

The Light of Hope

Luke 2.21-38

December 31, 2017, A Service for the New Year

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I love this Morten Lauridsen piece about mystery. And I'm grateful to Belle for reminding us that this is a season of mystery.

Perhaps we forgot that. Or perhaps we think the only mystery in Christmas is for children. With all the de-mythologizing of the Christmas story and all our disgust about the commercializing of it and the experience of our own disappointment and cynicism, well perhaps we have wrung all the mystery out of this season and this story.

And I have to say that one of the great mysteries of the season for me is hope. What is it? Where do you find it? How do you hold on to it?

I've noticed that my experience of hope has changed over the years. When I was a child, hope was more short-term: getting that bike or passing that exam. As I grew older, hope was about more long-term things like a career or a relationships or a future. Now that I am even older, I'm discovering that hope isn't about any "thing." It's about a way of *seeing* things. Things come and go. Plans change and don't pan out. Expectations fail us. But hope doesn't depend on any "thing" because it's a way of seeing *everything*.

That's why I love this story in Luke 2 about good old Anna and Simeon. These are older folks who have been waiting a long time for something to happen. No doubt each of them had seen hundreds of babies brought to the Temple. No doubt they had their own disappointments.

Simeon is prepared to be "dismissed" in peace – which sounds like a euphemism for a transition of another kind. Anna was widowed after only 7 years with her husband and she is now 84 and alone.

In their lifetime, things had gone from bad to worse in the religious and political life of their people. Even now, the outlook must have looked grim.

But there they were. Somehow still holding on to hope.

So I will read their story printed in your bulletin this morning and Ben will invite you to sing the canticle. [Luke 2.21-38]

When the eighth day arrived for the child's circumcision, he was named Jesus, the name the angel had given him before he was conceived.

When the day came for them to be purified, as laid down by the Law of Moses, the couple took Jesus up to Jerusalem and presented him to God ... Now there lived in Jerusalem a man named Simeon. He was devout and just, anticipating the consolation of Israel, and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. She had revealed to Simeon that he would not see death until he had seen the Messiah of God. Prompted by her, Simeon came to the Temple; and when the parents brought in the child, Simeon took the child in his arms and praised God, saying:

Canticle (of Simeon): Your salvation is in the presence of all peoples.

O God, 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 the glory of your people Israel.

Canticle

There was a woman named Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher, who was a prophet. She had lived a long life, seven years with her husband, and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple, worshiping day and night, fasting and praying. Coming up to the couple at that moment, she gave thanks to God and talked about the child to all who looked for the deliverance of Jerusalem.

Canticle

Old Anna and Simeon's hope is about seeing – and all people seeing – light for the nations. You might say that what they saw in that baby was a potential they could not possibly see. They were long-gone by the time Jesus was preaching and healing and getting in trouble for loving people of all kinds and overturning tables in their beloved Temple.

No doubt they had already seen a lot by the time that couple showed up with a new baby. But that's not the point. It wasn't about seeing any particular thing but seeing in that little baby the light of potential in everything.

When Paul Rogat Loeb writes his book about hope, he says:

... hope is a way of looking at the world – more than that, it's a way of life. Nowhere is this more apparent [he writes] than in the stories of those who like [Desmond] Tutu and [Nelson] Mandela, persist under the most dangerous conditions, when simply to imagine aloud the possibility of change is deemed a crime or viewed as a type of madness.

Sometimes I think we get disappointed because we sell hope short. We tie it some particular thing, some short-term or long-term fix, and our hopes are crushed when that thing – whatever it is – doesn't happen. Like Tutu and Mandela, Anna and Simeon see in hope a potential that is a dangerous act of resistance regardless of what happens. It was, for them, a way of life, as Loeb says, that is “defiant, resilient, persistent ... no matter what the odds against us may be.”

So this year I am looking for hope in places that there shouldn't be any. People who have no reason to hope but hope anyway. People who are living the mystery of hope. People who are living that dangerous, defiant, resilient, persistent kind of life no matter the odds.

I remind you that the Dr. King that preached that great “I Have a Dream” sermon on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial also preached a sermon called “Shattered dreams.” How many times did Dr. King see his dream of love and justice dashed by political and social and spiritual leaders of his day? How could hope remain?

The answer lies [he writes] in our wiling acceptance of unwanted and unfortunate circumstances even as we still cling to a radiant hope, our acceptance of finite disappointment even as we adhere to infinite hope.

I need to hear that because I think I have sometimes suffered from an easy hope – one that doesn’t get me in trouble; one that is quickly dashed because that “thing” doesn’t happen; one that gives up on things I should hold on to and holds on to things I should let go.

I want to see my life and you and the world in the light of a different kind of hope – one that sees you and me and the world and everything, regardless of the circumstances, in the light of that “radiant hope” and that “infinite hope” that doesn’t depend on any “thing” but sees the light of potential in *everything*.

This season I’ve been spending a lot of time with the great African-American preacher and teacher and university dean, Howard Thurman. He was the one who wrote those opening lines for worship today about the work of Christmas that begins now – on this eve of a New Year.

Thurman was born in 1899 and was raised by his grandmother who had been a slave. He went to school in the segregated system in Daytona, Florida and you can probably imagine those years of segregation and the dangers of the early racial justice movement.

His family was poor but they raised the money to send him to college and graduate school. He was ordained in 1925 and became the pastor of

Mount Zion Baptist Church in Oberlin, Ohio. Later he was on the faculty at Morehouse and Spelman colleges and led a “Negro Delegation of Friendship” to South Asia, where he was deeply influenced by Mahatma Gandhi.

When he returned to the United States he published *Jesus and the Disinherited* that provided a foundation for a nonviolent civil rights movement and he helped to inspire young leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr. and James Farmer. He was a cofounder of the Church for the Fellowship of All Peoples in San Francisco where people from every ethnic background worshipped and worked together for justice and peace.

None of that could have been easy. No doubt “things” didn’t always go as hoped. But hope wasn’t about things for Howard Thurman. It was about a way of seeing everything.

Whatever difficulties and disappointments Howard Thurman experienced, he wrote another Christmas poem:

*I will light candles this Christmas
Candles of joy despite all sadness,
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch,
Candles of courage for fears ever present,
Candle of peace for tempest-tossed days,
Candles of graces to ease heavy burdens,
Candles of love to inspire all my living,
Candles that will burn all the year long.*

So, we light candles of hope this morning. Not like birthday candles where you make a wish for a particular thing and then blow them out.

These are candles, as Howard Thurman says, despite all sadness, despite all those unwanted and unfortunate circumstances, despite anything because they are the light that helps us see the potential in everything.

On that morning in Jerusalem, Anna and Simeon saw in that little baby a potential they couldn't possibly live to see.

It was the mystery of hope.

It was a way of life.

It was an act of resistance.

It was a light regardless of anything and in the potential of everything.

So, with Howard Thurman and Dr. King, with those old prophets, Anna and Simeon, and with all those who hold on to hope in unlikely places, we will light candles today of joy and hope and courage and peace and grace and love ... regardless.

And today, if you hear that voice – that voice of hope stirring in your heart on the eve of this New Year – well, for God's sake and for your own, do not harden your hearts.

NOTES

"Canticle of Simeon," *New Century Hymnal*, p.734. Paul Rogat Loeb *The Impossible Will Take A Little While: a citizen's guide to hope in a time of fear* (Cambridge, MA: Basic Books, Perseus Book Group, 2004), pp.4-5. Martin Luther King, Jr. "Shattered dreams," *Strength to Love* Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), pp.87-96; quote from p.91. Bio of Howard Thurman online at www.pbs.org/thisfarbyfaith/people/howard_thurman.html. Howard Thurman, "Candles for Christmas," *Meditations of the Heart* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1953), pp.152-153.