

Advent Part One

Luke 2:1-3

1. God works through unlikely circumstances.

- *Micah 5:2*

2. Hope is born in the midst of disorder.

God enters our chaos, not just our comfort.

3. God keeps his promises on his own timetable.

God's promises are not broken just because they are slow.

4. Hope travels with us.

- *Matthew 28:20b*

Hope has a name.

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Advent: Hope of All The Earth¹

Part One: Hope

Today we begin our advent series based on this book, “Hope of all the Earth” – a devotional book that begins today and takes us through Christmas with daily readings. We’re encouraging all of us to take the journey together, so God can speak to us each day from the same sources. If you haven’t gotten a copy, you can pick one up on the way out – just \$10 each, in either English or Spanish. But don’t let the money keep you from getting one though – if you don’t have the money, feel free to pick one up anyway. We want you to be able to have one, and we can do that because of the generous giving of our people.

I don’t know if you’ve noticed this, but the seasons are changing. Maybe you’ve felt it; it’s colder now. The leaves have fallen off the trees. Last week I mowed my lawn – hopefully for the last time (but I said that two weeks ago, too!) If you’ve gotten up early enough, or if you live at a little higher elevation, you’ve had to scrape ice from your windshield in the morning. We’ve been through Thanksgiving. We’ve been through Black Friday. We’re moving into the Advent season. Of course, Christmas season unofficially began at the department stores before Halloween.² It seems like the seasons are determined more by Starbucks’ flavors than by holidays. Pumpkin Spice – the “official” flavor of fall – came out in August, and Eggnog lattes start on Tuesday.

But the church calendar invites us to take a different posture during this season—one of waiting. In the church, today is the first day of the new year, also known as the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is the season when we remember the waiting that God’s people did before the Christ child came, and the waiting that we do now, for Christ to come again. We wait in eager expectation for the kingdom of God to come in all its fullness. During this busy season, Advent invites us to remember what God has done and to wait for what God will do.

And in this season of waiting, we are invited to recognize the brokenness of the world around us.

During Advent, we see and feel the ways that sin and death still hold sway in the world. The darkness of the world can seem overwhelming. Our waiting could lead us to despair if we let it.

¹ Resources include: David Glimour, *Hope of all the Earth*, The Foundry, 2025
Hope of all the Earth Pastor’s resource, The Foundry, 2025

² Jared Alcantara, *A Thrill of Hope*, <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2020/october/thrill-of-hope.html>

Yet we begin every church year by reminding ourselves that we are a people of hope. Today, we will be reminded of this in Luke 2:1–3. Let me read it to you:

“In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register.” (Luke 2:1-3, niv)

When we think of the Christmas story, we often start with angels singing or shepherds rejoicing. Luke begins not with the miraculous, but with a census. With government orders. With people traveling under political pressure. With inconvenience and uncertainty.

It is into this very ordinary, very messy, very troubled world that hope quietly entered.

Luke 2:1–3 reminds us that God often begins His greatest works in the most unexpected places—in decrees of emperors, in crowded roads, in discomfort, and in days that feel out of control.

Let’s see what hope we can get from this challenging circumstance that Joseph, Mary, and the baby in her womb had to go through. The first thing we see is that...

1. God Works Through Unlikely Circumstances.

This scripture begins with “in those days,” referring to an era of Israel’s history when the world seemed broken beyond repair and the darkness appeared overwhelming.

Israel was under Roman control. They had been an occupied nation for most of the last six hundred years. They had little control over their laws and often faced challenges to their worship practices.

Then, the Roman emperor declared a census, which led to more efficient taxation and demonstrated Rome’s immense power.

The decree of Caesar Augustus seemed like nothing more than political bureaucracy. Yet God used a pagan emperor’s order to bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem—thus fulfilling a prophecy spoken centuries earlier in Micah 5:2 –

“But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah,
though you are small among the clans of Judah,
out of you will come for me
one who will be ruler over Israel,
whose origins are from of old,
from ancient times.” (Micah 5:2, niv)

You might think that would have been encouraging to them, but by that time, Israel had not had a recognized prophet in almost four hundred years.

We too know “those days” when the darkness seems overwhelming. Natural disasters have ravaged communities and loved ones. It feels like there are always wars raging – whether between global powers or between feuding religious factions or between federal and local cities or political groups. We see violence in the news, we read violent rhetoric on social media, we have experienced violence and shootings in our community and in the communities around us.

We know relationships that seem to be broken beyond repair. We have kids with single parents, kids without parents, parents raising children alone.

We experience the grief of our loved ones falling ill and dying, and wonder how we can go on without them. We’ve said goodbye to too many long-time saints in our own church family.

And yet, Hope reminds us that God is sovereign even when life feels out of control.

You may be walking through circumstances you never would have chosen:

- A change in job
- A difficult family situation
- A health battle
- A season of waiting

But Luke 2:1–3 teaches us: God can use even the burdens of life as bridges to His purposes. Nothing in your life is wasted in His hands. We see that as...

2. Hope Is Born in the Midst of Disorder.

Think about what the scene in Luke 2 looked like:

- Thousands of people traveling.
- Overcrowded cities.
- Full inns.
- Political tension.
- Economic strain.

Into this chaotic context, God sends His Son.

Hope doesn’t wait for perfect conditions.
Hope arrives in the middle of the mess.

Maybe you feel like your “inn” is too full—too much noise, too many worries, too many demands. Yet this passage reminds us:

God enters our chaos, not just our quiet.

He meets us where life is crowded, complicated, and uncomfortable. In Luke 2:1–3, we are reminded that there is hope in the darkness.

For in “those days,” God was already at work!

God had already sent John the Baptist, the prophet who will prepare the way for the Lord.

God had also already announced to Mary the coming Messiah in the person of Jesus, whose birth we will celebrate in a few short weeks.

Today, too, when the darkness seems overwhelming, God is still at work in and through God's church.

God has always worked through God's faithful people to bring hope and peace to a world that suffers from despair and violence. One such person was André Trocmé, a Protestant pastor in France during World War II. He and his wife, Magda, worked and suffered to protect the Jewish people after Germany took over.

The Holocaust Memorial Center in Israel gave the couple the designation, "Righteous Among the Nations," for saving thousands of people from Nazi persecution. For 15 years, André served as a Protestant pastor in a French town in south-central France. In his preaching, he spoke out against discrimination as the Nazis were gaining power in neighboring Germany. During World War II, he urged his Christian congregation to hide Jewish refugees from the Holocaust as well as other individuals persecuted by the Nazi regime. He, his wife Magda and his assistant, Pastor Edouard Theis, led the people of their town and surrounding villages in providing refuge for an estimated 5,000 people.³

God is also at work in the world around us, and through the church. God's grace is always reaching out and drawing all people to God's self, and God is at work in and through those who love him and are living for him in the world. So we don't have to look far to be reminded that...

3. God Keeps His Promises on His Own Timetable.

Mary and Joseph were not traveling because they wanted to. They were traveling because they had to. They may not have known it, but they were moving exactly according to God's timing.

Of course, we know they were walking to Bethlehem because God had already spoken that the Messiah would be born there. But from their perspective, it was a long, exhausting journey. From God's perspective, it was a step-by-step fulfillment of prophecy. Caesar Augustus sent out a decree that "all the world" should be "registered" (Luke 2:1).

Unbeknown to the mighty Emperor, this was going to be the most significant census of all history. After all, even the most powerful of potentates are subservient, whether they know it or not, to the ultimate King of kings and Lord of lords, the LORD God of Israel (cf. Proverbs 21:1).

For sure, this decree shows just how much Judah was under the yoke of Rome at that time. It had been centuries since they'd had a king holding a scepter.

³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andr%C3%A9_and_Magda_Trocm%C3%A9

Many centuries before, while Israel still had kings, a prophet had predicted that, out of a little place called Bethlehem, a 'ruler in Israel' would 'come forth,' whose 'goings forth' were from all eternity (cf. Micah 5:2). With hindsight, we can see that this is a clear prediction of the incarnation. Even the 'chief priests and scribes' understood it to mean that 'Christ' would be born 'in Bethlehem,' and told the Emperor's puppet king in Jerusalem, Herod, that it was so (cf. Matthew 2:4-6).

It was this decree that brought Joseph and his fiancé to Bethlehem (Luke 2:3-4). This was the right place at the right time as the Virgin Mary was about to give birth to her firstborn son, Jesus (Luke 2:6).

From Nazareth to Bethlehem is about 80 miles. That's nothing to us who have cars but for the ones who were traveling by foot and donkey, this was no afternoon trip. This would've taken about a week. Think of Mary. I'm sure the last thing she wanted to do was to hop on a donkey (did they have a donkey? Actually, the Bible doesn't say). And she made that trip at nearly full-term. Talk about inconvenient.⁴

We can learn from Mary and Joseph that Hope grows when we trust that God is working – even when we don't see the outcome yet.

God's promises are not broken just because they are slow.

Delay is not denial.

Silence is not absence.

God's promises will be fulfilled in your life, too, at just the right time. We can say that because...

4. Hope Travels With Us.

As Mary and Joseph made their way to Bethlehem, they were carrying hope—literally. The hope of all the earth – of all accumulated history – was warmly nestled in the womb of Mary, nearing the time of his arrival. They quite literally carried hope.

But in a spiritual sense, we also carry hope with us. After Jesus had been tortured, killed, and buried, he rose from the dead and for 40 days he walked with his disciples. Then, just before he ascended into heaven, Matthew tells us that Jesus made this promise:

“Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:20b, niv)

He is present among us, he walks with you in this life, and for those of us who have accepted his forgiveness and given our lives to him, we carry hope within us – the very presence of Jesus by the Holy Spirit. We too, carry hope with us. So we realize that hope is not a destination; hope is a companion.

⁴ Christopher Holdsworth, *A Royal Nativity. Revised.* May 27, 2023

Hope is not something we wait for at the end of the road; Hope walks the road with us.

And the same God who guided a young couple through crowded chaos and uncertainty still guides us today.

In Luke 2:1–3, we are reminded that God is always at work, even during those days when the world seems to be the darkest.

The old hymn “I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day” speaks to this hope in the darkness. The carol is based on a poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow written during the American Civil War. Keep in mind that Longfellow wrote it after suffering terrible loss: first was the death of his dear wife. She had been sealing envelopes with hot wax when her dress caught fire. Henry rushed to help, trying to extinguish the flames even with his own body. She died the next morning. His burns were so severe that he couldn’t attend her funeral. The scars on his face were so bad that he never shaved again, but it couldn’t cover the emotional anguish that nearly sent him to an asylum. Then, during the civil war, his oldest son snuck out to go join the union Army at the age of 18. Eventually his son was shot, and although the wound was serious, he was able to make a recovery. It was in the midst of that personal and national grief that Longfellow wrote this poem. It begins with the joy of hearing the Christmas bells proclaiming peace and goodwill.

Then another sound rings out—the sound of cannons, shattering the speaker’s peace and throwing him into despair, believing that hatred and war have made a mockery of peace and goodwill. Yet then the bells ring out again, and the speaker hears this message of hope:

God is not dead, nor doth he sleep;
The Wrong shall fail,
The Right prevail,
With peace on earth, good-will to men.

So in the darkness, when despair threatens to overwhelm us, let us remember that our hope is in the God who neither slumbers nor sleeps and who will one day redeem and restore all of creation. This is our hope. You see –

Hope Has a Name

The story begins with Caesar’s decree...
but it ends with Christ’s arrival.

Human authority issues commands.
But divine authority fulfills promises.

Politics shape history,
but God shapes eternity.

And into a world of travel, turmoil, and tension, Jesus was born.

So when your life feels like Luke 2:1–3—when you are walking under burdens you didn't choose, when the journey is long, when circumstances make no sense—remember: you may be closer to Bethlehem than you realize.

Hope is not far.

Hope is not silent.

Hope is not lost.

Hope has a name—and His name is Jesus.

Have you met him?

Prayer

Benediction:

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13, niv)