

WE LIKE CHRISTMAS!

The Hope of Christmas

Luke 2:21-38

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One of our members told me this story, which he read in a magazine. Someone had called for a service specialist to come to his house and repair some appliance. Three times the customer set a time with the company, and three times the repair specialist was a no-show. Finally, the customer sent an email entitled, "Matthew 11:3: Are you the one who is to come or are we to wait for another?" How many of you have had an experience like this one, waiting for a repairman? Waiting is no fun, is it?

This morning's sermon text on this first Sunday of Advent is about two elderly people, Simeon and Anna, who had waited a loooooong time. Now we don't know these Bible characters as well as some. But the point is, we need to meet these two, Simeon and Anna. They have some things to teach us. They had a lot in common: they were both up in years; both had been waiting a long time for God's Messiah (Simeon referred to it as "the consolation of Israel," v. 25; Anna called it "the redemption of Jerusalem," v. 38). And here's something else these two had in common: neither were particularly famous or successful or important by the world's standards. They were just faith-filled and hope-filled.

I mentioned that Simeon was waiting for the consolation of Israel. That word "consolation" is from the same root as the word Jesus would later use to refer to the Holy Spirit--Comforter, Encourager, Paraclete, the one called alongside us. I'll be honest with you. I don't know of anyone who doesn't need hope and encouragement. I've never had anyone say to me, "Enough with this hope and encouragement. I can't take anymore!" We are beaten down, discouraged, frightened. We need hope! We crave hope! We are aching for hope!

There is great power in hope. But please know that biblical hope is far different from shallow optimism. Optimism depends on circumstances. Let me offer a simple analogy. The difference between shallow optimism and deep hope is the difference between a cut flower and a mighty, live oak tree. Theologian Jurgen Moltmann reminded us that hope not based on human possibilities, but is grounded in the faithfulness of God and the effectiveness of God's promises.

This morning, I have hope for our nation, deeply divided over the events in Ferguson, MO. It's not a hope grounded in circumstances or what humans can do. I have hope in what God in Christ can do to end needless violence, to respect all persons and property, to end the hatred. Only God can do this.

To change the focus for a moment, I have the same hope for our beloved sisters and brothers in Ukraine. I recently received an email from a pastor I met last year. He writes of the ravages of

war. Thousands have died. He said, "The heart aches to see one more funeral, the tears of mothers, wives and children." Then, toward the end of his email, he writes that a brother asked him recently, "What's joyful in your life?" The question startled him. After thinking, he wrote this: "God is alive, and that is the greatest joy. No matter what is going on around us, when Jesus is in our life, when He takes first place, then everything else is in the right place."

I also have hope for our eternal salvation in Christ. This afternoon, I will be leading our annual Service of Comfort for those who have lost loved ones in the past year. In reality, the service is for everyone. We are all touched by death's power. We are all marked with mortality. Humanly speaking, there is no answer. Only God can offer us hope in the face of our last enemy, death.

You see, whether we are talking about Ferguson, MO, Ukraine or our own brush with death, we have to figure out if we're going to be ruled by our worst fears or our best hopes [I am grateful to the late Peter Gomes for this thought, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, p. 101]. I don't fly commercial flights very often, perhaps a few times a year. I admire those road warriors who can do that regularly. On a recent flight, something occurred to me. The hardest part of any flight is the waiting. Driving to the airport? No problem. I can chart the progress, the mile markers. Walking through the terminal? Again, progress. Even security check? Annoying but reassuring. But then you get on that plane and they shut off the AC, and you just sit there. And nothing is happening. Or is it? Actually, the pilot and crew are doing the all-important pre-flight checklist. So when it seems like nothing is happening, that may be the time when the most important stuff is happening! And so Simeon and Anna waited. We like Christmas because of the hope of Christmas. Waiting. Hoping. And waiting some more.

Because the Christmas message is that God comes through. Anna and Simeon remind us: God is worth waiting for. Here's a simple summary of our hope, of our faith and of this season: God can work IN any crisis. God can work THROUGH any crisis. God gets the last word. Amen.