

Hope

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[0:00] Well, hey, good morning. My name is Ray Sweet from First Christian Church in Greensburg, Indiana. You can always check us out at FCCGreensburg.com or our church Facebook page, FCC Greensburg.

But hey, thank you so much for tuning in today. It is always our prayer that God will just take His Word, stir our hearts, mold us more and more into the image of Jesus Christ.

Now, I know we say this every year, but is anyone else having a little bit of an anxiety attack right now? Because it's December, Christmas is only 22 days away, and in 29 days, it will be the year of our Lord 2024.

But here we are, right? And I want to welcome you to the first week of our series called Christmas Characters. Not to be mistaken with caricatures.

And this is the part where radio makes it a little bit tougher. Because if you were in our worship services this morning at the church, you would see a picture of our entire ministerial staff and these cartoon caricatures that we have of each of us.

[1:11] And we just like to have fun with this. I've shown this before in church. So, I want to go through this list and just talk about the characters that we have in our staff here at FCC.

We'll start off with Amy. She's the nice one. Now, Amy's husband told me she's not perfect. I mean, she's close, but she's not perfect. But I've got to tell you, she's got to be one of the nicest people that I've ever met.

Amy is the glue that holds our staff together. And she puts up with the rest of us. And for that, she has a special place in heaven. And then there's Lynn.

Lynn is our children's director. And her and Amy really do depend on each other a lot. Because they've got to deal with all of us guys here at the office. But Lynn is the staff mama.

It could be 2 o'clock in the afternoon. And she could be swamped getting everything ready for children's ministry for Wednesday or Sunday. And I could walk into her office and say, You know what, Lynn?

[2:15] I'm hankering for some mush right now. You know that cornmeal stuff? I'm hankering for some mush. And you know what she would probably say, having been around her for a few years now, she'd say, Well, let me run to Aldi's and get some real quick.

And I'll have it ready for you in about 30 to 45 minutes. Now, I promise I would never do that to her. But that lady is so selfless in making sure everybody else is taken care of.

And then next, there's Jude. He's our children's ministry apprentice. We'll call him Babyface. And I know this may be awkward, but it's true that Jude is so young that several people in this church, when he was a baby, changed his diapers in the nursery.

And I'm talking about in this millennium. For crying out loud, he was 14 months old when I did my first internship here at the church. So talk about making me feel old.

That's exactly what Jude does. But, you know, we love Jude, and he has such a bright future ahead of him. Next is Steve, our administrative pastor. We'll call him the storyteller.

[3 : 20] I dare you to throw out any topic, and you watch, that Steve has a story that he can share about it. His stories have even been infamously named Steve Stories, where he will start out by saying, As you may or may not know, all Steve Stories are true.

Only the names have been changed to protect the innocent. And then there's the two that really spice things up in our staff. We've got Mitch the instigator. Mitch has mastered that art.

He's also in the top 1% of the population when it comes to sarcasm, to the point where you have no idea if he's being serious or if he's joking. He's one of my very best friends in the world and has been for a couple decades now.

And I still have a hard time figuring out whether he is serious on some things. And he loves it, and he uses his great sense of humor to his advantage to do a fantastic job in loving the youth of our church.

And then there's Tyler. Tyler's our worship and tech pastor. Now, there's a lot of fun that you can see when you're around Tyler, and I'll label him the cheese factory.

[4 : 32] Because for most of us, like the Cheetos commercial, it ain't easy being cheesy. But for Tyler, oh yeah, it is easy. It flows out no problem. He can take dad jokes to a whole new level.

And his joking intelligence, I just made up that phrase, is top notch. And what a joy it is to have such a jovial personality leading us to the throne in worship music on Sundays.

And listen, I don't even want to know what they would label me, but I have a feeling I'll probably find out really soon. But hey, speaking of characters, each year we talk through the Christmas story that's very familiar to most of us.

And one little secret about preachers, sometimes Christmas and Easter can be the hardest messages to prepare because it's so familiar, and we often feel like we're saying the same thing every year.

But I think it really helps when we can kind of step back and realize that these Christmas characters, they were a lot like us in that they were ordinary people from very humble beginnings who the God of the universe chose to bring into his story.

[5 : 42] And maybe they would even have been labeled the nice one or the instigator or the storyteller. Maybe they enjoyed a good dad joke. And I love how God took these characters and he uses them in ways that they would have never have dreamed.

So let's take this journey again as we talk about the hope, peace, joy, and love that came into this world to set us free. And you know, going back to baby face Jude for a second, he would have appeared like an old man to Mary when she had the Savior of the world.

See, Mary was probably somewhere around 13, 14, maybe 15 at the oldest. And while some of you are probably maybe thinking about your own teenagers saying, man, don't you guys get any ideas?

The reality is that their world would have been so different from ours 2,000 years ago. That Jewish culture in that podunk town called Nazareth, they would have grown up simply surviving in many ways.

Responsibility would have been thrust on a girl from humble beginnings like Mary to help take care of her family. And that was the culture of the day. It wasn't weird for a 13, 14, 15-year-old to get married and have a family.

[6 : 58] There was a maturity there of probably someone in their maybe early to mid-20s today. They also didn't have the luxury of modern medicine as we know it, and the average lifespan would have been shorter.

And so Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, also from very humble beginnings, and most likely still a teenager, although boys were usually a few years older than the girl.

And while we usually hear that Joseph was a carpenter, and we think about him building maybe tables and chairs or even homes, the word used to describe his occupation is the Greek word tekton, which was kind of a generic word that simply meant he worked with his hands.

In his culture, it would have been most likely with stone, even before wood, but he would have worked with wood probably as well. So basically, he would have worked with his hands to build things. Now, in some way, he was a laborer.

There would have been no lavish lifestyle for this young couple. And yet, I can't help but to picture their love story.

[8 : 05] They obviously were in that puppy love state. Maybe they had laid under the stars and were gushing about their dreams of their life together, even how many kids that they might have.

And still, I'm going to walk out on the thickest limb that I've ever strolled and say this. They never dreamed they would raise the Savior of the world and be in the pages of God's word.

Nor would they think that they would be preached on 2,000 years later as faithful examples of walking in the hope that Christ brings. So let's talk about this word today, this word hope.

As I often say at funerals, hope is the very thing that all of us search for, whether we realize it or not, or whether we search in the right place or not. And in the words of Henry Halley, what is there?

What can there be to make life worthwhile apart from the Christian hope? And the answer to that is nothing. Everything else will leave you empty and depleted and defeated in the end.

[9 : 11] But the hope of Christ changes everything. So let's dive into God's word today as you turn with me here to the Gospel of Luke, chapter 1. And if you're new to the Bible and not sure where this book is located, that's okay.

All right? You've got to start somewhere. I've been where you are. So Luke is about two-thirds the way through your Bible. It's the third book of the New Testament. So you've got Matthew, Mark, and then you come to Luke.

John would be right after that. And as you're turning to Luke, chapter 1, I realize that every person listening today has their struggles. I get it. Life is hard.

Things are said that can easily manipulate how we view ourselves. Things are done that can paralyze our ambition. Things happen that make us want to give up and walk away. And yet our God interrupts our circumstances with hope.

So as we dive into the pages of God's word, let me show you three things today from Joseph and Mary that we can learn about hope.

[10 : 14] And here's the first thing. And don't forget, if you ever want to see our outline, you can always go to the YouVersion, Y-O-U version Bible app. It's absolutely free. Download that.

And then you can go to the menu. You can go to events. Go to First Christian Church of Greensburg. And then you'll see our outline. But here's the first thing. Hope produces obedience.

Hope produces obedience. Now put yourself in a typical Jewish person like Mary or Joseph's place for a second. You know the prophecies about the coming Messiah.

He's the hope that you are longing for, especially under Roman rule and Roman authority. But there's been about 400 years of silence from God.

Some have begun to think that he's disappeared when all along he was moving things into place to bring the ultimate hope into this world. And suddenly, as we see here in Luke 1, 26, an angel appears to Mary.

[11 : 14] She's frightened just like we would have been. But the angel calms her fears and lets her know that you, Mary, are highly favored. The Lord is with you.

And now look in your Bibles and let's jump down to Luke 1, verse 31, where the angel puts it like this. You will conceive and give birth to a son and you are to call him Jesus.

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever. His kingdom will never end.

How will this be, Mary, asked the angel, since I am a virgin? The angel answered, the Holy Spirit will come on you. The power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God.

Even Elizabeth, your relative, is going to have a child at her old age and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail.

[12 : 18] Now look at Mary's response because it really does show her incredible heart that is already fully committed to Yahweh, to God. She says this in verse 38, I am the Lord's servant, Mary answered.

May your word to me be fulfilled. What an amazing heart for the Lord, even as a young teenager. She says, I'm the Lord's servant. But the original Greek word was even stronger than we may think of as a servant.

It's the word doule, which is the feminine form of the word slave. And while I know that word will carry some baggage for most of us, this is powerful because there's no better master than the Lord.

And there's no other way to come to him than to come all in as that doule, that slave of righteousness. Now, we don't get to redesign God. We don't get to rewrite or pick and choose what we believe from his word.

We simply come as that new creation where the old is gone and the new is here being transformed by the grace of God. And here this angel has the privilege to deliver the ultimate message of hope.

[13 : 32] The Messiah is coming. His name will be Jesus. And you, Mary, in the most unexpected of ways, you get to carry him in your womb for nine months.

You, Mary, along with Joseph, will get to raise the Savior of the world. No pressure, right? I'll tell you, and a lot of you know this, but for me as a parent of three, I have three kids that are 10 and under.

It is overwhelming sometimes, feeling like you're messing up way too often. And here's a young Mary that will have to raise the God who spoke and creation sprang into existence.

The God who knit her together in her mother's womb. And yet that hope of her coming Messiah immediately produces obedience.

Here I am, Lord. Send me. Yeah, it's overwhelming, right? But nothing is impossible with you, Lord. So that begs the question from us.

[14 : 33] Is there an area of my life where I've not been obedient? Maybe God has been calling you to serve in a certain area and you've been running away. You've not been willing. It goes against your comfort level.

Maybe he wants to take that lust or sexual promiscuity or that addiction and replace it with hope. Maybe fear controlling your life needs to be conquered through Christ and his hope.

Maybe it's something as simple as realizing I've neglected Hebrews 10.25. That's very clear that it tells me not to forsake meeting together with the body of Christ, going to church, being an active part of a church, doing life alongside my brothers and my sisters.

Maybe it's a bad attitude or gossip or lies. Maybe it's an ungrateful or victim mentality. Whatever disobedience needs to be laid at the altar, Mary says, I am the Lord's slave.

I choose obedience. May your words, Lord, be fulfilled in me, she says. Now, I don't know about you, but man, that gives me goosebumps.

[15 : 39] Imagine if all of us who are listening to this approached our life with that attitude. Think about what the Lord could do in and through his children when, like Mary, we choose obedience.

Now, here's the second thing that I want you to see. Hope also meets us in our humble state. I know we could go around and we could tell stories of amazing teachers that we had in school who impacted our lives for the better, who inspired us to chase after our dreams, and I could tell stories myself, and I am so blessed to have some of those.

But how many of you also remember, kind of on the other end, teachers in school that seemed to just kind of favor the popular kids who were from certain families.

It just seemed like if you didn't come from a certain line or whatever, that you were just kind of shoved to the side. I think most of us would agree with that, but God's not that way, and that's what I love.

And I love the story when God sent the prophet Samuel to anoint the next king over Israel after Saul had rejected God. And here are all the sons of Jesse, young men that looked a lot like how kings in the world would have looked in those days, big, strong, tall, and yet listen to God's response.

[17 : 00] But the Lord said to Samuel, Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things that people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.

And then he proceeds to call the runt of the litter, David, who's been out filthy, tending the sheep, and he calls him to be the next king over Israel.

And listen, Mary could relate. She came from a family that wasn't known outside of their small town. She didn't come from wealth or prominence. She simply came from humble origins with a heart that loved the Lord her God and God chose her to be the mother of our Savior.

And guess what? He chooses you for his purposes as well. And I love Mary's song. As Jesus is in her womb, she goes to visit her relative Elizabeth.

God performed a miracle that we'll talk about here in a couple weeks where John the Baptist was in Elizabeth's womb in her old age. And even when Mary arrived and greeted Elizabeth, the word says that the baby in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy at the sound of Mary's voice knowing that she was carrying the Messiah.

[18 : 19] And I want to read to you the first part of this beautiful song from Mary to God as she's so overwhelmed in the Lord's perfect plans that she simply worships him.

So look at Luke 1, 46 through 49 with me. And Mary said, My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed for the mighty one has done great things for me. Holy is his name. Now listen, I have no idea how you grew up, what side of the tracks you come from, how you've been labeled, even what mistakes that you've made that others have maybe constantly reminded you of.

But I know this, God created you in his image. He loves you, he sees you, and regardless of where you come from or what you've been through or even how you've been hurt in your life, his hope through Jesus Christ can meet you right where you are.

But it won't leave you there. His hope forgives, but listen, his hope also transforms these hearts so that we don't look like that old image anymore.

[19 : 36] We're now a brand new creation and his hope daily guides us. He meets us in our humble state. He doesn't do what some have done where they just pick the popular kids.

He looks at the heart and he loves you as much as he loves me, as much as he loves anyone else in this world. And then last, hope lives the impossible.

I want you to hit reverse for two books and go back to the Gospel of Matthew, chapter one. That's the very first book of the New Testament. Matthew one. And we've taken a quick look at Mary's experience with the angel appearing to her.

We've seen her obedience and her humble state. But now put yourself in Joseph's shoes for a second. The girl you love, the girl you've promised yourself to, the girl who you will soon marry and spend your life with, she comes to you and she drops a bombshell.

She says, I'm pregnant. You know that you've followed God's commands. You know that there's no way that baby can be yours. You've kept yourself pure. You've done what you were supposed to do.

[20 : 46] And how can I believe the craziness of her story that an angel appeared to her and told her that the Holy Spirit through him, a child, would grow within her and be the Messiah of the world?

Yeah, lady, I've heard that one before, right? Pretty dramatic. But in Joseph's mind, no way that's true. It's a lie, nonetheless. But he loved her still.

He's heartbroken. So he decides to break it off quietly to spare her from public disgrace. He often, we often look at Mary, you know, and rightfully so, but there's a reason that these two were together.

We look at her faith and there's a reason because he was faithful as well to the Lord and Joseph was a godly man who chose to bless Mary instead of curse her when he thought that she had done him wrong.

Now look at Matthew 1, 20 through 24. So he thinks this is all a lie. He thinks she's making this up that she has been unfaithful. But look at what happens. Matthew 1, 20.

[21 : 54] But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will give birth to a son and you're to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet. The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son and they will call him Emmanuel, which means God with us.

When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. Now, apparently her crazy story wasn't so crazy once God got involved here with Joseph.

And I imagine the pressure to raise the God, the universe, was intense and yet Joseph also chose obedience and faithfulness to the Lord. Now let me be clear. We do not elevate this couple, especially Mary, to levels that we see done in other Christian traditions because we just don't see it in God's word.

And you know our philosophy, sola scriptura. Scripture alone is our guide. But listen, we also aren't going to run to the other end and ignore their incredible example to each of us of what it looks like to live the impossible.

[23 : 12] And yes, the Messiah being born only happened once. But listen, you and I both are called to live the impossible. Not in our strength, but in Christ and His perfect will over our lives.

Now can I just be extremely real and blunt with you here for a second? We can come so easily and we can sing our worship songs about the God of the impossible.

We can raise our hands and believe that He is awesome in power. And yet you and I both so easily can walk out those doors and live like we don't even believe the biblical words that we just sung.

We can so easily live like the impossible is not even a possibility. I'll never forget sitting in the living room of a member of our first church where we were at and hearing a guy I really like say, you know, God can only do so much.

And I forget my exact words, but it was something to this effect. I politely responded back by saying, not the God of the Bible that I serve. And the Apostle Paul, a man who saw the awesome power of God at work in his and others' lives, put it like this in Ephesians 3, 20 and 21.

[24 : 23] He says, now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine according to His power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations forever and ever.

Amen. You know, the Christmas story is just one more reminder that God uses the ordinary, the broken, to do the impossible because it's all about His power and His grace.

Now, I started off this message having fun talking about our staff who all have a good sense of humor, but let me show you how blessed we are as a church. I could tell you when we hired Amy that God made it clear that we were to pursue her for that administrative assistant position, and He has only confirmed it by her spiritual maturity, her heart to serve faithfully.

She has taken her role to new heights and we are all blessed in many ways by her faithfulness, much of which we don't even realize how she is making our lives easier by all that she does.

When our previous family ministry director left, it was a scary time, but God knew that Lynn Clinney had the servant-hearted faithfulness to Him to do a fantastic job and she has continued to grow our children's ministry, our family ministry.

[25 : 42] I know we joke about Jude's age and I used to get that too a couple decades ago when I was first in ministry, but the reality is that I'm excited for what God is doing in and through this young man.

As he continues to grow and get a biblical education, I believe the sky is the limit for what God will do through him. Pastor Steve also has taught me so much about grace how to show it to all that he encounters.

He's also one of the best friends that you could ever ask for and I'm thankful that he's on this team helping behind the scenes to help our church be healthy. Pastor Mitch has the ability to be thrown into any situation and do a fantastic job of modeling Christ to our youth and our church.

We often joke around and say he's a professional winger. He can wing it like nobody I've ever seen and yet his heart beats for the Lord and he does an incredible job and yes, he does prepare.

I'm not saying he doesn't prepare for things but our youth group has basically doubled this year alone with the Lord using him and his team. And then Pastor Tyler, man, he has brought a passion to lead us to the throne in worship.

[26 : 55] He's an extremely intelligent guy who can go way deeper than I in theological discussions and he just brings a lot of fun and joy to our team. Now, I only focus on our staff today to say that we always pray with one another that God will use us broken vessels to shine his love into this world and I believe that's true of you as well.

There's hope in Christ that this world needs and God wants to use you just like he did Mary and just like he did Joseph to tell others about the amazing hope that comes through the Savior.

Pray with me. Heavenly Father, I'm just so thankful for your word today. Thank you for the example of Mary and Joseph. I do rise up and call them blessed like your scripture says.

They are wonderful examples of trusting you and following you that we can learn so much from. And Father, I just thank you for the ultimate hope that you give us in Jesus Christ.

I thank you for the hope that he brought into this world in the most unexpected of ways and I thank you that that hope wasn't just for people in Bible times but it's for us today and we don't have to just trudge our way through life.

[28 : 14] We don't have to just do the rat race going from job to job or whatever. Lord, you call us to walk in your hope. In your hope.

And I'm thankful for that. So Father, help us to trust you and love you more. Help us to be faithful to tell others about this awesome hope that we have in Christ.

We love you, Jesus. We pray all this in your precious name. Amen. I want to give you just a quick invitation. If you're listening to this and you don't know the Lord as your Savior, you've never surrendered your life to him through repentance, through baptism, you've never just given all of you to all of him, I want you to know that he loves you and he's ready to come into your life and do incredible things.

But it starts with you saying, Lord, here I am. Send me. Here I am. Take my heart. I surrender it to you. So if you'd like to talk about that or maybe you've just got some questions about God, give us a call, 812-663-8488.

Once again, that's First Christian Church, 812-663-8488. Or you can email me at rayatfccgreensburg.com. Hey, God bless you.

[29 : 32] Have a great week.