

LUke 1: 5-25
December 6, 2020

The Fear of Disappointment
Rev. Meredith Kemp-Pappan

Even though it feels like the Christmas Season kicks-off around Thanksgiving (if not earlier!), it usually takes me a week or two to immerse myself in the yuletide spirit. By Advent 2, most of our houses are decorated, plans are coming together. Christmas wish lists have been mailed to Santa. Tucked into one of our boxes of Christmas decorations is a photo of my brother and I on Christmas Day in 1987, both of us proudly holding or wearing our Christmas gifts. I remember that particular year well, because I had a last-minute request to Santa Claus for a stuffed animal, and, to my immense delight, that stuffed animal was under the Christmas tree. But in the days leading up to Christmas, I was not sure that Santa would deliver. Would my request be fulfilled? Or would I be disappointed?

Disappointment is not one of the holiday themes we want to lift up (who wants to light a candle of disappointment?), even though a lot of the holiday season is powered by the fear of disappointment. Most of our holiday films use disappointment as a powerful plot device: Raphie longs for a Red Ryder BB gun, and is afraid he will be disappointed. Clark Griswold has spectacular plans for his holiday bonus from work, only to be disappointed by his boss's lack of generosity. George Bailey, whose life has been a string of disappointments, finally meets a guardian angel who shows him that, despite all of it, *It's A Wonderful Life*.

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Maybe you have had some disappointments in Christmases past—disappointed in a relationship, circumstance, or in a gift given or received. All of us are disappointed that Christmas 2020 will be different. Advent is our time to acknowledge the complicated feelings evoked during this season of waiting. It may feel shameful or even sacrilegious to admit feelings of disappointment, but, as we will learn, the fear of disappointment is as part of our Advent narrative as the Angels and the manger.

The Gospel of Luke gives us the backstory of the miraculous circumstances surrounding the birth of John the Baptist, prophet and cousin to Jesus. John's parents, Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, were righteous people and faithful Jews. They had devoted themselves to God. And yet, they had been disappointed for years because they were unable to have children. Those who have or continue to struggle with infertility understand the heartbreaking disappointment of an unfulfilled desire for a child.

The name "Zechariah" means God remembers. Elizabeth's name means "God promises." Already, we have a little clue that God will remember God's promises in due time. Zechariah and Elizabeth were both from priestly families. Back in those days, your vocation was not a matter of choice, but a

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matter of birth. So if your daddy was a priest, you were a priest. If your daddy was a carpenter, you were a carpenter.¹ Children were expected to continue to family business— another reason Zechariah’s and Elizabeth’s hope for a baby was all the more pressing.

It’s a shame we often don’t hear much about Zechariah during Advent. His visit by the angel Gabriel, and his incredulity at the angel’s message, deeply resonate with us. I, too, am very often disappointed that God didn’t answer a fervent prayer how I wanted. I have been frustrated that God didn’t resolve a conflict in a way that benefitted me or my loved ones. And I am impatient that the moral arc of the universe seems reluctant to bend towards justice.

Advent shakes us up out of a sleepwalking state of disappointment. As Amy-Jill Levine reminds us,

“This sense of being shaken up is Advent good news. Christmas should be more than putting up the tree and wrapping the presents. It should give birth to something that shakes up the routine, something that gets us to see the world otherwise. That shaking up is what it means to follow Jesus. To love one’s enemies is scary; to take up

¹ Levine, Amy-Jill. Light of the World - [Large Print] (p. 30). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.

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one's cross is terrifying. Yet at the same time, Luke reminds us, there is a legacy that carries us forward and a promise that God will remember the covenant and bring about eternal justice."²

God promises, and God remembers. God doesn't promise that we will get everything we wanted for Christmas. God promises that justice will prevail. God promises that the poor and downtrodden will never be forgotten. And, as Zechariah will one day sing, God will remember "to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of death, and to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Amen.

² Levine, Amy-Jill. Light of the World - [Large Print] (p. 34). Abingdon Press. Kindle Edition.