Can you imagine what it’s like to live an entire lifetime hoping for something that you never see. I think ask Americans, it’s hard for us to relate to this aspect of the Bible, but for people in other cultures it might not be. For instance, in China, there are many people I met who spent their whole lives hoping that things would change politically. Others spent their whole lives hoping that China would become the greatest country in the world or hoping that they would have the chance to get revenge on Japan. These hopes are instilled into young children, who carry them on through their entire lives, passing them on to their children. Or maybe think of the situation in Israel and Palestine today, many people there have grown up their whole lives hoping that there could be peace. Entire generations have come and gone in that hope.

Perhaps we have that sense of hope at election time. Somehow we deceive ourselves into thinking that if only the right person wins, everything will be okay. But if the wrong person wins: we’re in for it. And we hope very intensely for a while, but it fades fairly quickly after the election. Some Americans have other political hopes that are more long term. Some people have hoped to see Roe v. Wade overturned for the last 45 years. Some people have been hoping to see Universal Health Care for about as long. Or on a personal level, some people hope to win the lottery and play it their who lives. Some people suffer under dysfunctional families and hope that one day they can get away.

This is our last Sunday this year to consider the hope that our ancestors in the nation of Israel had. This was not a hope so temporary as we currently experience. This was a hope that stretched back to the very beginning. Ever since our first parents brought evil and death into the world by disobeying God, their Creator had given them hope that one day he would come and make things right again. This hope was passed on to Abraham, a nomadic herdsman living in about 2000 BC, when God promised him that all the nations on earth would be blessed through him. That hope was passed on to the nation of Israel, when God told them that they would be his special people and he would be their God. And that hope was passed on to King David, the first great king of Israel in about 1000 BC.

**Part A 2 Samuel 7:8-16**

**8 “Now then, tell my servant David, ‘This is what the Lord Almighty says: I took you from the pasture and from following the flock to be ruler over my people Israel. 9 I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you. Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men of the earth. 10 And I will provide a place for my people Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning 11 and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also give you rest from all your enemies.**

And so what was the hope God gave? Like Abraham, David’s name would be great. He would be a great leader and bring peace for his people. He would defeat their enemies and allow them to live in safety. These were all good, but they only covered David’s life. Then God made promises concerning the future of David’s line:

**“ ‘The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you: 12 When your days are over and you rest with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, who will come from your own body, and I will establish his kingdom. 13 He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men. 15 But my love will never be taken away from him, as I took it away from Saul, whom I removed from before you. 16 Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.’ ”**

David’s line would not end. He will have a son. In fact, he would have many sons. And when those sons disobeyed, they would be punished. They might experience setbacks and failures. Yet his lien would never pass away. His kingdom would last forever. It was through the line of kings coming from David that God’s great kingdom, in which he restored peace and righteousness to the world, would come.

Solomon was the first king in David’s line, but he failed miserably. Some of the kings who followed Solomon were pretty good, most of them were okay, and a few of them were very evil. Many of the prophets promised that a future king would be born who would be the perfect king. And yet, eventually, the last king from David’s family was taken into exile, and it seemed like his dynasty was over.

Yet 1000 years after David they had not given up hope. Joseph, Mary, Zechariah, Elizabeth, they all hoped that God would restore this line, revive this kingdom, and bring about the peace and righteousness they had always wanted. They were taught this hope as little children. They held to this hope all their lives. They passed it on to their children and died in this hope.

This prepares us for what will happen in our reading from Luke today. But there are two lessons we can take from this already to apply to ourselves. First, Christianity is a unique religion. A lot of people are fairly ignorant about all things religious today, but that doesn’t keep them from having opinions. And if you ask them, all religions are more or less the same. They have the same basic teachings, the same basic goals, and get you to the same place in life. Basically, the differences in religions reflect differences in culture. Nothing could be further from the truth. It’s true, all Christian denominations have a lot of things in common. No other religion traces itself back to the creation of the world. Even Judaism believes that it came from Abraham or Moses, although they have the Adam and Eve story, they don’t see it as the beginning of Judaism. Buddhism believes it started with the Buddha, while Isalm started with Mohammed. None of these claims that their faith is the continuation of something that began at creation and actually contains within its texts tracing its history through every generation back to that time. It’s pretty amazing.

And through all that time, how did God’s people live? By faith. They had a sure hope in the promises to come. They realized that nothing much might change in their lifetime. Yet they trusted God to save them and to work his purposes on earth, even through them. They knew that if they didn’t live to see it, that was okay, because they would go on to be with God and he would eventually make everything right.

Today most people outside the church think they understand what it means to be a Christian, but they usually don’t get it. They think it means living a certain way. They often think it means being judgmental. But what it really means is clinging to this ancient promise made to all humanity. That is pretty awesome. It’s kind of like Lord of the Rings or some epic like that set in a far away kingdom. In fact, books like that were partly based on this Messianic promise. But it’s not some fictional story and it’s not set in a land far, far away. It’s set right here. God is calling you and me to join the countless generations in putting our hope in him to fix this grand mess called life that we have gotten ourselves into as humans. We sometimes get confused and put our hope in other things. May God always lead us back to the truth, to put our full hope in his eternal Word.

**Part B: Luke 1:57-66**

We now return to Elizabeth, the senior citizen married to the old priest Zechariah. He is the one we read about a few weeks ago who had a vision in the temple. He was told he would have a child, and name him John, and this would be a great prophet who prepared the way for the Lord. However, Zechariah did not believe this at first, and so God made him mute until the baby was born.

Six months into this, Mary came to visit Elizabeth with some news of her own. And if you do the math, Mary was still with Elizabeth when it was time to have the baby. That is most likely how Luke got his information. Mary would have been about 12 or 14 at this time. That means she was about 50 when Jesus died and rose, and in her 70s when Luke came to interview her for the book of Acts. But no doubt she had told these stories many times. Whether Luke interviewed Mary himself, or he if interviewed members of the extended family in Galilee, he would have had first or second degree connections to these events quite easily. And so we can trust these words come from someone who was quite knowledgeable about the event even without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, which he also had:

**57 When it was time for Elizabeth to have her baby, she gave birth to a son. 58 Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy, and they shared her joy.**

Of course they are overjoyed and amazed at the miracle that a woman past the age of having children would have a baby, and they would also have been happy that it was a boy.

**59 On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him after his father Zechariah, 60 but his mother spoke up and said, “No! He is to be called John.” 61 They said to her, “There is no one among your relatives who has that name.” 62 Then they made signs to his father, to find out what he would like to name the child. 63 He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone’s astonishment he wrote, “His name is John.”**

This was amazing. It made no sense to call him John. Imagine everyone’s surprise, perhaps even Mary’s as they were both determined to name the boy John. There was something special about this child. It would have really amazed everyone. It might have been hard for Zechariah to do this. But by giving the child this name, he showed that he trusted what the angel said and was ready to obey. And so his brief test was over:

**64 Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue was loosed, and he began to speak, praising God. 65 The neighbors were all filled with awe, and throughout the hill country of Judea people were talking about all these things. 66 Everyone who heard this wondered about it, asking, “What then is this child going to be?” For the Lord’s hand was with him.**

The way this worked out was a remarkable sign for everyone. And when his lips were opened, they were transformed from doubt to praise. In our next reading we’ll see what sort of a praise this was, but for now, we can praise God ourselves.

**Part C: Luke 1:67-80**

What an interesting test God put on Zechariah. It must have been awkward for him unable to speak and evidentially unable to hear well either. All this came about because he did not believe. It’s interesting, he held onto this hope, this ancient hope, for his whole life. We read that he was a very devoted man. Yet two weeks ago we read how he just couldn’t believe that God was finally going to fulfill his promise and especially that he was going to use Zechariah’s son John so prominently. So God allowed him to have some time to think.

Sometimes I think some silence can be good for all of us. We tend to compartmentalize our lives. We have our family life, our work life, and our church life. We have our family self, our work self, and our church self. Maybe when we are here in church, it’s easy for us to believe God’s promises. But our work self or our family self doesn’t think about them so much. We might even life, act, and even think one way when we’re with our family, another way at church. Zechariah was a priest. He knew these promises backwards and forwards. Yet when God told them they were happening, he couldn’t believe it.

What if God appeared to you and told you he was going to do something great through you. Not just your church you. Your work you. Your family you. All of you. What if he came to you and said, enough of this going to church on Sunday, nodding your head, and then living like it didn’t really matter the rest of the week. From now on, you’re going to make a difference for me wherever you go and whatever you do. Would it take your breath away? Would you doubt like Zechariah. Well, God has made these kind of promises to you. If you’re God’s child you have the holy spirit in you, and he’s there for a reason. But sometimes we need to take some time and reflect. Sometimes we need to stop being so busy talking, and doing, and remember what God has said, and think about what it means for our own lives. That’s what Zechariah had a chance to do. And on the other end he came up with this song of praise that summarizes the Old Testament hope as well as I think could be done. This song is rich in imagery and phrases from the Old Testament:

**67 His father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and prophesied: 68 “Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel, because he has come and has redeemed his people.**

Notice, Zechariah speaks about it like it’s already accomplished. God has come and redeemed his people. This word was usually associated with the Exodus from Egypt. There God redeemed his people by delivering them out of slavery. Now God was going to redeem them in a more permanent and significant way.

**69 He has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David**

Salvation may have brought to mind the many Psalms where David prayed to be delivered from his enemies, and the phrase house of David calls to mind the Messianic promise we read in our first reading from 2 Samuel. The horn of salvation is an image we do not have, but a horn is a symbol of strength, and would naturally here be seen as referring to a new king or ruler from David’s line.

**70 (as he said through his holy prophets of long ago), 71 salvation from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us—**He remembers that this is an ancient promise, that God would deliver his people from all their enemies. From the Babylonians to the Moabites, the Edomites to the Romans, they had a lot of enemies who oppressed them.

**72 to show mercy to our fathers and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham:** This reminds them that God’s covenant was one of mercy. God didn’t owe anyone anything. Yet, he had made a covenant that he would save his people, and he intended to keep that covenant, because God cannot change his mind.

**74 to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.** It’s true they had a lot of enemies, but it’s sad how often they could be their own worst enemy. The final goal God had for his people was that they could serve him in holiness and righteousness all their days. And what is it that kept them from doing that so often? Their own sinful hearts. They couldn’t keep their eyes focused on his promises. They couldn’t keep themselves devoted to his laws. Their greed, their love of pleasure, their apathy, their anger, their pride, all these things got in the way. We’ll come back to that in a moment, because I think that’s where we can tie this reading into our own lives. But God was going to purify his people so that they could serve him without fear and that they could live in holiness and righteousness. Every time they had tried in the past, it failed. But this time would be different because this time God was going to get involved in a new way. But before we apply this to ourselves, let’s finish the song:

**76 And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, 77 to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, 78 because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven 79 to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace.” 80 And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel.**

God was going to shine over them in the power of the sun. He was going to give light to their darkness, something we will talk more about in the Christmas Eve service. He was going to show them the way of peace. And Zechariah’s son John would prepare the way for him.

I’ll be honest, I love this reading, but I find it really difficult to apply directly to us. We are living the dream here in America. We have everything we could want, what is left for us to hope for? And Jesus has already come, why focus on the ancients who put their hope in him before he came?

But as I started to mention a minute ago, we have the same basic problems. We want to serve God without fear, yet so often we’re afraid. We are called to be God’s holy people, yet so often our lives do not look holy. We want to serve him by doing what right but so often we do what’s wrong. What’s the solution? Turning to Jesus. That’s the only solution to our failure. Zechariah says quite clearly, our only hope is in the salvation God came to bring us through the forgiveness of our sins. It is only this that can enable us to live in righteousness and holiness before him. Only by coming to know the true God through faith in Christ can we live before him in this way. And this is what we are called to do.

So how can that affect the way I live over the next few days? In your own heart, in your words, and in your actions, honor Christ as Lord. Remember what we’re celebrating on Christmas. It’s the fulfillment of these ancient promises going back to David, to Abraham, even to Adam. The Christmas presents are a nice tradition. Family get-togethers are good and God pleasing affairs, at least the can and should be. But Christmas is about much more than a season or a day. Don’t worry about what other people think about your being a Christian. Don’t let them intimidate you if they think you are weird. Look at Zechariah. When he had time to reflect on his own unbelief, he came out on the other side unafraid to give his son a weird name if that’s what God wanted. Let other people think you are weird for going to church, for praying before a meal, for sharing your faith when others are slightly uncomfortable. So what? It’s worth it to experience the salvation God brings.

Second, the holidays come with all sorts of temptations. Over-indulging in food or in alcohol. Especially the drinking can lead to sinful things. Gifts can be selfless, or they can make us more selfish. We can be tempted to fight with family as they bring up old wounds or resume old arguments. And as much as we often feel like we need time off, sometimes when we indulge ourselves we just get more selfish. So watch yourself. Be on the lookout for special temptations this holiday season. As you approach the eggnog, or the irritating family member, the piles of Christmas cookies, ask yourself, “What opportunity do I have for my light to shine? How can I serve God in righteousness and holiness in the way I treat these people, or in the way I acknowledge him, or in the way I avoid temptations I know have caught me before?” And rely on God’s tender mercy towards you to answer that prayer and make you his effective servant and witness this Christmas and always. Amen.