

Holding on to Hope • Luke 2:25-38

Some say health is most important: “If you have your health you have everything.” Some say happiness is number one; all they want is to be happy. But, it’s really hope that should top every list. We cannot always be healthy and none of us is constantly happy but we can hold on to hope. As Christians we always, always have hope.

Two thousand Christmases ago a man and a woman held on to hope through difficult times and long lives. One was Simeon. He was a righteous and devout man who lived by faith. It wasn’t easy to live by faith when his country was occupied by the cruel Roman army. It wasn’t easy to believe in a coming Messiah when there were doubts and differences even among his fellow Jews. But he held on to hope.

Anna was either old or really old. There is some ambiguity in the translation from Greek to English. She was either 84 or had been a widow for 84 years which would mean that she was at least 100. Either way, her husband had died and her life was spent mostly alone. It is never easy to be old or alone but it was particularly hard in a primitive and poor place like first century Israel. But she held on to hope.

The story of Simeon and Anna is part of the Christmas story although it is seldom read or remembered. It is found in Luke 2:25-38:

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

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“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Simeon and Anna had all the ingredients of hope. Hope anticipates the future. Hope is always about tomorrow. Jerome Groopman, MD, a Harvard Medical School professor who wrote a book entitled THE ANATOMY OF HOPE, defined hope as “the ability to see a path to the future.” Hope is somehow seeing a way out of the difficulties of life.

That’s how it was for Simeon. He saw the pain in his nation. He grieved with the afflictions of his people. He yearned for consolation. There was no apparent way to escape the cruel Roman rule. Many had tried with disastrous results. It seemed like an endless trap. But Simeon saw a path to tomorrow through a Messiah from God. His dream was to live long enough to see this Messiah come to Israel. He held on to hope and that is how he survived.

Anna was older. She was a widow more than ten times longer than she was a wife. She had no prospects for marriage or future children. She was an old woman. Her fate was set. She was a prime candidate for hopelessness. But she was full of hope—and not just hope but hope with action as she daily worshiped, prayed and fasted. She was convinced God would send a Savior and saw that child as the hope for the future.

It's easy to hold on to hope when life is easy and all our dreams have come true. But most of us struggle with pains, problems and uncertainty. We wonder how to survive today and thrive tomorrow. We need to find some path out of the mess we are in. We need a way beyond hopelessness. We all need hope that anticipates a better future.

Christian hope is hope that comes from God. Hope without God is merely wishful thinking. Dreaming up fantasies is not Christian hope. Such wishful thinking is often little more than self-delusion. Just because we “Think Snow” or “Wish for Peace” or “Want Money” doesn't mean that any of this will happen.

Christian hope is different. Christian hope comes from God and not fantasy. Simeon's hope came from the Holy Spirit. Anna's hope was rooted in the prophecies of the Bible. True Christian hope isn't our imaginary yellow-brick-road. True hope is based on the person and the power and the promises of God himself.

Hope often surprises. At least Joseph and Mary were surprised. We read in Luke 2:33, “*The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him.*” After a virgin birth, an army of angels and everything else they had been through you would think Joseph and Mary would be surprise-proof. But, they weren't. They were amazed at the words of Simeon and the predictions of what was to come. That's the way hope in God and life with God works. He points us on a path to tomorrow but surprises us with twists and turns that no one would expect.

C. S. Lewis, author of the CHRONICLES OF NARNIA, called his autobiography SURPRISED BY JOY. That is exactly what hope is all about—surprises from God. Just when we think all is lost God sneaks up with victory. Just when we think we have life all figured out God takes us in exciting and unexpected new directions.

But it takes time. Seldom is hope quick. God took a lifetime for the hopes of Simeon and Anna to come true. For some people the fulfillment of hope takes more than a lifetime. As Christians our hope is not in the calendar or the clock; our hope is in the Christ. We are convinced that Jesus Christ will come through no matter how long it takes.

Often hope is slower than we would choose. Often hope comes in chunks and pieces, with starts and stops. Simeon and Anna did not live long enough to see baby Jesus grow to manhood. They did not witness his supernatural miracles or hear his divine revelations. They weren't around for his crucifixion or resurrection. They waited in hope and lived long enough to read Chapter One of God's fulfillment of hope. In other words, God gave them more to hope for in the future.

And it's like that for us. Hope is always anticipating the future. It is always a path from the difficulties of today into the delights of tomorrow. Christian hope always comes from God, it usually takes time and it is full of unexpected surprises.

Of course, everyone wants hope. Who wouldn't? The practical question is how do we get hope? Do we just sit around and wait for it to appear? Let's start with the downside of hope and identify what steals hope out of our lives.

One thing we can do is guard the hope that we have. Hope is a very precious commodity that needs to be guarded. Colossians 1:23 says, “. . . *continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.*” The implication here is that we can be moved from hope.

We all know the thieves of hope—circumstances; disappointment; disease; poverty; death; and others. They are the situations of life that leave us powerless and feeling hopeless. It is a lie of Satan that everything in our lives is out of control and there is no way out. What's been stealing your hope lately?

Probably the greatest thief of hope is us. We are often our own worst enemies when it comes to the effect of hope in our lives. Not because we want to be hopeless but because we have a misplaced hope. I want to read to you an interesting line that was penned by St. Paul to his friend Timothy, a pastor in the ancient city of Ephesus. Here is what Paul told him in 1 Timothy 6:17:

Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in

wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

When we are rich we are prone to think that money is our path out of every difficulty. When we are in love we trust a lover. When we are in positions of power we are likely to hope in whom we know and the influence we have. But as Christians our hope is in God. Money, people and positions are not dependable, but God is. To hold on to Christian hope be on guard against the robbers of hope and the substitutes for hope other than God himself.

But let's be proactive about hope. Claim the promises of God. The word "hope" appears 161 times in our English Bible. I recently read every reference and delighted to discover all that the Bible says about hope. It was a huge hope-builder all by itself. I suggest that you look at the concordance (index) in the back of your Bible or buy a Bible software program and read every promise of God about hope. It will give you encouragement and hope that will grow your soul.

Choose one or a few Bible promises of God. Write them down. Post them on your refrigerator, in your car or as your computer screensaver.

Memorize the promises of God and recite them regularly. Here are some suggestions:

... but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (Isaiah 40:31)

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future." (Jeremiah 29:11-13)

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)

Through him (Jesus) you believe in God, who raised him from the dead and glorified him, and so your faith and hope are in God. (1 Peter 1:21)

We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. (Hebrews 6:19)

In the midst of poverty, persecution and death those early Christians held on to their Christian hope in God's grace. Hope was and is the anchor of our faith.

Simeon and Anna hoped for a lifetime before their hopes came true. Hope is always about the future. Hope is always about what we have not yet experienced. Hope is always in what God will do. Don't give up easily. Don't surrender too soon. Don't think that God has forgotten. Hold on to hope with the conviction that God will do good no matter how long it takes. Romans 8:25 says, *"But if we hope for what we do not yet have, we wait for it patiently."*

Expect surprises when God turns hope into reality. Remember that our hope is not in what will happen. Our hope is in God. Honestly, I would rather trust God than me! Some of my dreams were better unfulfilled. Some of my prayers deserved a

"no." Remember that hope is seeing a path to a better tomorrow. It's a way out of a lousy situation. With that definition in mind listen to 1 Corinthians 10:13:

No temptation has seized you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted

beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it.

The promise of God is that he will give us all the strength we need through whatever situation we face. He will always provide a path to a better tomorrow. We just may be totally surprised by the path he gives.

My father-in-law died at home in the house that his parents built when he was 12 years old. They bought it through the Sears and Roebuck catalog and the pieces were shipped by rail to Clifton, New Jersey. Charleen's parents put up their Christmas tree in the dining room of that house just before Christmas of 1994. By then her father had been diagnosed with terminal cancer and we all pretty much knew that would be his last Christmas.

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After Christmas they left the tree up and the lights on. The final weeks of his life were spent in a hospital bed in the living room in sight of that Christmas tree. He died in April of 1995. Her mother left the tree up with the lights on. Multiple times we offered to take it down but she insisted that those lights were staying on and the Christmas tree was going to stay up.

It stayed there for the next six years. The tree and its lights became a symbol of hope for tomorrow rooted in the memories of yesterday. Through the years of grief over the loss of her partner of a lifetime and through her own illness and eventual death Charleen's mother insisted that the tree stay put and the lights burn bright.

May the lights of hope keep burning for you. When illness strikes, when loved ones die, when you are swamped with discouragement . . . hold on to hope! Don't let anyone talk you into taking

the lights of hope down. Keep your hope bright through faith in the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, we need hope.

Please give us the hope we need through the circumstances that we face. Help us to guard against misplaced hope. May we substitute nothing for hope in you and may we keep the light of hope shining brightly.

I pray that your grace and your mercy might rest on your people and especially on those right now who are in the midst of a mess. May the light of hope in Jesus Christ shine brightly!

I pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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