



Worth the Wait

TEXT
Luke 1:5–15a

December 13, 2020 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Angie Thomas' novel *The Hate U Give* is a courageous and heartbreaking story of Starr, a young black person coming of age and the deep questions of identity — questions as to where you belong in this world, and of life too often lived defined by violence or the threat of violence or the struggle to deal with violence. There is a moment in the story when Starr is in the car with her mother. Out of the blue, her mom says, "You weren't breathing when you were born."

"What?"

"I had you when I was 18, still a baby myself. Momma thought there was no way I could be a good parent, but I did everything right. I quit drinking and smoking and made every appointment. I even played Mozart through some headphones I placed on my belly. We see what good that was; you didn't finish a month of piano lessons.

"But in that delivery room, when they pulled you out, I waited for you to cry, but you didn't. Everyone started running around ... I freaked out. Your daddy couldn't calm me down. After the longest minute of my life, you cried. I cried harder than you, though. I knew

I did something wrong. A nurse took my hand, looked me in the eye and said: 'Sometimes you do everything right and things will still go wrong. The key is to never stop doing right.'"¹

In 1989, Carol and I packed our worldly possessions into a U-Haul and drove from Charleston, South Carolina, where I had been an associate pastor at the Westminster Presbyterian Church, and they tried to teach me to be a pastor. We drove to New Haven, Connecticut, so I could go back to school. A few weeks later, Hurricane Hugo blew Charleston apart. My mentor, Bob Dunham, the senior pastor of Westminster, said they gathered in the sanctuary. I don't think they had electricity. They prayed. They sang a hymn. It gave them strength.

Bob told me that when the storm passed, there was an energy to face the crisis. Neighbor took care of neighbor. People pulled food from lifeless freezers and barbecue for the whole block. But as months passed and fall turned to winter — as much as Charleston has winter — and winter turned to spring, a weariness set in. By Easter, folks were done. They needed something normal, but things still weren't normal. The energy and compassion and communal care that had

come so easily began to slip from their fingers and hearts. It was the inability to get past it that wore on them. And it is hard to be your best self when you are that weary.

I've been thinking about that this year. 2020 started like any year, but as winter turned to spring, we found ourselves in a crisis. On March 12, a task force here at Village decided that we would suspend on-site worship for a few weeks to give us a chance to flatten the curve. I was naïve about this. I thought we would be back in worship for Easter. I couldn't imagine that I would preach from a cemetery on Easter.

Then I thought, Pentecost. That will be a great day to come back to church. And then I realized flattening the curve didn't mean we could return to normal; it just meant the hospitals would be able to keep up in taking care of the sick. And here it is, I think the 40th Sunday we have been meeting on your screen. And the curve is no longer flat, as seemingly with each passing week, new records of cases and deaths are recorded.

And there is a weariness, for we are ready for things to be back to normal. Talk of vaccines gives us hope, but the logistics of vaccinating a nation — and the

societal suspicion of science that leaves many of our neighbors suspicious — means it's hard to tell when it will be safe to be with one another.

I imagine Zechariah could relate.

Last Sunday we had a visit from John the Baptist. Were John a doctor, we would say he had a poor bedside manner, but he sure wants us to thrive.

This week we meet John's old man, and he is really an old man. We find Zechariah in the temple, as we would expect. He is offering incense and leading God's people in prayer. It wasn't his first time. He had done it before. Actually, he had done this his whole life.

But today was the day he yearned for. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth had no children. This was in a time when being without children raised questions not just in their hearts, but in the hearts of everyone. Were they being punished? Had they been unfaithful to God? What had they done wrong?

All of that changes as Gabriel descends with breathtaking news: As old as you are, you are going to be a dad. And your son will be God's prophet.

Two things: First, I need to acknowledge that stories like this can be really hard. Many know the emptiness that Zechariah and Elizabeth feel before the angel arrives. And for many, an angel never comes. And maybe you have your own questions, like Zechariah before you.

You may wonder, did I do something wrong? Are we being punished? I just need to say,

it's not about that. Sometimes you can do everything right and things still go wrong. Not every sick person heals. Not every wounded marriage survives. Not every test is passed — even when we pray. Sometimes we do everything right and things will still go wrong. It's not because God has passed you by or is punishing you; it has nothing to do with that. Sometimes there is just tragedy and no answer comes; we just have to keep on.

But if I understand this text, there is a different second word that speaks to us. When we read the story, Gabriel's feet have already crashed through the roof of the temple. We meet Zechariah at his moment of transformation.

But what about before? I don't mean when he was having breakfast. I mean what about the weeks, the months, the decades before? The text says he was righteous, blameless, according to the commandments. He wasn't being punished; there was nothing to punish. He has been coming to this temple and lighting incense and trying to hold on to a prayer that seems all but ignored — until, I imagine Zechariah has most likely given up that God would hear him.

But still Zechariah kept on doing right.

We are drawing close to the night when we remember the birth of the love that defines us. It is a love that shows us how to be a real person. But it's a love that is hard to trust sometimes.

Because there is a lot of hate, and sometimes it seems the hate is winning. There is a lot of greed, and sometimes the greed

is too strong. There are a lot of folks who seem to delight in destroying things — lives, communities, truth. And sometimes it seems that the destruction is too powerful. And sometimes it seems that folks of character are viewed as weak, and the unscrupulous are winning. And we can begin to wonder if God is ever going to show up.

Love can be hard to trust because this love makes us vulnerable. Ironically, it makes us strong and weak at the same time.

Sometimes you can do everything right and things will still go wrong — but the key is to never stop doing right.

When we find that hard or exhausting, or we are not sure doing right really matters, remember an old man named Zechariah who tells us the angels haven't forgotten us. Love will win. I don't know when the angels will show up, but God has not forgotten, so it's worth the wait.

Sometimes we do everything right and things will still go wrong, so the key is never stop doing right.

¹*The Hate U Give* (2017), p. 154

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.