

she showed a quilt at her state fair. The quilt was the culmination of a lifetime of work. It was that double-wedding ring pattern of interlocking circles. It looked massive as it hung from the barn rafters at the quilt show. It was a true labor of love. She won a ribbon for her quilt at the fair.

A few months later, her family woke up to a fire in their home. Their home, which they had lovingly renovated and restored over the past ten years, burned to the ground that night. I think unless we have experienced that particular tragedy, it's hard to imagine the kind of devastation they felt and have continued to feel. When the flames were out and it was safe, Lynn's husband trekked into the wreckage of fire, water, and snow. Finally, underneath ash and debris, in its own zipped up bag, he found the quilt, gently folded and put away. It was damaged by fire and water, blackened and stained. But it was still distinguishable as a quilt. Finding it provided an invitation into hope—hope that there was life after the fire; hope that they could pull through the grief; hope that life and love could be stitched back together again, though surely in a new pattern with a different design. Finding that hope, living into that hope cannot be taken for granted. It is not a sure thing and it is not just a feeling we might get. Hope is a decision we make, against all odds. Hope is a practice we embody for ourselves and for the people all around us.

Collectively, our world is still an awfully long way from the freedom and joy that the little girl laying on the quilt on Tar Beach dreamed of. It's a long way from the fulfillment of the kingdom Jesus came to proclaim. But we live into hope. God is the one populating our imaginations. God is the one sending us dreams for what could be, and what already is taking shape. Because like Mary sang, God now proclaims our full release to faith and hope and joy and peace. Not tomorrow, not in some future. But now. Because God has come in Christ, the promises are as good as done. Because Christ will come again, our hope is sure. So we can make the hard choices to live into hope. We can hope because it is worth the risk. We don't have to timidly wish for the things God promises. With hope, we can live into God's plans for restoration and renewal. Like Mary did, like Joseph did.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

December 22, 2024

Fourth Sunday of Advent

“Hope is Worth the Risk”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25 and Luke 1:46-55

A little girl lays on a colorful quilt on the roof of her apartment building in New York City. The bright, handmade quilt sits on top of the tar black coating of the roof. The girl calls this spot, Tar Beach, and from this beach, she swims in the ocean of her daydreams and her wonderful imagination. Author and illustrator Faith Ringgold shares the dream of Tar Beach in her picture book of the same name. From her spot on the quilt, the little girl soars over the George Washington Bridge. She wears its dazzling lights like a diamond necklace. In her mind's eye, she flies high above the struggles that mark her family's life. Her father helped build that bridge, walking 24 stories up high like a cat. Now he is helping build a new building for the union, which he won't be allowed to join because his Daddy wasn't a member, or maybe because they are Black...or maybe both. But laying on her quilt, with the power of her dreams helping her soar, this little girl is free. Her dreams make her full of hope for all that might be possible.

Joseph's dream helped him to soar too. His dream helped him live into hope. Just as Mary chose to live into hope, too. We talked two weeks ago about the angel's visit to Mary and her consent to God's invitation to bear Jesus. She proclaimed the hope of what God was doing in her bold song that we read today. But when Joseph first heard that Mary was pregnant before their marriage, he planned to dismiss her quietly. Her story of the angel and an unexpected pregnancy must have been troubling and hard to believe. Certainly it seemed unwise for him to go forward with their marriage. But Joseph wasn't going to make a big show of things; he was going to be restrained in his ending of their engagement.

That was the sensible option. And I think we can understand his plans. It's hard to believe an unbelievable story. Sometimes though, our human devotion to logic turns to cynicism. We have trouble trusting anything that's mystical, spiritual, unless we can prove it. Other times, we just accept what is, even if it's not very good. We don't want to hope for something

1 Kelley Nikondeha, *The First Advent in Palestine: Reversals, Resistance, and the Ongoing Complexity of Hope*, (Minneapolis: Broadleaf Books, 2022), 119.

2 Kayla Craig, “Commentary, Matthew 1:18-25 & Luke 1:46-55; Fourth Sunday of Advent, “Hope is worth the risk,” *Sanctified Art Sermon Planning Guide*, 2024.

better because maybe we'll be sorely disappointed. But God is not in the business of being sensible or logical. God is definitely not cynical. And God was the one animating this story from start to finish.

When Joseph had made up his mind to move on from Mary, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. Just like the angel had said to Mary, the angel also said to Joseph: "Do not be afraid. All that Mary said is true. When her child is born, you will name him Jesus. He will save the people from their sins." This was all very compelling. But his decision was not just a matter of right and wrong, it was also a practical, economic one. In that time, Joseph would have been entitled to financial compensation if the engagement ended. Yet God's pull on his mind and heart turned out to be more valuable than the money he was owed. Kelley Nikondeha writes, "In Joseph, a different economic practice was at work. He valued Mary as a person, beyond what sum of money he could demand."¹ By putting his trust in this miraculous thing God was doing, Joseph risked his economic future. He was willing to sacrifice his good name and possibly face public disgrace if things went sideways. But he lived into hope anyway. Joseph did just as God said. This word from God in a dream was enough. Like the little girl laying on the quilt, the dream populated his mind with visions of what could be, no matter how unlikely it seemed. With his decision, Joseph makes clear that hope is worth the risk.

Some of you know that I spent some time in Malawi in southern Africa after college doing mission work, which mostly meant teaching elementary school kids a little English. The time was sponsored by my home church in Virginia. When I first traveled there, three other people came with me—my pastor, my dad, and another church member. We met with some of the partners that our church was affiliated with: schools, hospitals, churches. We saw a lot of beautiful things and were treated to a lot of wonderful hospitality. And we also saw a lot of really hard things—children who wouldn't have had enough to eat without their bowl of porridge at school; mud huts that didn't provide adequate shelter; a whole country where the only OBGYN doctor was the Presbyterian missionary we were staying with. At the Sunday morning worship service we were to attend, many different Malawian choirs were scheduled to sing. Someone asked us ahead of time if the four of us visitors would sing, too. We were not a choir, to be very clear. But being their guests and seeking to be gracious, we somehow agreed. What would we sing? A hymn called "Live Into Hope." The last verse goes like this:

*Live into hope of captives freed
From chains of fear or want or greed.*

*God now proclaims our full release
To faith and hope and joy and peace.*

It's not an Advent hymn per se. But the words are so similar to what Mary sang in her song, that it might as well be an Advent hymn. Mary sang with such conviction, proclaiming that God has brought down the powerful and lifted up the lowly; God is at work filling the hungry with good things. God's works, like these, are as good as done and they are always ongoing. Mary was living into hope by singing her hope.

See, hope is not just wishful thinking. Hope is not something we either possess or we don't. Hope is turning your heart toward what might be possible, and then acting toward what God intends. That is a spiritual practice, a choice, a way of being that we can all hone and lean into. Mary and Joseph made decisions that put them at risk in their community. They did not accept the status quo or settle for the logical choice. They lived their hope. They made choices that leaned toward the world God intends.

The hymn we sang in the Malwaian service speaks of hope for a world set right. Hope that is communal. It is something we practice in our own little lives in order that it impacts the whole world. That's how Mary and Joseph lived. Their choices made a huge difference for their own lives and families in Galilee. But then, their choices to follow God's leading impacted the whole human family. As Kayla Craig writes, "Their choice to trust God has reverberations that echo into eternity."²

My friend Elizabeth is a pastor in Pittsburgh. Over the past few years, she has watched as asylum seekers are often bussed to her city from the US border. They come disoriented, often without food, diapers, or formula. They have been given little more than bus tickets and confusing itineraries. Every Thursday, Elizabeth lives into hope. She goes to the bus station with a group called Grannies Respond, or in Spanish, Abuelas Responden. Elizabeth and the other grannies and volunteers give out bottles of water and diapers. They share toiletries and toys for dazed children and exhausted and scared parents. Elizabeth calls this ministry barely a band-aid on all that is broken. It does not begin to address or fix our immigration system. Not to mention the brokenness in our world that would send families on a dangerous journey looking for a better life, without any guarantee of finding it. But there is my friend, living into hope. Not just wishing, or even praying, for a different world. But she's out there sacrificing her time and energy. Doing an uncomfortable—often unpopular—thing in order to show dignity, maybe even love, to her newest neighbors.

Today is our last day with the image of quilts guiding us through this season. A woman I know, named Lynn, is a quilter. A couple of years ago