

Luke 2:22-40  
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“Fear and Hope”

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We have just come through another lovely Christmas Eve at Emanuel Church. The worship services were well attended. The music was spirit raising. After the worship services Christmas eve it was fun to watch people hanging out and talking. Others commented how pleased they were we had gotten a white Christmas. It all seemed almost greeting card-perfect. But the greeting card picture of Christmas is what we have tried to make Christmas into; when, in fact the FIRST Christmas was far from picture perfect.

Do you remember how fearful the people were in the Christmas stories? Joseph discovers Mary is pregnant and the baby is not his, and fear leads him to the edge of breaking his engagement until he is told, “Do Not Be Afraid.” The shepherds hear the angelic announcement of good news for all people, and instead of feeling hope; they become started with fear until they are told, “Do not be afraid.” Mary is confused and scared until Gabriel visits and tells her, “Do Not Be Afraid.” Even after the birth, King Herod responds from a place of fear, sending wise men under false pretenses of going to pay homage to the child... when actually the Mighty King wanted to eradicate this baby because he worried this child would dethrone him one day. I’d love to see Hallmark, or Shutterfly make a series of Christmas cards where most people in the stories are full of fear, because that was the reality in the first century.

Today’s story, the presentation of Jesus in the temple is motivated by specific requirements of the law of Moses. This scene is a combination of several old testament traditions. First in Leviticus, a new mother is to bring an offering which is sacrificed by the Priest to enact her purification. Then in Exodus, we learn every first born male belongs to the Lord and needs to be redeemed.

Luke has borrowed influences from a third story in the Old Testament; the story of the birth of Samuel. When Hannah prayed to God for a son she vowed if she had a son she would give him to God for all his days. And as promised after Samuel was born, Hannah brought him to the temple and he was dedicated to the Lord. In our story it is clear Mary takes the role of Hannah while Jesus fills the role of Samuel. So when Joseph and Mary present Jesus to the Lord in Jerusalem, they are dedicating his life to God. It becomes another way of helping all of us understand that Jesus is Son of God, Holy One, Savior and Lord.

In the temple we meet Simeon, described as just and devout, with the Holy Spirit resting on him. He had been informed that he would not die before he met the Lord’s Messiah. And immediately he recognizes and blesses the baby as the Messiah.

But I am a little more intrigued by a second person we meet in the temple, Anna the Prophet. Anna reiterates Simeon’s blessing, but then she goes a step further. She begins to talk about this child to all who are seeking the redemption of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem was a city in turmoil. One author describes the divide, “There was an upper city of the elite and a lower city of the poor.” Having a population around 40,000. The city was structured by a strange mish mash of Greek and Roman influences. Stability in the region was fragile and uprisings were not unusual, especially around festive occasions. The Romans kept peace by fear, meaning they used just enough force to maintain the people’s fear of them.

And there is that word again, Fear. I read an article in Psychology Today about a teacher who offered a class called “The Structure of Fear.” Through his students research they discovered the fear overlaps a lot of other emotions, many of them we might expect like anxiety, stress, terror and concern. But over the course of the research, one emotion which overlapped the students experiences of fear was a total surprise. Hope.

The author continues, “What’s particularly intriguing about hope is that ‘it’s a future-oriented emotion that often emerges in challenging and difficult circumstances.’ People don’t experience hope when things are great; it’s when they experience a lot of uncertainty and anxiety that hope emerges. He continues, “The fascinating thing about hope is that it coexists with fear. If there’s nothing to fear, there’s little reason to feel hope.”

What the Prophet Anna is saying in the story today is God’s future is now, God’s Hope is here. Through the birth of this child and the way of life he will call people to lead; Hope is born. Simeon is holding Hope in his hands as he elevates the child in dedication to the God of the whole world. The storms of life won’t stop and fear will enter our lives... Kings, and shepherds, and husbands, and young mothers, and you and I will still experience fear. But born to us and dedicated to God is one through whom we are called again to rise above and claim the Hope of God’s new creation.

Listen to the confidence expressed by one of our Spiritual Ancestors, In Psalm 3 the author writes, “many are saying to me, “There is no help for you in God.” But you, O Lord, are a shield around me, my glory, and the one who lifts up my head. I cry aloud to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy hill. I lie down and sleep; I wake again, for the Lord sustains me. I am not afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me all around.”

On this Sunday during the season of Christmas, I invite you to be Anna. Don’t just come to the manger and see that the baby is blessed. Let’s be God’s messengers, let’s go out and tell about this child who has come to save us. Let’s tell stories of hope. Let’s tell stories of God’s goodness and peace. Let’s tell stories to all who are looking for peace, and justice, and faithfulness. In the new year we can become a mighty chorus of Hope. For the storms they are raging.

Anna invites us to vow again this year that we will help each other through the fears which arise. When we are trusted with another’s tender fear, we will listen, and ask God to guide us to a word of compassion, care, or encouragement. When fear pushes others to withdraw, we will gently invite a new relationship or help safely open the space for them to return. When we

feel the overwhelming need to fix another's fears, we will take pause and ask God, who is ruler and healer of all, how our gifts may be of greatest use.

See, redemption wasn't just something that many in Jerusalem were looking for. We are all seeking redemption from something. We all want to be saved from the storms of Sin, Error and evil. God's gift of Grace, born in a baby who was later dedicated in a temple, offers us the love that calls us back again and again... to Hope.

Amen