

Rev. Anne J. Scalfaro
7 December 2025

10:30 a.m. MT Worship
Second Sunday of Advent

Calvary Baptist Church
Denver, Colorado

“When We’re Running Out of Hope, God is at Work”

Second Sermon in the Advent, Christmas, & Epiphany series,
What do you fear? Insisting on Hope this Advent

NOTE: A sermon is a spoken word event. This manuscript served as a guide but is not exact to what was preached in the moment.

Isaiah 43:19-21; Matthew 11:1-11

New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition

MaryAnn McKibben Dana begins her book entitled, *Hope: A User’s Manual*, by writing: “You’re probably familiar with the [inspirational slogan] emblazoned on posters and paperweights: *What would you do if you knew you could not fail?* Well, when the world’s on fire—[in Jesus’ day and our day]—a better question may be: “*What is worth doing even if you think you will fail?* Once we can answer that question, we’ll be in touch with a hope that cannot fail us.”¹ How can that be? Well, because Hope is not about outcomes, but about always seeing opportunity, again and again and again and again.

Yet experiencing failed outcomes is the very reality that John the Baptist is wrestling with in today’s text. Because I

don’t think he expected to fail, and he certainly didn’t expect Jesus to fail him! After all, where did his Hope for a better world get him? Prison!

As you’ll remember, John the Baptist was Jesus’ cousin and his forerunner in the faith. Traditionally in Advent we hear John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, pleading for the people to repent prepare the way for the one coming who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. But this year we are leaving behind the younger, more self-assured John, who was hopefilled and confident as he baptized people in the Jordan River and we’re jumping years ahead to the *end* his life and ministry so we can really zero in on this precarious moment when deep fear and suffering cause him to question the impact of his life’s work.²

¹ MaryAnn McKibben Dana, *Hope: A User’s Manual* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2022), pg 4.

² Rev. Lisle Gwynn Garrity, “Theme Connections,” *Sanctified Art What do you fear? Sermon Planning*

Guide for the Second Sunday of Advent, ‘When We’re Running Out of Hope, God is at Work,’ (c. 2025), pg 9, accessed on Dec. 7, 2025 at sanctifiedart.org.

Many of us can relate to such a moment, or even to an entire season when we feel defeated of disappointed, cynical or confused. Those times when we ask, *“Has anything I’ve done even mattered or made a difference?”* I’m sure John is thinking, *“Nothing ever changes. Clearly doing good doesn’t mean good things happen to you. I’m in prison, after all...what’s the point?”*

Indeed at this point in his life, John the Baptist seemingly “has no hope.” He is in prison. Herod put him there. Surprise, surprise, right? But wait, this is not the Herod you’re thinking of. You’re probably thinking of Herod the Great from last week. And while he was cruel, greedy, and ego-driven, the Herod that puts John the Baptist in prison, and eventually beheads him is not “Herod the Great,” but none other than one of his sons: Herod Antipas.

Actually all three of Herod the Great’s sons— Archelaus, Antipas, and Philip—continue their father’s legacy of ruthlessness and brutality after his death. Herod Antipas not only beheaded John the Baptist (*Mark 6:14-29*) he also sought

the death of Jesus (*Luke 13:31; 23:6-12*).³

So, while this week’s Herod is not the same Herod, the fearfulness of “The Time of Herod” persists. When power goes unchecked through the generations, its potency can become even more poisonous, can’t it? This is a warning to us all. One person is never the sole problem. There is always a culture and system upholding someone’s power, and it’s always hungry for the next person in line. The systemic greed and the kind of power that needs to put many people down in order to keep a few people “up” does not die when one person dies. It will live for generations if not held to account, and dismantled, and if lessons are not learned. Otherwise, there is no room for another system to be built, nor the wisdom or reflection to build it! And a system that uplifts all, rather than a few, requires a whole new imagination—the kind of imagination that Jesus reminds John the Baptist about as he sits in prison flat out of hope. I’ll come back to that in a bit.

³ Obery M. Hendricks, Jr. *The Politics of Jesus* (New York: Three Leaves Press, 2006), pg 56.

As John sits behind bars, he questions his whole life purpose and understanding of who Jesus was. It must feel like the “bad guys” are winning here. If Jesus was really the Messiah, wouldn’t he save him? Maybe Jesus isn’t who he thought he was. Maybe he had it all wrong, all along. What a disorienting place to be in; this kind of doubt can be debilitating for sure.

As a prisoner held under Herod’s authority and cut off from the movement he ignited, “his firebrand voice has been silenced,” as Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee says. “And in its place, we find a [vulnerable] question, carried through the disciples to Jesus: ‘*Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*’” (Matt. 11:3)”⁴

“It is not just a question—it is a cry from the edges of despair. John, the prophet who baptized Jesus and had declared him the Lamb of God, is now unsure. In the dim light of his cell, with execution on the horizon, hope flickers low. He does not ask for a miracle. He asks whether his whole life—his ministry and

*message—meant anything. It’s a question many of us have asked, especially when our efforts for justice and truth feel fruitless. After every protest, election, vigil, or prayer for peace that seems unanswered—Did it matter? Did I get it wrong? Was any of it worth it? This is not doubt born of cynicism. It is the trembling that comes when conviction meets suffering—when the cost of faithfulness has been high, and the fruit appears small. It is what hope sounds like when it’s running thin.”*⁵

But thin hope is still hope and thin as it may be, it’s strong enough to buoy our doubt and firmly hold our fear, as we wonder, even still perhaps today: “If Jesus is really the one who brings God’s kin-dom to fruition, why is our world still marked by exploitation, [illness,] injustice, polarization, and violence? Why are we still waiting? How long must we wait? Will Jesus really come to redeem those who suffer, or should we look [elsewhere]?”⁶

The answer lies not in [fancy theological statements], but in

⁴ Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee, “Commentary on Matthew 11:1-11; Isaiah 43: 19-21,” *Sanctified Art What do you fear? Sermon Planning Guide for the Second Sunday of Advent, ‘When We’re Running Out of Hope, God is at Work,’* (c. 2025), pg 9 accessed on Dec. 7, 2025 at sanctifiedart.org.

⁵ Lee, pg. 9.

⁶ tanley Saunders, “Commentary on Matthew 11:2-11,” *Working Preacher* (11 Dec. 2022), accessed on Dec. 7, 2025 at <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/third-sunday-of-advent/commentary-on-matthew-112-11-6>.

the simple, yet clear, images of real life that Jesus lifts up and reminds John (and his disciples) about: when the blind see, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have the good news proclaimed to them, is not that the power of God and the imagination of a new creation?⁷

In her artist's statement about her artwork—*Hope Like a Dancer*—which is next to the Matthew 11 text in your Order of Worship, Lauren Wright Pittman writes: "I imagine John, even if for a moment, breaking into a bit of laughter [as he is reminded of] the magnitude of Jesus' ministry. Jesus was quite literally doing the unimaginable. He was removing barriers so that the marginalized were no longer reduced to begging and sitting on mats, shoved to the edges of society. He was not only healing physical ailments; perhaps more importantly, he was restoring people to community. [And yet] out of all the miraculous actions mentioned, the news did not include "release of the captives" (as Jesus' first sermon from Isaiah included in Luke 4:18-

19). [Wouldn't you imagine John would have been waiting to hear *that* good news for him?] With [its absence], John would know that he was not going to be freed, and so, the number of dancers [in my painting, each representing the groups of marginalized people healed by Jesus' ministry] would remain one short of seven [the number of completeness]. As we know all too well, God's work is not completed in Jesus' time. We are still woefully short of realizing the fullness of God's desire for all of creation, and the work is ours to see through. Until then, let us keep our eyes peeled for the glimmers of hope dancing all around us and work toward a day when all can join in that dance of wholeness."⁸ Let us help those who no longer have a song in them discover their voice, and invite them to the dance floor and show them the dance, again, step by step...taking it as slow as they need.

Because this is the good news: it seems that John *is able* to celebrate those glimmers of hope, even as he himself will lose his life, and he's able to hold onto this hope because of

⁷ Saunders, *ibid.*

⁸ Lauren Wright Pittman, "Artist Statement on Hope Like a Dancer," *Sanctified Art What do you fear? Visual*

Art Collection," (c. 2025), accessed on Dec. 7, 2025 at sanctifiedart.org.

how Jesus responds to his question. He doesn't dismiss him. Jesus does not respond a lecture or an eye-roll saying, "*John should know better.*" Instead, Jesus answers John's question with the witness of what was actually unfolding in the world around them in their day...the tangible signs of hope they were enacting and seeing. He says to the disciples: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." (Matt. 11:4-5). Every time one of these things happens, hope shines. The world is a bit brighter and God's kin-dom is one day closer to coming on earth as it is in heaven.

"Jesus points not to grand victory, but to quiet signs of transformation. He doesn't hand John certainty—but invites him to perceive God at work. It is a reorientation toward Isaiah's vision, which was given by the prophet Isaiah to his people after generations of exile [when they had surely lost all hope]: *"I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?"* (Isaiah 43:19a)⁹

⁹ Lee, pg. 10

¹⁰ Lee, pg. 10.

Keep your eyes open. Your ears peeled. Your senses tuned.

Yes, "the empire is still intact. Herod still reigns. John will not be released from prison. Yet Jesus insists: God's dream is unfolding. Look again. Listen. Perceive."¹⁰

As Rev. Dr. Lee says, "What is powerful in this moment is not that Jesus performs miracles, but that he frames them as evidence of God's reign at work—an alternative kin-dom not marked by [Herod's] coercion or fear, but by healing, liberation, and good news for the marginalized. Matthew lifts up Jesus, not as a new Caesar, but as the agent of God's redemptive transformation. [And] those who perceive the signs understand what kind of Messiah has come."¹¹ Not a dictating, strong-armed rule, but an invitational, gentle, lead-by-example, loving servant.

Essentially, Jesus gives John hope by sharing the testimony of what the people are seeing around them, and their testimonies are 'evidence of hope,' 'seeds of what will

¹¹ Lee, pg. 10

continue to come' as his ministry and movement continue.

Jesus names very specific actions and signs that the people are seeing: the blind regaining sight, the lame walking, the deaf hearing. And at the same time, John is not guaranteed that he will live. Ironically perhaps, hope extends beyond the time limits of our lives, stretching before us and beyond us, and yet God's kin-dom is dependent on us being part of the Hope that connects us all and continues until they kin-dom come. Like a paper chain around a Christmas tree, link by link, each of our lives makes a difference by what we do, and perhaps even more, by what we see and perceive, name and proclaim. Do we only see the fear-filled, dangerous, difficult things around us? Or do we see those things, yes, and also see and name the hope-filled, positive, life-changing, redemptive things that are happening too? It's never either/or. It's always both/and. Sometimes we may have more of the "doom and gloom" than we do the "glimmers of hope" but both are always present.

So it begs the question, do we see evidence of God still at

work in our world? What signs of transformation do you see? What glimmers shine in your darkness? What "new thing" is God is doing in your life? Do you perceive it?

It's okay if you don't. Keep looking. Keep listening. In fact, look at and listen to what other people are saying about the Hope that they see, the Transformation that they feel. Sometimes the witness of another, opens up a bit of awe and wonder in us.

But remember that the signs of hope that Jesus points to won't look like the 'signs of success' that we are used to; Jesus' signs are markers of an entirely new kind of kin-dom and life and way of being in the world.

We, of course, want to succeed and achieve and win; we want to fix things, figure stuff out, and find solutions. We want what we do to matter and make a difference. We want to believe something tangible will come of our Hope. Yet as we see in today's text, having Hope is not connected to *how hard* we work, even though Hope involves hard work. Rather holding hope is really more *holy* than it is hard.

The word ‘holy’ is from the Hebrew word *kadesh*, meaning “set apart,” and the Greek word *hagios*, meaning “set apart or sacred.” How do we look at what is happening around us in the world, and see the holy or set-part moments within the chaos and darkness and mess? How do we see and listen and perceive for how God is at work, and “set that apart” or ‘highlight’ that for others and ourselves! Are doing the holy (and yes sometimes hard) work of digging through the dense tangles of our fear and of the world’s pain, to lift out Hope every single time we see it, hear it, find it, *and* every time Hope sees us, hears us, and finds us? Hope is holy work, and it really takes intentionality to ‘set apart’ and name how we see God at work in the world.

I’ll give this a try, lifting up and ‘setting apart’ a few ways I’ve seen or experienced hope recently:

- People donating to food banks when SNAP benefits were cut last month; a massive response of communities take care of one another on the local level
- Or get this story that just made me mile: Manolo Betancur—owner of the oldest immigrant Latino bakery in the Carolinas—gives out cakes to his neighbors experiencing homelessness on their birthdays. He’s done this for 12 years! The sole purpose is to bring joy to their lives and say, “we see you, we celebrate you”¹² But now others in his community are stepping forward and helping out where he is more restricted because of fears of ICE threatening his workers and community. Now others are continuing his work and giving him the message he’s passed on to those in need for years: I see you. I celebrate you!
- Or, wow did I see hope on Giving Tuesday, as people came out in large measure to give to non-profits that work in medical research, showing their beliefs in the gifts of our Creator that shine through our scientists and researchers and physicians (thanks be to God!)
- I definitely felt hope when the Denver Zoo calling my husband Damon on Thursday

¹² Joseph Lamour, “Baker Delivers Free Birthday Cakes to Homeless People: ‘They’re Our Neighbors’,” *Today Show* (6 Oct. 2025), accessed on Dec. 7, 2025 at

<https://www.today.com/food/people/baker-delivers-free-birthday-cakes-to-homeless-people-rcna235965>.

evening after we returned home from Zoo Lights to let him know that his lost wallet was found and turned in, and nothing was gone—cash, cards, license—and it was all there...every dollar. A reminder of honest people in this world, even in (especially in) really hard economic times when it would have been easy to sneak a \$20 or two or four!

- Or even this morning...I was part of hope, along with you Calvary! Calvary member, and Denver Police Officer, Topher Palmisano knocked on my office door around 5:00 to let me know he and his partner Carly had a gentleman in our board room. They had picked him up off of I-25; he was walking along the highway, in danger of being hit, but it was the straightest way for him to get to where he needed to go way up north. But Topher knew he would be probably get hit in his state, and he knew we had bus passes, and thanks be to YOU, Calvary, we do and we got a couple and gave them to him and this man safely got to where he needed to go. Even more, he

had been hesitant to get in a cop's car, saying it always got him arrested, and Topher promised him that wouldn't happen on this night...and it didn't...and more than anything...can you imagine what that trust and this experience did for this man's understanding of the police and community care?

It is amazing to see glimmers of Hope and be reminded that God is at work, even when times are tough, and yet as Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee reminds us, "Hope in the gospel is not grounded in outcomes or visible success. Hope is rooted in *perception*—in trusting God is still at work, even when systems remain unchanged, even when prophets die behind bars."¹³ Even when we doubt whether it's all worth it.

Because even in his doubt, "Jesus affirms John—not in spite of his question, but through it. '*Among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist,*' (Matt.11:11). Jesus doesn't see John's crumbling hope as failure. He names it as part of what makes John faithful."¹⁴

¹³ Lee, pg. 10.

¹⁴ Lee, pg. 10.

And if that isn't a glimmer of hope for those of us who live with doubt, then I don't know what is!

“Advent does not require us to manufacture hope. It invites us to bring our emptied hope to Jesus, to ask the hard questions, and to listen again for signs of God's nearness. When we're running out of hope, it's the right time to ask: What do you see? What do you hear? And do you trust that somewhere, even now, something new is springing forth?”¹⁵

You know the Christmas Carol,
Do You Hear What I Hear?

*Said the night wind to the little lamb,
do you see what I see
Way up in the sky, little lamb,
do you see what I see
A star, a star, dancing in the night
With a tail as big as a kite
With a tail as big as a kite*

*Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy,
do you hear what I hear
Ringing through the sky, shepherd boy,
do you hear what I hear
A song, a song, high above the trees
With a voice as big as the sea
With a voice as big as the sea*

*Said the shepherd boy to the mighty king,
do you know what I know
In your palace warm, mighty king,
do you know what I know
A Child, a Child shivers in the cold
Let us bring Him silver and gold
Let us bring Him silver and gold*

*Said the king to the people everywhere,
listen to what I say
Pray for peace, people everywhere!
listen to what I say
The Child, the Child, sleeping in the night
He will bring us goodness and light
He will bring us goodness and light¹⁶*

I love the contagion of hope in this carol as it grows from seeing and listening and perceiving to praying. And I love how the hope-filled messages passes from Night Wind to Little Lamb to Shepherd Boy to Mighty King to People Everywhere...to finally where it all begins and ends...with our Hope, the Child Sleeping in the Night, with the Hope that this Child will bring us Goodness and Light.

You know the carol, but you may not know the context. Which is quite appropriate for this Advent Sunday of Peace. This carol was written in

¹⁵ Lee, pg. 10.

¹⁶ Lyrics found on Dec. 7, 2025 at
<https://www.godtube.com/popular-hymns/do-you-hear-what-i-hear-lyrics/>

October 1962—by a couple who was married at the time, Noël Regney (lyrics) and Gloria Shayne (music)—as a plea for peace during the Cuban Missile Crisis. That Crisis, as you know, was only 13 days long, but the fate of the world was held in the balance. The confrontation was between the governments of the United States and the Soviet Union, when American deployments of nuclear missiles in the United Kingdom, Italy and Turkey were matched by Soviet deployments of nuclear missiles in Cuba. The Crisis is widely considered the closest the Cold War came to escalating into full-scale nuclear war.

During this time, Regney had been invited by a record producer to write a Christmas song, but he was hesitant due to the commercialism of Christmas. Yet something about the tension of the Cuban Missile Crisis kept nagging him. He sat down and tried to think of images of peace but was coming up short. But the inspiration finally came as he watched babies being pushed in strollers on the sidewalks of New York City. Such a small glimmer of Hope in the midst of all that was going on, and yet it was enough.

That one image inspired the whole song.

But get this. Shayne stated in an interview years later that neither she nor Noël could personally perform the entire song through at the time they wrote it because of the emotions surrounding the Cuban Missile Crisis. They just couldn't get through it, they always broke down during it. She said, "*Our little song broke us up. You must realize there was a threat of war at the time.*"¹⁷ But, she said, the fact people sing it worldwide to this day (and sing it all the way through!), shows us that even though we could not voice the words during the time of our deep fear, its truth remained steadfast and still sings on beyond us.

And we—you and me—are invited to keep the song alive and sing it yet still today...

*Do you see what I see?
Do you hear what I hear?
Do you know what I know?
The Child, the Child, sleeping in
the night
He will bring us goodness and
light*

Amen.

¹⁷ Information accessed on Dec. 7, 2025 at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Do_You_Hear_What_I_Hear%3F.