

Natalie W. Bell  
 December 20, 2020  
 Blue Christmas

***Borrowing Hope***  
***Luke 1:26-38***

*<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."<sup>[b]</sup> <sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"<sup>[c]</sup> <sup>35</sup> The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born<sup>[d]</sup> will be holy; he will be called Son of God. <sup>36</sup> And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. <sup>37</sup> For **nothing will be impossible with God.**" <sup>38</sup> Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.*

In her book, *A Weary World*, Kathy Escobar reflects on just ***how hard Christmas can be for many people.***

She is reminded each Christmas, of the loss of her son to suicide. And she is keenly aware of how many people are hurting at Christmas— from loss and brokenness and shattered dreams.

The ***world tells us we need*** a bright, shiny, happy, beautiful Christmas— straight out of a magazine.

But the truth is, ***NONE of us have that.***

That life can only be found in *Hallmark Christmas movies!*

We have REAL hearts and homes, with ***real hurts.***

And this is the reason so many Christians have adopted a **Blue Christmas service** near December 21<sup>st</sup>, the longest night of the year. The service acknowledges our very real pain and suffering, While pointing to our very real hope— hope that is found only in the newborn King, our Savior Jesus Christ.

***Hope is a small word with a lot of meaning for Christians.***

It is foundational to our faith in Christ.

According to Miriam Webster—hope is the *expectation and desire for a certain thing to happen.*

In the Bible the world is ***richer and fuller.***

Hope is something that can even come from suffering, *a suffering that produces endurance, and an endurance that produces hope, as Paul says in Romans 5:1-8.*

***Hope is not a slap-a-smile-on-it feeling,***

And it's certainly ***not based on good circumstances.***

Hope is about looking for the ***possibilities.***

And as Christians it's about ***looking for what is possible with God.***

And according to our scriptures today, and the angel's words to Mary, Those possibilities are ***endless.***

*For nothing will be impossible with God! (Luke 1:38)*

Our hope is ***real, and based on the fact that***

***our God can provide*** all that we need,

our God is always with us,

always loving us,

always working in our lives and our world.

***But sometimes believing that is easier SAID than done.***

Have you ever felt that all hope is lost?

I think most of us know that feeling.

I know after losing a loved one it can feel almost impossible to get out of bed, or quit crying, or move forward with work or plans or caring for family.

There are times when life seems hopeless.

And Escobar says that those are the times when we need to ***'borrow hope'.***

We turn to those closest to us and ***ask for them to hold hope for us.***

Kathy Escobar, *A Weary World: Reflections for a Blue Christmas*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2020, pg. 75

This is just like ***asking people to pray for you***, when you aren't up to that.  
It's just like in the Bible when ***Aaron and Hur helped hold Moses' arms up*** in the air so that the Israelites could win the battle in Exodus 17.  
God knows we need to ***lean on*** one another,  
and sometimes we need ***to borrow hope.***

My daily devotional, *Streams in the Desert*, on December 19<sup>th</sup> says that ***"life is a steep climb, and it is always encouraging to have those ahead of us "call back" and cheerfully summon us to higher ground. We all climb together, so we should help one another...as our view becomes better ..., and as we discover things of importance, we should "call back" our encouragement to others"***. L.B. Cowman, *Streams in the Desert*, December 19<sup>th</sup>.

***Hope for Christians IS risky***, because it's based on ***expectation***.  
When we hold out hope, we risk being ***hurt and disappointed***.  
So having hope is ***courageous***—it's moving ahead, despite your fear.  
It's going to ***unfamiliar places***, even in your fear.

Mary knew what it was to ***hope, and what it was to be afraid***.  
There's a reason that the angel reassured her with one of the most famous refrains in scripture: ***DO NOT FEAR***.  
He said that because ***she WAS afraid***—  
she didn't know what was happening!  
Can you even imagine?  
She might have thought she was losing her mind or imagining the whole thing!

But she stayed right there with the angel.  
***She didn't run away or refuse*** the instructions.  
She heard her mission and call from God,  
and ***held out hope*** that God would provide everything she needed.  
***"Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."***

***Her hope was risky, and it was certainly courageous.***  
After all, Mary was only engaged, not married.

She would be pregnant, not by Joseph.  
 She would likely face ridicule and shame,  
 and skepticism from those who loved her.

But she kept on going.

And her **hope in this newborn baby sustained her.**

Escobar says that **“hope will require letting God’s Spirit move in ways that feel mysterious, scary, and often unfamiliar”.**

Kathy Escobar, *A Weary World: Reflections for a Blue Christmas*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2020, pg. 76

Isn’t that so true?

When was the last time you felt like life was **mysterious, scary, or unfamiliar?**

How about during **all of 2020?**

With the politics and injustice and the pandemic!

**And yet-- we have hope—that God’s Spirit is at work.**

We are not just relying upon ourselves, we are **relying upon God.**

A good and gracious God.

A God for whom nothing is impossible.

The same God who blessed Mary!

But let’s be honest.

**We still have some FEAR—fear is very real for all of us.**

There is fear in this **pandemic,**

Fear about the **future.**

**So how do we GET PAST our fear—and grab onto HOPE?**

Escobar says first we have to **admit that we have some fear.**

Then we take **courageous little steps**---SMALL steps.

We don’t try to conquer everything at once.

Mary had nine months to understand what was happening in her body and her marriage to Joseph.

Each step of the way God was with her.

She literally just put one foot in front of the other day after day.

Escobar says that while taking these little courageous steps,

***we also need to be real and vulnerable.***

Sociologist and author Brene Brown is perhaps the expert on this.  
 And she always says when it comes to suffering or hard things,  
 We should just be real. Admit the pain.  
 And we shouldn't compare ourselves to anyone else—  
 by thinking we are hurting more than everyone,  
 or that our pain is not as bad as someone else.  
 Everyone's life is unique. There is no comparison.  
 Ideally, we have people with whom we can just be ourselves.

Once we ***admit our fear,***  
 And take ***courageous little steps,***  
***Being real and vulnerable*** all the way,  
 We need to ***FOCUS*** on God.  
 Not our circumstances—  
 Because our circumstances may stink—but God is God,  
 And with God all things are possible.

Finally, Escobar encourages us to  
***SEE, FEEL and HEAR God—WHEREVER we can, HOWEVER we can.***  
 It might be in a friend, a sunrise, a song, a book, a scripture.  
 Really ***anything and everything can hold the promises of God,***  
***God can use anyone and anything to speak to us!***  
 It might not be a big sign, or an angel speaking like Gabriel to Mary!  
 It could be something very simple. Kathy Escobar, *A Weary World: Reflections for a Blue Christmas*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2020, pg. 77.

And as ***we keep moving forward in life,***  
***Looking for God all around us,***  
 We also ***look for the helpers*** all around us  
 (just like Mr. Rogers always encouraged us to do!).  
 And, we take steps to ***BE the helpers,*** wherever there is a need.  
 Because sometimes what we need, to hang onto hope,  
 is ***to help someone else.***  
 To reach out.  
 To give.  
 To be generous.

All of this holding onto hope---it's really about seeing life from a *new perspective*.  
God's perspective.

Which is one of **wonder and amazement**.

Think about that for a minute.

**God sees everything that is possible, which is amazing!**

Just look at our **story today**---

a virgin engaged to man in small town Nazareth is favored by God?

Chosen to conceive and bear a son, who will be great, Son of the Most High, with  
a never-ending kingdom?

Now just think about that announcement.

Talk about the wonder and amazement!

And it just continues with the angel's announcement about

**HOW this will happen:**

*"The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will  
overshadow you; therefore the child to be born<sup>[d]</sup> will be holy;  
he will be called Son of God.*

Then, the whole encounter ends with **yet another miracle**:

Elizabeth, in her old age, believed to be barren, is now six months pregnant!

To believe this story **requires some wonder and amazement**, doesn't it?

The question is: **do we LOOK FOR the wonder and amazement in our lives?**

And does that bring us hope?

Are we paying attention to the amazing stuff all around us?

Or do we just want to make our own plans,

And focus on what we know for **certain**?

Escobar believes that's a recipe for pain and heartache,

because **certainty is the opposite of wonder**. Kathy Escobar, *A Weary World: Reflections for  
a Blue Christmas*, Westminster John Knox: Louisville, 2020, pg. 88

Trying to be certain, can rob us of our hope!

Doesn't that make sense?

That certainty can rob us of hope?

After all, our human hearts and minds are **limited—but God is not!**

I wonder, can you think of ***a time that God just amazed you***—  
in ways you never could have expected or planned?

I could ***preach on that*** all day long!  
Every time I have faced a challenge, God has shown up in amazing ways!  
People have called me out of the blue,  
Friends have reached out with love and help,  
Unexpected blessings have reached my mailbox, or email!

***When has God amazed you?***

And are you ***open to that now***—this Christmas?

***To live in wonder and amazement***, requires ***a step of faith***.

It means surrendering our need to ***know*** everything, and our desire to be ***right***.  
It means letting go of our desire to have everything ***figured out***,  
and ***planned*** way ahead of time.

Which is a real bummer if you're a planner like me!

***But not seeing the path ahead is actually very Biblical.***

The Israelites had to step into the Red Sea before it actually parted.  
When Moses led the people out of Egypt, they didn't have a map,  
Or a clue how they would survive.  
And look how God provided!

***Just when the way seems IMPOSSIBLE***, that's when God works and moves.

God is ***not in the business of giving us lots of advance notice***,  
or laying out the path before us.

And God definitely doesn't give us a plan and ask—

***"Is this what YOU had in mind"?***

Instead God invites us to ***have hope—and step out in faith***—

Believing that everything will be provided.

Even when the way ahead looks ***impossible***.

***ESPECIALLY when it looks impossible.***

Friends, hear the ***Good News of the Gospel*** on this ***Blue Christmas Sunday***:  
We can choose to hold onto hope,  
Hope in a God who is wonderful and amazing.  
A God who ***helps in impossible situations***, and when we ***least expect*** it!

May we all be ***open to the God who comes to us in the baby Jesus***,  
And the ***Savior who brings the ultimate hope!***  
And for this greatest gift, all God's people said, Amen.