

First Sunday after Christmas: December 26/27, 2015

Hope Fulfilled



I suspect by now that we are all “hoped” out. We have been hoping through the season of Advent: Hoping for peace, hoping while fearful, hoping in humility. Hoping that we will be ready for Christmas once again. And now it has come. Hope has been revealed. The angels have sung. The shepherds have made the journey. We have beheld the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. The Present of Christmas has come. And the presents under the tree have been unwrapped. And there’s a bit of letdown that it’s all over. Weeks of preparation. Days of decorating and shopping. Hours of cooking and cleaning. Was it worth it? Did the outcome match the anticipation? It depends upon who you ask. It depends on what you were anticipating.



How is that the same event can produce two totaling different anticipations?

- Big final: dread over failing, or euphoria over finishing the class
- Root canal: anxiety over the pain and expense of treatment, or relief from pain free eating
- Car noise repair: worry over transmission failure, or peace of mind over safe travel
- Pregnancy: fear of a long and hard delivery, or joy in swaddling a baby

Worry over a negative outcome or *hope* over a positive outcome: These determine how we look forward to an event, how we looked forward to Christmas. For many Christmas is a time of melancholy and sadness as they long for times gone by. For others the season is filled with anxiety over conflicted relationships and strained families. And despite best efforts at meals and gifts, when the crumpled wrapping paper is discarded and the leftovers pitched, there is this hollow feeling that the outcome didn’t match the effort. Perhaps what’s missing is that quiet but powerful ingredient called “hope.” Hope for a lasting benefit from our journey to Bethlehem, from the promise of Immanuel, “God with us.” Hope for something that will propel us into 2016 with the conviction that “God with us” means “never alone, always resourced, deeply loved.”



The Christmas gospel revolves around the birth of a baby. A very special baby, to be sure. But birthing babies is part of our human condition, witnessed by attending fathers and embraced by delivering mothers. So we can identify with Mary and Joseph and what they went through from the time the angel announced to Mary “Fear not; you will give birth to a son, Jesus, who will be called the Son of the Most High.” Those nine months of waiting are a picture of the millennia of waiting that Israel went through anticipating the coming Messiah. Their joy in swaddling the baby Jesus is our joy in hearing once again the herald angels sing “peace on earth, good will to men.” And their pilgrimage to Jerusalem to redeem their first born son according to the law of Moses, that is our pilgrimage of redemption and new life.



Enter Simeon and Anna. If anyone knew waiting, these two knew waiting. Simeon was righteous and devout and had been promised by the Holy Spirit that he would see the Messiah before he died. Anna was eighty-four, who for most of her adult life had attended to temple fasting and prayer. Isaiah 40 was their consolation, what kept them going through years of occupation by Rome and upheaval in their world. “Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Proclaim that her hard labor has been completed. The glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all mankind will see it.” *Her hard labor has been completed.* Israel was given the seed of the promise in the Garden of Eden. “One shall come who will crush the evil one, though he will be wounded in the process.” Israel was pregnant with this hope. Eve even thought that Cain was the hope fulfilled. We know better. This pregnancy would take longer, much longer. For centuries this hope gestated with the nation. And with the passage of time the waiting became imponderable. My daughter is seven months pregnant. She tells me her knees won’t hold as much as they used to, they’re not as stable as before. Also, her hips take a minute to start working after she’s been lying down. With each passing day Abby and Andrew’s anticipation grows, though in their case they don’t know the gender of the child by their own



choosing. And they know waiting.

I’m sure that for many in Israel

hope became resignation, and resignation became desperation as the years of waiting passed and the prophetic voice went silent. How long, O Lord, how long? Yet not all lost hope. Simeon and Anna are virtuous in their resilience. God will come and ransom captive Israel. Simeon and Anna are our poster children for hope. They knew waiting. And they knew hope. And they waited with eager anticipation for the consolation of Israel. They encourage me. May they encourage you. You will not wait forever for hope to be fulfilled in your life. It's coming. But not wrapped in festive paper. It comes in a most unassuming way.

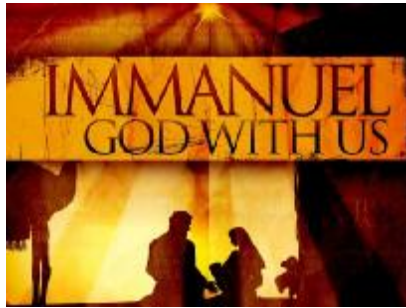


Enter Mary and Joseph. If Simeon and Anna looked for the consolation of Israel, Mary carried that consolation within her womb. After the angel visitation she and Joseph undoubtedly searched the Scriptures for an explanation. They found it in the words of the prophet Isaiah. “Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.” *Immanuel*. God with us! She had to ponder this in her heart. This much she knew. When she gave birth to her firstborn, for her as for Israel, *her hard labor had been completed*. In this Child “the hopes and fears of all the years” came together. As she swaddled Jesus in her arms, could she have possibly comprehended the enormity of this embrace? Did the words of Isaiah pierce her darkness? “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” Pure, unbridled joy. The joy every mother and father experience when holding their newborn child. Multiplied exponentially when that child is the fulfillment of the hope of every mother and father, every son and daughter, since hope was given birth in the Promise. In the midst of such magnitude, humble Mary and Joseph do what they only know to do. They bring Jesus to the temple to redeem him according to the law of Moses. There they find the message of the angels and the testimony of the shepherds confirmed.



Enter the baby Jesus. With him, Mary and Joseph bring “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.” Every firstborn belongs to the Lord because he saved every firstborn of Israel in the Passover. This rite of consecration had been done for centuries. But never before was it greeted with this greeting. Simeon takes the baby Jesus in his arms and announces that the consolation of Israel has come. In his arms he cradles the salvation of all peoples, “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people Israel.” Anna speaks of his coming redemption of Israel. For in the midst of misty eyes over swaddling clothes and manger straw lies the undertone of redemption. We hear St. Paul interpreting the words of Anna: “In the fullness of time God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption as sons.” Too soon clothes that swaddled Jesus would be stripped from his body. Too soon soft manger wood would give way to the splintered wood of the cross.

Mary and Joseph marvel at these words. Hope, so long in coming, had become hope now fulfilled. And their lives would be forever changed. Blessed to be sure, as Simeon blesses them. But his blessing acknowledges that Jesus will be a sign for the fall and rising of many. Mary would not be exempt, as the cross loomed large. And neither are we exempt. We, too, bear in our flesh the suffering of Christ. We have carried it here with us this morning. The melancholy and sadness, the anxiety over conflicted relationships and strained families, the disappointment over crumpled wrapping paper and discarded leftovers. Yet in their place we have heard a better word: *Hope*. And with Simeon we have seen a better vision: *Salvation*. Light. “For revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” Marvelous!



The Word has become flesh and has made his dwelling among us. We have seen once again his glory, glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. In his coming hope has been fulfilled. And this hope is a powerful thing. It transforms a stable into a palace and a manger into a throne. Shepherds become ambassadors and a humble virgin becomes the mother of God. And you and I receive adoption as the children of God. How good is that? This is the meaning you have been looking for all along in the trees and lights, the shopping and presents, the meals and gatherings. It is the hope that propels you into 2016. It is the conviction of Immanuel, “God with us.” For we are never alone, always resourced, deeply loved. Now that’s a Christmas to remember! Amen.