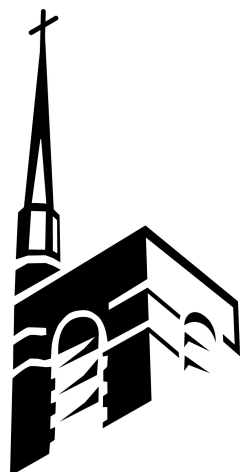


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“HOLDING TOMORROW IN YOUR HANDS”

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Scripture: Luke 2:22-40

First, a word of explanation to the seminary students. To the great dismay of the liturgical purists and lectionary fundamentalists among us, you will note we don't follow the lectionary and we do take liberties with the liturgical calendar. For example, here in Birmingham the celebration of Pentecost always comes on the first Sunday of June, no matter the date of Easter. If you'd like to know why, I would be glad to explain. Today is Epiphany, focusing on the coming of the Magi and the adoration of the Christ Child, but I am melding it with last week's story, one of the final events in the birth narrative, the presentation of the Christ Child in the temple. See, I didn't get to preach last week, and besides, in my years of ministry I have known and loved so many Annas and Simeons that I just can't pass it by.

Luke tells the tale. (read Luke 2:22-40)

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An old man shuffles across the ancient, dusty stone floor, past the towering pillars soiled from the hands of countless worshipers, worn smooth from the wearied shoulders of tired pilgrims who for centuries made their way to this place of worship. The haze in the old man's weary eyes matches the smoky blur from burning sacrifices, smoldering incense, oily lamps. The smell of dying animals and sweaty servants fills the place as the sounds of a multitude of the languages of the known world all conspire to make this a place of mystery and awe.

The old man sees little of it. Besides, he has seen it all for so many years, the images are emblazoned in his brain. He seems oblivious to the hub-hub around him; the fringe of his long robe leaves a trail in the dust. His long beard, a symbol of age and wisdom, encircles his head like a wreath, enclosing his rusty, dark-skinned cheeks and weathered lips. His eyes, though of little use, still flame with the light of faith and hope as he searches the crowd for something, for someone.

But what I want you to notice this morning are his hands...worn and wrinkled, with twisted arthritic fingers, veins purpled with age under almost transparent skin. Keep your eyes on his hands.

This day, amid the sights and sounds and smells and confusion, a young couple makes their way through the crowd. They are easy to miss...just a humble carpenter and his young teenaged wife carrying a small bundle of a baby, probably just eight days old. Obviously their first-born, they are here to offer him to God, then to make the sacrifice in his place so they can reclaim him and take him home. Nothing very unusual. It probably happened every day...just a pair of poor parents, just a screaming baby, just a humble sacrifice of a few small birds.

But slowly, something stirs in the old man's soul...a quickening heartbeat, a twinge of the Spirit. Somehow he knows beyond knowing. He sees with eyes of faith. He senses something beyond all the human sights and smells and sensations that surround him. This is THE CHILD!

Simeon takes the child in his ancient, time-worn palms. It must have looked like Old Man Time hugging the New Year's Eve baby. A tear glistens in the weathered wrinkles of his ancient face and runs down into his dusty gray beard.

This child... This child... This child...

And on this first Sunday of the new year, I would like to suggest this morning that like old Simeon, you and I hold the Christ Child and the message he brings in our feeble, all-too-human hands; hold this new year in our shaking, anxious grasp. We, like Simeon, hold tomorrow in our hands.

At the risk of sounding simplistic, I would like to suggest three gestures for this first Sunday of the new year.

1. Like Simeon, we take the new year and we hold it up to God.

Luke says Simeon “*took the baby up in his arms and blessed God.*” So we take the days of our lives—our hopes and fears for this new year, the moments and months, the hours and weeks that lay ahead—and we offer them up to God.

Over 200 years ago, John Wesley prepared this “Covenant Service” for the People Called Methodist—the first liturgy published specifically for the early Methodists, to be used on New Year's Day or the first Sunday of the New Year as a way of annually renewing our covenant with God. It begins with praise for what God has done:

We give thanks for your loving kindness which has filled
our days and brought us to this time and place.
In darkness you have been our light;
In labor, the all-sufficient reward.

And it ends with the beloved Covenant Prayer as we hold this new year up to God, saying:

Here it is Lord...whatever it holds, may we be exalted or brought low.
May we have all things, may we have nothing.
Whatever this year brings, we offer it up to you.

Every year when we pray this prayer, I remember the first time...

It was the first year Judy and I were dating. She was one year out of college; I was a senior. (I've always been fascinated by older women!) Asbury College offered a "Watch Night Service," worship using the Covenant service at midnight. We really knew how to party at Asbury!

It was the first time I had ever prayed this prayer. At that time we had no idea where the road would lead. I had no idea we would end up in Michigan and I had never even heard of Birmingham, but together we prayed this prayer, opening ourselves to whatever God had in mind. We simply offered our future up to God.

More than forty years later, I look back with no regrets. And if I had it to do all over again, I'd start out the same...holding the future in my hands, holding it up to God.

2. And like old Simeon, we take the Christ Child in our hands and we hold him out to the world.

That's the second movement...not clutching the Christ to ourselves; not grabbing as if he were our private property, as if he were a white, Anglo-Saxon American Methodist baby born only for us; but holding the Child out to others, sharing the good news, offering the message of hope and grace and joy to all the world.

Old Simeon caught the vision when he said: "Mine eyes have seen thy salvation, which thou hast prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for the glory of Israel."

This child...given to the world.

This Christmas was magical in our household—with three grandchildren, two of them at that age where they are so thrilled with the season, anticipating Santa, sharing the story of "The Night Before Christmas." It seems this season Ethan and Alice both learned and loved "Go, Tell It on the Mountain." So we sang it over and over again. Sometimes in the midst of doing nothing, Ethan would just start to sing and we would all join in:

*Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere.
Go, tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born.*

And if you've been to the manger, if you heard the angel chorus and joined in singing "Silent Night," if you lit your candle and lifted it high, then the only appropriate response is to GO! TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN.

Christmas was never meant to be just a chummy little candlelit moment between me and God. The Christ Child was not given to us for the sake of warming the cockles of our hearts so we

could cuddle up with the baby and sip a cup of Christmas cocoa. The Christ Child is placed in our human hands so that we might offer him to others.

With loving hands, we lift this Child and this new year up to God.
With open hands, we offer this Christ to the world.

3. *And with firm hands we hold on to hope.*

Old Simeon and his friend Anna are symbols of enduring hope. All their lives, they had been longing for this moment. For who-knows-how-many years, they waited, standing on nothing but the promises. Day after day, trusting the God of their salvation.

When I think of old Simeon, my mind immediately moves to memories of old Rev. Ross. The adults in our church called him “Daddy Ross,” but to us kids he was always Rev. Ross—an old retired preacher in my home church. As a preacher of his generation, he always wore a black suit with a narrow black tie, always carried his well-worn Bible in his hands. He came to church every Sunday and always sat in the same pew. I remember him singing along in his scratchy voice the little chorus from the Psalms:

*They that wait upon the Lord will renew their strength,
They shall mount up with wings like eagles.
They shall run and not be weary,
They shall walk and not faint.
Teach me, Lord, teach me, Lord, to wait.*

The symbol of hope...holding on when all seems hopeless. Holding firm to the promises of God.

Frankly, I don’t know what this new year will hold, and neither do you. For you who are students, I can’t imagine what your future will be like, and neither can you. But like old Simeon, the one thing of which I am sure is that whatever the future holds, God will be there and we can step out in confidence, holding firm to hope.

You see, the old gospel song is right:

*Many things about tomorrow I don’t seem to understand,
But I know who holds tomorrow and I know who holds my hand.*

So we face this New Year in covenant with God:

Holding this new year up to God.
Holding the Christ Child out to the world.
Holding firm to hope.
Holding tomorrow in our hands.