wrestling with doubt and confusion. If you've been in a period of darkness. I pray that God would use this time, this exact right time to restore your hope. I pray you see this Christmas you seek heaven speaks, it always has and it does so most beautifully through Jesus. Amen.