

Luke 2:22-40
Baby, I'm Amazed
First Sunday After Christmas
December 27, 2020
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The 2020 Winter Solstice was last Monday. Here in Marshfield, WI, roughly 8 hours and 47 minutes were in daylight leaving us in darkness for the remaining 15 hours and 13 minutes. HEAR THE GOOD NEWS! This coming June, we will have 15 hours and 35 minutes of daylight and only 8 hours and 25 minutes of darkness. As I am sure you noticed, today we enjoyed a full minute more of daylight than we had last Monday. How about that? What are you going to do with today's extra minute of daylight?

Truth is we spend most of our time in between the announcement of Good News and the arrival of the happy event. Our existence seems in a perpetual pregnant pause, waiting for something or another. There's the hope that I can hug my mother and father who live in Indiana, or welcome my daughter back home from Copenhagen. On a single day, two weeks ago, we received news of two events with global impact, the final outcome of a national election held six weeks prior and the deployment of a safe and effective vaccine against the pandemic, and yet it seems lifetimes before any of us will see any measurable outcomes of either event.

No wonder the two biggest calendar events for us Christians mark the arrival, the actual appearance, of happy news, the birth of Jesus on Christmas Day and his resurrection on Easter following his crucifixion. Yet, both occasions are followed by the next day when the gift wrapping and pine needles, the basket grass and chocolate bunny wrappers are swept up, the leftovers of the feast go into the freezer, and anticipation begins for when we do it again in a year.

It has become a practice of my faith to look for these in-between moments in scripture if only because they seem to describe and perhaps lend significance to such moments when they crop up in my own life. There is the promise to Abram and Sara that they will conceive in their old age, Jacob's all-night wrestling match, the 40-year wilderness hike that left Moses outside, looking in to the promised land. There is the time between the annunciation to Mary and Jesus' birth. And the time between Lazarus' death and Mary and Martha's joy in his raising. And of course, for Christians, nothing compares, to the in-between time stretching from the last time to the next time Jesus walks among us.

Perhaps this in-between time is no more clearly depicted than in the two very different perspectives held in this weird story in Luke. You have Simeon and Anna, near the end of their earthly lives, who have, by God's grace, lived long enough to see the arrival of the long-awaited

Messiah. But only just long enough. Then you have Mary and Joseph, consumed with the task of providing the day-to-day, life-sustaining needs of this newborn hope.

We are told little about Simeon. A man in Jerusalem, righteous, devout, looking for the consolation of Israel, and, we are told, the Holy Spirit is upon him. And this all we have. Simeon is usually read as being a priest of the temple, officiating at the ritual duties Mary and Joseph have come to carry out, probably because of the amount of talking he does. Insert your favorite long-winded preacher joke. We tend to assume that if a man is talking, he must have some title or claim to authority. Otherwise, Simeon is just some old guy who blows as if by the wind, picks up this poor, tired couple's young son and starts waving him around and talking to God. But a careful reading of the text suggests that this is exactly what he is.

The one with the title, that being prophet, is Anna. We are told buckets about her. Daughter of Phanuel, from the tribe of Asher, widowed after eight years of marriage, somewhere around 84 years old. Unlike Simeon who comes into the temple only when the Spirit blows, she never leaves, worshiping, praying and fasting constantly. What is the one job we ask of prophets? Speaking, and Luke gives us not a single word of her wisdom. There is probably another sermon here for another time about who we listen to, who we don't, and why. For now . . . just sayin'.

Notice Simeon hopes for the consolation, comfort or relief from suffering, of Israel and Anna hopes for the redemption, the restoration of inherent or essential worth, of Jerusalem. Their hope is not on behalf of 'ones' who suffer or have been stripped of dignity. It is on behalf of a nation, and a city, a group of people, politically-defined, who long for consolation and redemption within a system that designates them as other. The problems engendering this hope are not caused by mere circumstance; these are systemic problems rooted deeply in society, and reinforced in culture. Feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, welcoming the stranger certainly help for a time, but the root of the problem goes unaddressed. Simeon and Anna might share a sentiment with Brazilian Archbishop, Hélder Câmara, "When I give food to the poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why they are poor, they call me a communist."

And does it not strike you as odd that both Simeon and Anna have lived long lives in the hope of God's Messiah, and now that he has finally been born into the world, they are about to leave it. And they praise God for it. Because their hope is not bound to their own circumstance, which they are well aware is about to change. Their hope is grounded in life. You know, I think we made a mistake of thinking that what matters is, eventually and only, revealed in death. What really matters is right here among the living. And it matters so much that even after we die, it still matters. As Emily Webb, the character from Thornton Wilder's play, Our Town, who is given one day to leave the grave and return to the living, says "Oh, earth, you're too wonderful for anybody to realize you." She turns to the stage manager and asks, "Do any human beings ever realize life while they live it . . . every, every minute?" The stage manager

responds with one word, “No,” but after a pause adds, “The saints and poets, maybe — they do some.” This is the testimony of Anna the saint, and Simeon the poet.

Let’s now shift our focus to Mary. The angels, the shepherds, the wisemen, the kid with the par-um-pum-pum drum, they’ve all gone home. The angelic annunciation was months ago. You have settled into the routines of responsible parenthood in 1st Century Palestine, diapers, three am feedings, doctor appointments. An unending procession of parent-teacher conferences, soccer and hockey games, music lessons and church plays stretch well past the foreseeable future. At least, you might think, I won’t have to deal with a never-ending snow day at the hands of an uncontrolled pandemic.

You have just loaded the diaper bag, the stroller, and the spare bottles, and headed to the temple in Jerusalem for the task du jour, *sigh*, the ritual cleansing and presentation to God. Suddenly, as if guided by an unseen wind, some old guy appears, scoops up your baby, and starts talking to God about how now he can die because he has seen your baby. The old woman who, it seems, hasn’t left the temple in years, sees your baby son and runs out, squinting into the sunlight, to tell everyone who will listen that you hold in your arms the very hope of the redemption of Jerusalem. Amazed, sounds about right.

Life is lived in the in-between, the in-between of advent, of the span from Jesus’ birth to the beginning of his ministry, of Holy Saturday that separates Good Friday from Easter Sunday. Dietrich Bonhoeffer writes in *Letters from Prison*, “Life in a prison cell may well be compared to Advent. One waits, hopes, and does this, that, or the other—things that are of no real consequence—the door is shut, and can be opened only from the outside.” He wrote this during a time he was convinced that that door would be opened and he would be set free. The door was opened but he was not set free, in any earthly sense. The arrival of the hoped-for, it would seem, in the case of Anna and Simeon, and Bonhoeffer as well, means the departure of the one who hopes.

In our culture defined by individual gain and loss, this is crazy. Why nurture a hope for something that you yourself will not see come to completion? “What’s in it for me?” we have heard some ask. In Mary and Joseph’s case, why hope for something beyond the myriad, if not overwhelming, duties of every day life? The lesson for me in today’s scriptures is that hope lives in-between generations. Hope is dependent upon being passed from the ones who can see it coming, but know they will be gone before it gets here, and the ones who can’t see it yet.

Our first scripture reading is from Paul’s second letter to Timothy. Just before today’s passage, the letter’s author writes, “I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that lived first in your grandmother Lois and your mother Eunice and now, I am sure, lives in you.” Timothy is told, “Guard this precious thing placed in your custody by the Holy Spirit who works in us,” . . . virtually the same thing Simeon says to Mary and Joseph.

I myself am reminded of the man who confirmed me in Christian faith in 1969, the Reverend Frederick R. Daries. Pastor Daries passed from this life barely a year after he passed his hope of God's Messiah to my confirmation class. I still have the Bible he signed along with the scripture passage selected and written in his by then palsied hand just for me, Jeremiah 31:3, "I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn thee." Some years ago, I did a deep internet dive. You can still buy a copy of Pastor Daries' daily devotional book, *With God and Friends Each Day*. It is one of those books that now costs less than the postage to send it. I bought a copy. The day it arrived, I flipped to that day's date to read the scripture passage he had selected all those years ago. I know this sounds like a cheesy country-western song, but this is the honest truth; the verse of that day was Jeremiah 31:3.

The only other record of his I have found is in a yellowed collection of sermons of various pastors from 1945. Pastor Daries' contribution is a sermon titled, "The Home Beautiful," inspired by a common motto of the same name.

"Where there is faith, there is love.

Where there is love, there is peace.

Where there is peace, there are blessings.

Where there are blessings, there is God.

Where there is God, there is no need."

In what could be a message from more recent times, he bemoans the decline of the Christian home, the abandonment of the family fireside and altar, the delegation of God-given duties to strangers, and that most troubling of topics, now more than ever, the recognition of authority and example.

I admit I was disappointed at my first reading and dismissed it in a fit of moral outrage. Authority has been abused, examples have been weaponized. The damage caused by the so-called nu-kew-ler family rivals that of the similarly named bomb. Thank God we have shelters and counseling centers here in Marshfield to get at-risk family members out of danger and on a path to well-being. If you or anyone you know is in a dangerous family setting, please let someone know. Help is available.

But I think I owe Pastor Daries an apology. He didn't have the perspective of the last seventy years. I want to hope that if he had, he would have awakened to the same concerns our ever evolving society has revealed. Reading it now, I realize he is only a nudge away. You see, families, and the homes they make, are the mechanism for passing hope across the intergenerational in-between. We only need to see that our family extends to everyone we meet, and our home is where we all are right now.

Faith is trust in the truth of the other, whether human or divine. Such is the ground of love.

Love is the commitment to one another to put what divides us well below what brings us together. Such is the ground of peace.

Peace is the necessary conduit for mutual wellbeing. Such is the ground of blessing.

Blessing is the promise and the very presence of God. The presence of God is the absence of need. This is the hope which sustained Simeon and Anna throughout their long lives, it is the hope that Mary and Joseph bore in their arms, and it is the hope in which we ourselves live, and move, and have our being. May we cherish the ties which bind our human family across all our in-betweens, and may we preserve the four walls that we all call home. May we take the words of the responding hymn to heart. "There is beauty all around, when there's love at home." Can I get an Amen?