

Holding Promise

sermon digest

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Luke 2:21-32

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Do you remember the fall of the Berlin Wall? It was, to put it mildly, a story of high drama and perhaps the most hopeful public event of our lifetime. Most of us watched in amazement from afar, and this past November we celebrated its twenty-fifth anniversary. There is, however, an amazing story within that amazing story that we may not know so well. On a September evening in 1989, following weekly prayers for peace at St. Nikolai church—the church where Bach composed so many of his cantatas—the people spilled out of the church into the courtyard to sing songs and demonstrate in support of such basic freedoms as the right to travel and elect their own government. What began on that evening became a tradition that lasted for weeks. Every Monday evening peaceful protestors gathered by candlelight around St. Nikolai church and sang songs of their heritage and of their hopes and dreams for a future marked by freedom and justice. Beginning with little more than a thousand people, their numbers swelled to more than three hundred thousand. Their song shook the powers that held their nation in its grip and changed the world. Sometime after the fall, a journalist asked one of the commanders of the East German secret police why they hadn't crushed these protests as they had so many others. The commander replied, "We had no contingency plans for song."

"Sometimes," David Lose observes, reflecting upon the incident, "all we can do is sing." And sometimes that is enough.

Such is the case as Luke tells his story of the birth of Jesus. He resorts to song. Words alone will not do. The situation, you see, is stark. And more than that, what Luke (as the other Gospel writers) is trying to do here is something more than merely documenting a biography. He is preaching. He is making a theological statement. He is interpreting not just who Jesus is, but who Jesus is set within the context of a seemingly less than hopeful situation. If you remember, Elizabeth and Mary sing. Zechariah sings. The angels sing. And now, the aged Simeon, holding the baby in his arms, sings: "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." The aged Simeon is joined by the aged prophet Anna, who joins the praise and begins to speak about the child to all who are looking for "the redemption of Jerusalem."

What is happening here? Simeon has taken into his arms this small child. But despite the wonder the birth of any child inspires, notice what has not changed. Who this baby will be has yet to materialize. He has not preached; he has not healed; he has not challenged the powers that hold the Jewish people hostage. Herod still sits on his throne, and Caesar still holds the power of life and death in his hand. The world looks much as did before Jesus was born.

And yet, here are this old faithful man and woman held in wonder, singing songs of thanksgiving and praise at the long awaited deliverance of God's people. Who are they? What do they see that we also need to see? What do they have to say to us as we look around us this second week after Christmas and wonder what happened to the light. What happened to the hope and joy and anticipation we so enthusiastically welcomed together? How can we, how do we return to the world that is unchanged out there with some word of hope? How do we speak some word of hope to each other and within our own hearts that will enable us to move beyond this blessed Christmas pause and back to face the divisions and inequities that threaten the very fabric of our society? Where do we find the sense of hope and resolve we need in order to go on in the face of our own or our loved one's unrelenting pain or declining health? And how do we continue with purpose and meaning as those who mean the most to us, one-by-one, are becoming absent from our lives?

The church has thoughtfully recognized in recent years that Christmas is not necessarily the "hap-happiest season of all" and that pressuring those struggling under a load of grief and loss to simply "get with it" is cruel. "Blue Christmas" and "Longest Night of the Year" litanies and carols take into account the toll of pain that death, divorce, estrangement, illness, distance, or a change in a relationship may be taking upon us and seek to provide a safe space for people to own their pain and/or to compassionately be present to others going through a tough patch in life. Such sensitivity, it seems to me, is not only appropriate to a ministering, caring church. It recognizes the depth of meaning contained in God's coming in Christ. Christmas is not only for the joyful. It is also for those who hurt. When we can come before God in all honesty, acknowledging our laments alongside our praise, we experience deep

within our souls the reality of the light that confronts the darkness. The light does not wish the darkness away. It does not pretend the darkness is not there. It confronts the darkness and burns still, even if at times, it seems little more than a bare, flickering flame.

True, Luke and the other Gospels are not in the truest sense biographies, but they are about context. They are about the context of longing and suffering and the ages and ages of waiting and yearning into which Jesus stepped. And if we miss that, we miss the gospel for then and for now. Jesus, Luke wants us to know, was born into a devout Jewish family in the midst of a longing and devout Jewish people. Five times in telling of Jesus' being taken to the temple, he says that Mary and Joseph were acting in accordance with the law of Moses. Five times and throughout his gospel, he wants us to know that "the hopes and fears of all the years" were met in the life and ministry of this one sent of God. The story he tells is about God and it is about promise and it is about us as it is about the Jewish people, as it is about Simeon and Anna.

Simeon and Anna, Fred Craddock tells us,

are Israel in miniature, and Israel at its best: devout, obedient, constant in prayer, led by the Holy Spirit, at home in the temple, longing and hoping for the fulfillment of God's promises *[Interpretation: Luke,*

40].

To be honest, we've met them before. Remember Zechariah and Elizabeth? For that matter, remember Abraham and Sarah? Hannah and Elkanah? They are aging. They are ready to "depart in peace." They live between memory and promise. Taking the child in his arms, Simeon embraces the promise. "God is doing something new," Craddock acknowledges, "but it is not really new, because hope is always joined to memory, and the new is God's keeping an old promise."

And that is what faithfulness means. Most of the time, it is not about heroics. Most of the time, it is not about feelings of euphoria. Most of the time, it is not about looking out at the world around us or at the circumstances that surround our personal lives as if we somehow occupy the catbird's seat. Faithfulness is rather about holding onto the promise and living toward the promise. It is about the song, the hope, the promise of faith, even when, and maybe especially when, hope seems hard to come by.

About twenty-five years ago, China was just opening to visitors from the West. A group of Baptist ministers of music toured the churches there, singing and sharing ministry experience. They brought back a video interview in which an elderly church organist shared his experience of the dark years. Speaking of the day everyone knew the soldiers were be coming to close down the churches, he told of sitting down at the church organ and playing the great hymns of faith until the soldiers finally arrived to close the doors. It was his act of love and faithfulness as his church was sentenced to endure decades underground.

So sing your song of Christmas. Sing your songs of joy—oh yes! But sing of joy that encounters pain. Sing of a God who comes to us precisely in those places where we are broken and take courage to face the day.

Sometimes, you see, all we can do is hold on and sing. And when you get right down to it, it's not a bad thing to do.