

## Hoping, Waiting, Trusting

### Isaiah 25:6-9 Luke 2:22-38

This morning, as we enter the season of Advent, we turn our attention to two lesser-known but no less important characters of the Christmas story, Simeon and Anna, who offer us examples of what it looks like to be people of hope. You'll notice that what I'm reading takes place after the birth of Jesus, but I wanted us to see an example of two people who waited, with hope, for God's promises to come to fruition.

### **Luke 2:22-38**

When the time came for their (Mary and Joseph's) purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons." (Luke quotes the part of the law which provides a concession for the poor; normally a couple was to bring a full-grown sheep as offering for the rite of dedication in the temple; but in the case of very poor people a concession was made, so they could bring two turtledoves... pigeons; which only would've cost a few pennies. This is Luke's way of telling us they were poor. That Jesus was born into poverty)

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are

dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

This is the word of the Lord

There is a lot going on in this scene, and for our purposes this morning I’d like to focus on the message and example of hope.

Simeon and Anna were people of hope. Hope is a bit of a squishy topic; it’s sometimes hard to wrap our minds around, and get a good grip on what it looks like, practically. Yet, it is one of the chief virtues of Christianity: faith, **hope** and love. We talk a lot about faith and how to exercise it. We talk a lot about love and how to show it (you’ll hear a good sermon about love on Christmas eve morning, from a preacher whose last name is Greider and first initial is H; but she has a lot more hair than I do!). However, we don’t talk a lot about hope; Christian hope, specifically; partly because hope is a little harder to wrap our minds around

practically, and partly because hope isn't primarily an activity; it's more of a disposition of heart and mind that require a kind of *in*activity. And we prefer to be active. The protestant work ethic manual says, "Get to work!" Hope says, "Wait a minute!" (Or, wait longer!) Instead of "get to work," hope says "let *God* do the work." And God is never in a hurry.

Simeon and Anna give us a picture of hope. Because here they are, both of them, getting along in years, and Luke tells us they have been waiting, and waiting, and waiting, and waiting... not for a few minutes; not for a few weeks or months, but for years. Devoting themselves *with trust and confidence* to this waiting project.

And the thing that they were waiting for was something that they could not control or activate, no matter how hard they tried, or how much they prayed, or how good and righteous they were, doing good deeds and all that, as if pleasing God with their goodness or their prayers would hurry God up and hasten the fulfillment of God's promise. It was only something God could do, in God's time.

And perhaps that is a good definition of Christian hope: waiting and longing, with confidence and trust, for something that only God can do, that only God can provide, on God's timeline. Waiting and longing, with confidence and trust, for something that only God can do, that only God can provide, on God's

timeline. It's not the same as wishing, because hope puts confidence in *God*, and trusts that God will act. Eventually 😊. *Wishing* doesn't really put trust or confidence in anything. It expresses a sentiment for something wanted, which is alright, but we need to be clear that wishing and hope are not the same. Hope is robust and trusting and has its anchor set deeply in God's promises. Hope is deciding to put our confidence in God, no matter how long it takes, no matter how bad circumstances look.

Luke tells us (in our chair Bible version, the NRSV) that Simeon *looked forward* to the consolation of Israel. NIV: he was *waiting* for the consolation of Israel. The Message: he was living in *prayerful expectancy* for that consolation. Those are all hope words—looking forward, waiting, prayerful expectancy. We are told that Anna spoke words of hope to those who were *looking for, waiting for, expecting* the same consolation. So amidst this waiting and expectancy, there would have been longing and desire combined with heartfelt trust and waiting. In other words, hope.

What are you waiting for these days? What are you hoping for? Another way to put this is, what prayer are you waiting for God to answer right now? Something that you can't control or activate.

Perhaps you've been hoping and waiting for a long time already. Or perhaps your longing and praying about something is relatively recent.

In this in-between time of the already and the not yet of God's Kingdom (it's already come, inaugurated in Jesus Christ, but not yet fulfilled) we are called to trust in God's promises, with patience. "Waiting with patience," as Paul puts it in Romans 8:25.

Because hope includes trust, trust includes waiting, and waiting includes patience. Here is a fun fact from your Bible nerd pastor. In the Hebrew language of the Old Testament the word translated as hope is the exact same word for wait, which is also the same word for trust. Same word. Which is why, for example in Isaiah 40:31 some translations say, "Those who *wait for* the Lord shall renew their strength." Other translations say, "Those who *hope in* the Lord shall renew their strength" and yet other translations say "Those who *trust in* the Lord shall renew their strength." Because... it's the same word. To hope in the Lord is to trust the Lord, to trust the Lord is to wait for the Lord. To wait for the Lord is to hope in the Lord. In the Hebrew mind, they all mean the same thing.

But waiting, with patience and trust, is not something that comes easily to us, does it? Largely because it is not a value or virtue in our culture any more, and therefore not developed in us, unless we choose to work at it. When a

virtue/value is embedded in a culture then it makes its way into the heart and consciousness of the people in that that culture—through osmosis and common practice. Hope and waiting and patience aren't embedded in our culture (not any more). In fact, merchandisers bank on you and me being impatient, impulsive, and quick on the draw with our credit cards and our appetites, especially at this time of year. *Impatience* is good for the economy! And hopelessness—or fear, and even despair—is good for politicians who want to get elected, or re-elected. Then they can promise quick fixes and “I have the solution to our problems.” That's why Scripture says (in Psalm 146, which I quoted last week), “don't put your ultimate confidence/trust/hope in human leaders. Hope in God!”

We've come to want, and even expect, ready solutions and quick fixes to our problems—whether from politicians or advertisers. There is an ad that's been on and off and on again for years, for an anti-aging cream that promises “to reverse the aging process.” Really!?! So here is a promised quick fix to a *perceived* problem. Which also goes to show that we don't honor and value the wisdom of aging, and of a natural life cycle. And besides, there is no such thing as reversing the aging process. But I'm sure this stuff sells.

We want answers. We like fast solutions. *We are uncomfortable with being uncomfortable.* When our kids were little, one of them had a friend over a

few days before Christmas and she saw some presents under the tree (like she had at her home) and said, all this waiting makes me want to throw something!” I think a lot of adults feel that way about the things we are waiting for! *We’re uncomfortable with being uncomfortable.* With waiting. With situations where we don’t have control, and when we cannot activate the fulfillment of a promise that can only come from God, in God’s time.

So, we are invited to hope, with Simeon and Anna, and remember that God is still present, and *always has been* present. God has not abandoned us, or anyone. God is not the abandoning type.

And while hope requires a kind of inactivity, and waiting and trust, it doesn’t mean we don’t do anything at all. Surely Simeon and Anna didn’t sit around twiddling their thumbs doing nothing while they waited. They lived their lives. Anna had things she was doing, and we can assume that Simeon lived his daily life while paying attention to the movements of the Spirit, preparing for the day when the great Nudge would come. The promises of God were in their consciousness, and they could live life in appropriate activity which expressed their hopefulness, while they waited and trusted.

I was remembering a story that Eugene Peterson told years ago, about waiting for the birth of his first grandchild. He said he was so anxious, and

excited, and every day he kept pacing the floor in their home. His wife said, “You’re wearing a path in the carpet. And, you’re making me nuts! Your pacing won’t make your grandchild come any sooner, or affect anything except your blood pressure, and our carpet. Go find something to do!” So, he acknowledged that he had no control over the pregnancy or over his son and daughter in law and the timing of everything; but there was something he *could* do. So he decided to go to his garage and make a cradle for the baby that the family was expecting.

And over the next several months he would spend a little time each day in his garage. And as he cut the pieces and sanded the wood, and put the pieces together, he would pray. The garage became a sacred place, a prayer room. He would pray for his son and daughter-in-law and their child and ask God’s blessings upon that family—for their health and protection and peace. And he prayed for other children and families that he knew. It was a wonderful way to anticipate and *participate* in preparing for the fulfillment of what was coming. Waiting, with *some* measure of patience and trust, as he said.

The baby was born, and that is an example of waiting for something when we know what the timeline will be (9 months). Other times we wait, however, not knowing the timing, and this calls for an extra measure of patience and trust.



I think of JRR Tolkien (a devout Catholic) who wrote the Hobbit and the Lord of the Rings trilogy starting in 1937, and finished them in the mid-1940's, and CS Lewis (who became a Christian as an adult and affiliated with the Anglican church in England) who wrote the Chronicles of Narnia series starting in 1939 on through the mid 1940's. Anything going on in the world from the mid 1930's to the mid 1940's?

All of these fantasy stories were stories of hope, written during the rise of fascism in Europe and through the second world war. They are stories about everyday characters who take courage, in spite of fear, and hold onto hope in the midst of terrible evil. No matter how bad things looked, they hung in there, each played their part, believing that good will win. Tolkien and Lewis wrote these stories as a way of saying, we have to exercise hope no matter how bad things look. God will prevail; good will prevail. They wrote those stories almost as a way of thumbing their nose at evil, and telling their readers: hang in there! Do what you can do in expressing your hope, but don't despair.

A few years after writing the Lord of the Rings trilogy, Tolkien is quoted as saying: "Despair is hubris (presumptuous), because we think we know what the outcome will be, but we don't." In the words of Gandalf, the wise and benevolent

wizard from Lord of the Rings: “Not even the wise know all ends.” So we have to trust that God will work all things together for good, in God’s time.

After the horrific shooting in the synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018, renowned Israeli-American violinist Itzhak Perlman appeared on one of the late-night shows to perform, and before his performance he was asked what his response was to the shooting, and he simply said, “We have to remember who we are, and we have to hope.” Hope that we will have true and lasting peace someday. It’s a promise of God. And one of those places it is promised is in Isaiah 25...

With prophetic imagination, Isaiah speaks of a time when all will be fulfilled, when there will be great feasting and great joy: the shroud of darkness is lifted (think of shrouds of darkness like depression, fear, or anxiety. They will be gone!). There will be brightness like a warm spring day. No more tears. No more disgrace.

*“It will be said on that day (quoting from verse 9), “Look, this is our God, we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”*

Let us be glad and rejoice in God’s salvation as we come to his table of grace today. Song, “If thou but trust in God to guide thee” ...