



Roanoke, Virginia  
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## ***“Hope”***

Once Upon an Advent Sermon Series Part I

*Isaiah 11 (selected verses), Luke 1 (selected verses)*

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“Once Upon an Advent”—it’s a sermon series title that invites us not to simply remember a season, but to enter a story. Advent is God’s way of pulling up a chair beside us and saying, “Let me tell you something true.” It’s not a season for fairy tales or a sentimental escape, but it’s the season to hear a story that begins quietly, surprisingly, and often from the places we least expect. I have heard it said that “stories help us see the truth sideways.”<sup>i</sup> They loosen the tight grip of our assumptions and open up our imaginations to God’s possibilities. As we begin this season, we’re invited to listen again for a story that’s been whispering throughout millennia, from generation to generation: God is still at work, even when all we can see is an ending.

Today, we begin the season of Advent with hope. This hope is not a kind of cheerful optimism or wishful thinking, not the thin positive vibes we sometimes substitute for faith. Advent hope is something sturdier, something more surprising. It is the kind of hope God plants precisely in the places the world has given up on. The chopped-down stump of a once-great kingdom, the older couple who expected nothing more, a tarnished cup someone thought was worthless—this the stuff of God’s great story. Advent invites us to enter these stories so we can learn to recognize hope when it first appears—small, quiet, already breaking in.



Looking to scripture, let's listen in on these stories of hope—

Isaiah 11:1-2, 5, 10.

<sup>1</sup> A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

<sup>2</sup> The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

<sup>5</sup> Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

<sup>10</sup> On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Luke 1:5-15a, 24-25, 57-58. <sup>5</sup> In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was descended from the daughters of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. <sup>6</sup> Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. <sup>7</sup> But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

<sup>8</sup> Once when [Zechariah] was serving as priest before God during his section's turn of duty, <sup>9</sup> he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord to offer incense. <sup>10</sup> Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. <sup>11</sup> Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup> When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified, and fear overwhelmed him. <sup>13</sup> But the angel said to him, "Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. <sup>14</sup> You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, <sup>15</sup> for he will be great in the sight of the Lord."

<sup>24</sup> After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said, <sup>25</sup> "This is what the Lord has done for me in this time, when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people."

<sup>57</sup> Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. <sup>58</sup> Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

Elizabeth and Zechariah's story begins in what one might call a "stump season"—a time when hope seems cut off, when one's future looks closed. Luke opens the Gospel not with a triumphant king or a dazzling sign from God, but with an older faithful couple who have lived decades of sorrow. The two have walked blamelessly before God, yet their prayers have remained unanswered. In first century Judea, barrenness was not only a personal grief, but a social stigma. Culturally (and sadly, I might add), a woman's primary purpose in life was to bear children.



Elizabeth had spent her married life infertile. She had endured an adulthood of being seen as less-than, of whispers behind her back, sideways glances, assumptions that God must be punishing her for something she did or didn't do. For years, Elizabeth waited and watched families around her grow and grow, while her own arms remained empty. Luke's Gospel, astonishingly, begins right there—in a place that looks like an ending.

But into this ending, God speaks a new beginning. An angel appears to Zechariah and a promise is given to them, both. "Your prayer has been heard." Such words must have seemed an impossibility. After so many years of silence, God speaks the promise of a child, John, whose birth will not only bring joy to his parents, but will prepare the world to receive the Messiah. God has planted a seed, and Elizabeth's words come like the first green shoot breaking through, "The Lord has taken away my disgrace." Hope has begun to take root—not loudly, not publicly, but unmistakably.

The Prophet Isaiah widens the lens. Isaiah 11 is addressed to a whole people who have seen their world collapse. Jerusalem has been invaded, the monarchy has been shattered, and the people's identity is now splintered by exile. Once, Israel and Judah were like a mighty cedar, proud and tall. Now, all that remains is a stump—rough and lifeless, little more than the ruins of what used to be. Exiles feel like that, like something essential has been chopped down. Isaiah's people knew this despair intimately, and maybe some of us know something of it too—seasons when the old strength is gone, when the structures we once trusted have fallen, when the future we imagined has disappeared.

Yet it is into this kind of devastation that Isaiah dares to speak a new word. "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse." Not from a new tree, but from the same old, exhausted stump, right where no one ever imagined something more could grow. Isaiah is not calling on nostalgia for a return trip to the "good old days" of David's kingdom. Instead, it's a vision of new life, unexpected life, resurrected life emerging from the same old, faithful root. The stump of Jesse becomes the birthplace of a future no one could have imagined.

The future our God promises is cosmic in scope. Isaiah describes in this chapter a peaceable kingdom where wolves will lie down with lambs, where children reach out in trust instead of fear, where creation itself is healed. This is what happens when God's hope takes root and matures. It sweeps outward, restoring not just individuals, but whole communities—and not just communities, but all of creation.



When we place the story of Luke’s Gospel alongside Isaiah’s sweeping vision, a pattern begins to emerge. God’s hope has a peculiar way of showing up in surprising places. God chooses a barren woman. God chooses a fallen dynasty. God chooses a stump, and each time, hope slips through the cracks and begins to grow.

Roanoke author Nancy Ruth Patterson didn’t set out to write a children’s book when she put pen to paper for *The Christmas Cup*. Originally written as a wedding gift for her brother, the book was meant to preserve the tender Christmas memories of their shared childhood and to honor their beloved grandmother who shaped so much of their lives. The story, however, carried a quiet beauty that spoke to more than her own family, and a friend submitted the book to a publisher without Patterson’s knowledge.<sup>ii</sup> (That, too, feels a little like Advent—a sweet and simple story never intended for the spotlight, becomes a vessel of grace.)

At its heart *The Christmas Cup* is a story about unexpected worth. Eight-year-old Ann Megan (“Megan,” for short) lives in a small Missouri town where most everyone seems to know one another. Setting up her lemonade stand, Megan watched people move in and out of an auction taking place next door. Taking along her hard-earned money, Megan wandered in and noticed an old, tarnished cup next in line for the bidding. Megan thought to herself how lonely and forgotten the old cup seemed. Before she knew it, she’d overbid a whole \$5, nearly all of her lemonade stand money, for the worthless old milkshake cup.

Back home, Megan’s grandmother tried to make the best of her impulsive purchase. Together, they hash out a plan. This unimpressive old cup was going to be the start of something legendary. They will call it the Christmas Cup, and they’ll use it to collect loose coins all Advent season. They’ll keep a list of all the people who’ve shown them kindness, and come Christmas, they’ll choose one person and purchase a gift with the money. They’ll take this overlooked cup and make it a vessel for something special.

Each week, the list grew. Once they started paying attention, they were surprised at how often neighbors and friends were good to them. But then again, Ann Megan was a good girl. Perhaps it’s easy to be good to someone who’s bright and kind and polite.

One day, on their way back from their school lunch break, Megan and her mischievous friend Willis made a not-so-good choice. “Megan had never seen a Mennonite up close before.”<sup>iii</sup> But she had heard her neighbors complain about the horse manure they left behind them on the street. And the kids in her school thought it was strange how they dressed and how the men wore their beards. They’d whisper and giggle about them behind their backs.



It was Willis' idea, but Megan joined in. The rocks they threw did the trick. The man's buggy began to tilt, until it was up on two wheels, flour spilling out of the sack—and who knows what all else—before Willis and Megan took off running.

Ashamed of what she'd done, Megan laid low in class—until the Mennonite man she recognized came walking into the school. It was only a matter of time before Megan and Willis were face to face with the school's dour principal, Miss Finney. Megan knew she was in for it. She could only imagine the punishment stern Miss Finney would lay out for them. To Megan and Willis' surprise, however, it wasn't a punishment Miss Finney had in mind. In her wisdom, Principal Finney took the children to the outskirts of town where they met and visited with Miss Finney's Mennonite friends. In that one afternoon, she taught the children to look at others (even those so different from themselves) with curiosity, kindness, and respect. It was a lesson that would shape Megan for the rest of her life.

Megan went home from that field trip and penciled “Miss Finney” in bold letters on her list.

Soon Christmas break came. Megan and her grandmother met at the kitchen table to count out the coins and read through her list. Reflecting back on all the goodness she'd seen, there was only one clear answer. Miss Finney had to be the one Megan bought the first Christmas Cup gift for this year. She picked the gift out of a catalogue, a beautiful pink sweater with pearls on the collar. Then Megan and her grandmother walked quietly through the snow after dark to deliver the surprise to Miss Finney's doorstep. Without waiting to see her come to the door, they hurried away home. It was the gift giving itself that made that night and the Christmas Cup so very special.

A dented milkshake cup, collection of loose coins, the goodness of neighbors, and a small act of kindness—hope shining through the ordinary.

God's hope shows up in the overlooked, the ordinary, and the unexpected: a barren woman. A chopped-down stump. A dented milkshake cup. A child's handful of coins. Sometimes, hope comes quietly, in small gestures of love—like Isaiah's green shoot, or Zechariah and Elizabeth's long-awaited child, even young Megan's tarnished Christmas Cup.

This morning, as we celebrated Milo's baptism, we witnessed the same truth: ordinary water becomes extraordinary grace; the truth that God calls each of us beloved long before we are ready and sometimes when we least expect it.

No matter where we are or how we feel this Advent Sunday, God is still telling the same story:



- Hope doesn't wait for perfect conditions.
- Hope grows in unexpected places.
- Hope shines through ordinary things touched by love.
- Hope is God's quiet, stubborn insistence that the story is not over.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Google attributes this quote to both Ursula K. Le Guin and Neil Gaiman.

<sup>ii</sup> "Patterson, Nancy Ruth 1944-" Encyclopedia.com [https://www.encyclopedia.com/children/scholarly-magazines/patterson-nancy-ruth-1944?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://www.encyclopedia.com/children/scholarly-magazines/patterson-nancy-ruth-1944?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

<sup>iii</sup> Nancy Ruth Patterson, *The Christmas Cup* (Orchard Books: 1989), 34.

