**Unpacking Christmas**

Luke 1:5-26, 39-44, 57-66 10:00 am Nov. 28, 2021

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| **slides** | **Sermon** |
| 1 | Title Slides |
| 2 | Introduction: Welcome to Center on this first Sunday of Advent 2021. It is the Sunday of Hope . This year on this Sunday we look at our experience of unpacking our Christmas decorations and putting them in the various places they go. Some like our church have a certain place each decoration goes each year. But this year I notice that the nativity scene on the altar is different. I like it. Others change things up and decorate differently every year. But what is it about unpacking your decorations that can offer hope to have the birth of Jesus happen for you in a new way this year?  How is your decorating going for you so far? Have you decorated yet? If so, how did it go? If not, what is your stumbling block for unpacking your Christmas decorations placing them where they need to go? |
| 3 | The fact is that lots of people are excited about this beginning to the Christmas season. If you are one of these you probably have your decorations up - inside and out! You have gone through the boxes and for some you had a delightful trip down memory lane! This decoration, this ornament brought back great memories of your parents making a particular Christmas extra special, or of a child that made his/her first ornament. For both Wade and Riley, I recall they took non metallic red and green balls and put them together to make spacemen ornaments! I didn't ask why spacemen. I just received them and the joy with which they gave them. Those spacemen, or the parts left of them will be on the tree again this year. Maybe some of you had an ornament or decoration that reminded you of a place far away and friends who lived there. That is true for me when we lived in England over two Christmases. Yes, for you unpacking the Christmas decorations is an activity you look forward to all year! You put on Christmas music, perhaps simmer some apple juice with cinnamon on the stove and involve the whole family in the activity. You feel the hope that this will be the greatest Christmas ever! |
| 4 | Yet for others, getting down the Christmas decorations in all those boxes will be a chore! Begrudgingly, we make ourselves open the boxes, if we even get them down, and go through the motions of putting them up. Such folks probably don't even have their tree yet. Why has decorating for Christmas become such a chore, when once is was so much fun. The reasons vary as the number of people doing it varies. For some it is adding a major event into a schedule that is already full. For others, we are just older and it is not as easy as it once was and the children now have families of their own. Maybe you are going through a time when you have recently lost loved ones and the ornaments bring back sad memories of the those loved one. When Wade died, it took 6 years before I opened a box of decorations! It wasn't until I moved here that I put up my gaudy outside lights. Even then I only put up a tree because a new friend gave me a real Christmas tree. So for some, this decorating, this preparing for Christmas is not a welcome time.  This week I was in Dollar Tree and the women just ahead of me checking out had all kinds of decorations that would make a beautiful Christmas display. I said to her, "You must be excited about Christmas because you have gotten so many decorations to put up! " But to my surprise she responded. "No, I am not excited about decorating. I don't even have any children home now. But I am determined to win this year's decorating contest! Not excited or joyful, just determined to win the contest. |
| 5 | That makes me think of a movie called "Christmas with the Kranks". Luther (Tim Allen ) and Nora Krank (Jamie Lee Curtis) plan to escape the Christmas traditions and take a cruise in the Caribbean instead. This was the first Christmas that their daughter was going to her boyfriend's home for Christmas and they would be alone. So why decorate since they would be gone before Christmas and not return until after. But this doesn't sit well with their Christmas -obsessed neighbors Vic Frohmeyer (Dan Aykroyd) and Walt Scheel (Emmet Walsh) who are determined to win the annual "best decorated street" street again this year. Soon as the neighbors get their houses decorated, the Krank's house begins to stick out like a sore thumb and they become social outcasts!  Look at this clip from the Movie: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KTzyGuB9V6c |
| 6 | Where do you find yourself on the spectrum of unpacking your Christmas decorations? Like the Krank's or like the ones who already have all their decorations up, or somewhere in between?  But when you think about it, getting out the boxes and decorating is a time to pause from the day to day life and reconnect with memories pushed back in to the recesses of your brain. But the main idea of unpacking our decorations and putting them in their place is to focus our attention to the possibility of a renewed celebration of God's gift of Christ to the world  In the decorating process, if we are open to it, there are some unexpected surprises awaiting us if we are decorating for the coming of Jesus into our lives. |
| 7 | Let's look at our scripture now and hear Beth Moore tells (Jesus the One and Only, page 10.) about Zachariah and Elizabeth approach the revelation of having a son in their old age. It helps us to understand Zachariah and Elizabeth's background and why God chose them.  Zachariah rose from his bed in a small room outside the temple, amazed at the once-in-a-life-time privilege he feared would never come, after all, he was no spring chicken!  This was no time for marital preoccupation, but Zachariah's mind surely detoured to his wife of many years. Unlike most of her other priest, he had no children. When his temple service took him from home, Elizabeth was all alone. She handled her empty home with grace and dignity, but he knew her childlessness still stung terribly. Jewish homes were meant for children.  Zachariah took extra care to smooth out the white linen fabric and carefully tie the sash of his priestly garments. Not all the priests took responsibilities so soberly, but Zachariah was a righteous man. He walked through the temple gate with all senses magnified and beheld a sight to take away a man's breath: the cream and gold temple bathing in the morning sun. A few early risers probably already gathered for worship in the courtyard. Little did Zechariah know that the gentle breeze was blowing in far more that just another morning.  Zechariah is not a character in a fiction novel. He was a real man who sought to serve a real God even in the midst of unanswered prayers, mystifying disappointments, personal weakness, mundane daily rituals and anxiety causing responsibilities. Can you relate? If so, a great adventure lies ahead of you as we make our way through Advent to Christmas! And our adventure starts with this story from Luke 1 where God prepares the world for the greatest gift of Hope ever given! |
| 8 | Now let's note the responses of our two main characters of the scripture to the news that God sends through an angel.  Zachariah comes to perform the task of being the priest of the week. He is a Levite which were given the responsibility of leading worship from the time of Moses. As we heard he was righteous and took his duties seriously. But he had always been troubled that he and Elizabeth never had children. Having a family was a sign of God's blessings and hope for the future.  So, as Zachariah went about his duties in the Temple the last thing he expected was to encounter an angel with a message that he and Elizabeth now in old age would finally have a son! He is literally bowled over! But, he is not sure if what he is hearing is real. He questions the angel logically, precisely because he and Elizabeth are way, way passed child baring years. Because of his unbelief, the angel declared that he would be mute until the angel's words are fulfilled. Zachariah had the best news of his life, but could not bring himself to believe it even when it came from an angel of God. It was like some of us when we feel we just can't empty the decoration's box and decorate for Christmas. We know it is the time of year we prepare for God's great gift of Jesus, but we can't see beyond the task to the gift God is preparing to give us! Does God need to make us mute because we give in to our pessimism that this Christmas will be about stuff instead of a real gift of hope? What are you willing to do to prepare yourself for the coming of Jesus in a brand new way? Does that dread of opening your decoration's box bleed over into your dread of celebrating the whole of Christmas?  Now, when Zachariah came out of the Temple, he tried to tell everyone what happened but couldn't! All know that something special had happened but didn't know exactly what. Can you imagine the frustration that Zachariah felt that he could not tell the most exciting thing that had ever happened to him?  It is opposite for us, we know the good news of the birth of Christ, but how many of us are going to share the news? How so many of us let the decorations, unpacking and work sap our energy and we forget to share why we are doing this. We neglect to tell others about Jesus' birth and how he becomes the savior of the world. |
| 9 | Now Elizabeth on the other hand reacts to the angel's message in sharp contrast to Zachariah. We do not know how Zachariah communicated to her the message of great hope to her. I have always thought that he wrote it down because both of them were from priestly families and I suppose both could read and write. Maybe she knew of the message when she actually became pregnant a short time later. Of course she was pleased in that God answered her prayers of many years and had taken away the disgrace of her barrenness. But went into seclusion for 5 months. Then Mary came to live with her. Elizabeth embraced the gift, but didn't go out shouting from the roof tops. I think she relished every second of her pregnancy and the anticipation of John's birth. She wasn't worried about morning sickness, the discomfort of a child growing inside her old body nor the delivery. She steadily looked in faith to God and rejoiced in the good news the angel gave to Zachariah. She was like the ones of us who look forward to opening the boxes of Christmas decorations and put them up knowing that something wonderful can happen at Christmas! |
| 10 | Christmas is a wonderful time of the year when we choose to make Jesus the center of our decorations and our observance. How wonderful it is that God loves us so much that God would provide a way to help us have an eternity with Him. Christmas is the celebration of God's promise being put into action with the birth of John to announce the coming of Jesus. And how Jesus would live and grow up fully human and fully divine, experiencing what we face and willingly giving his life for our sins. |
| 11 | Stores owners, the travel industry, the restaurant owners and all the ones that get the financial ripple effect of Christmas tell us it is the most wonderful time of the year because it fattens the wallet. WE as Christians certainly agree with them, but for an entirely different reason. That reason is the hope of redemption that comes with the birth of Jesus! The commercial part of Christmas looks to their bottom lines and the profit they make; secular, material gains. But those of us who are unpacking our boxes and decorating are looking above and know it is the most wonderful time of the year because of the miraculous things that God did and continues to do for the divine love God has to save us! |
| 12 | So, As you decorate, as you unpack those boxes, as you put up your lights and trees and turn your yard into a winter fairy land, do so as a way to talk to others about the missing reason for the season! When they comment on your lights, your front door display, your tree in the living room, the packages under the tree, take the opportunity to share that it is Jesus' birth that you are celebrating! Maybe God will open the door for you to share that reason so they might know Jesus as Lord, too!  On this first Sunday of Advent, the story of Zachariah and Elizabeth give us hope that God uses just plain people to share his love. May our efforts to celebrate this holy season give our friends and neighbors reason to hope that God is still at work in our world. Let your decorating speak not to the cultural meaning of Christmas but for the hope we find in Jesus! Amen |