

Hopes and Fears of All The Years... A Christmas Message

Theme: Jesus is the fulfillment of every longing heart.

Text: Luke 2:21-35

"The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight", so concludes the first stanza of one of the favorite Christmas carols, "O Little Town of Bethlehem." That is quite a claim! All humanity's desires and longings, all of our anxieties and trepidations find their resolution or fulfillment in the babe born in Bethlehem.

As we come to this service on the day after Christmas, I am conscious that within the last 24 to 36 hours many of us experienced the hopes and fears of children, certainly not on such a grandiose level. Their hope might have been to get an IPOD, and the fear was that their would not. Hope graces a child's face as they rip into the beautiful wrapping that hides what is inside, only to be followed by, "what's next" and "is that all?"

There is nothing like the glee of kids at Christmas whose anticipation becomes an adult's delight. The digital cameras and camcorders were flashing trying to capture the moment so that memories could be replayed for the future. The pile of paper and ribbons were gathered up on the way to the Christmas meal. All of these hopes and fears are but a small scale version of the deeper longings that grow in our hearts as we mature.

This morning we meet the character in the Christmas story who embodies "the hopes and fears of all the years". A man named Simeon was present at the temple when Mary and Joseph came with the baby Jesus to dedicate him. Simeon was a calm man with a settled heart in a volatile land. He was most likely a part of a group known as the *Quiet of the Land*. While Palestine seethed hatred against their Roman occupiers, Simeon was quietly focused on the hope of the long awaited Messiah. While would-be and self appointed messiahs stirred up insurrection against mighty Rome only to be crushed; Simeon we are told "was waiting for the consolation of Israel" (Luke 2:25). What an arresting description, "the consolation of Israel"!

The Depth of Longing

Before we explore what is what that Simeon was waiting for, let's notice the intensity of his longing.

Hopes and Fears of All The Years... A Christmas Message

This waiting for the "consolation of Israel" was such an obsessive and singular focus, that once the Christ child was taken into his arms, his life was fulfilled. If he had died in that moment, he would have died a complete person. We read in v. 26, "It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ (Messiah)." Then he breaks out in song in v. 29, 30: "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..."

Simeon had such a longing that his heart ached only for this one thing. Have you ever longed for something so much that an unfulfilled hope would leave a hole in your heart? On the other hand, if you did get your wish, you could say, "Now my life is complete, let me die in peace." Where I suspect all of us can relate to this is as parents with our children. As long as our children are wandering in the far country apart from a safe and secure relationship with Christ, there is a perpetual groan in our spirit, and when they return to the compassionate arms of their heavenly Father, we might say, "Now Lord, my life is fulfilled."

I want to share with you the cry of a father's heart that speaks to these deep, and unfulfilled longings. A family in our church introduced Lily and me to an organization serving those who have the unique challenge of being parents of an autistic child. Just this week we received the year end mailer from the founder of this organization, who wrote eloquently and with tender yearning for his son, Dov. Dov is about to turn 13, and yet cannot speak and only communicates by pointing to letters. Hear these longings of a father for his son:

"It is very late at night, everyone is finally in bed for the duration and the house is quiet at last. This moment of solitude in a very noisy season is a small but very sweet pleasure."

He speaks of his son as the brave one who has to deal with the challenges of his condition. Then the father continues, "And yet I will say one thing about the experience of parents: It is strange and somewhat painful to love so much, to want something so very, very much and not quite get it. Imagine whatever you want with every fiber of your being—a job, a home, a little peace of mind, a soulmate. Then multiply that by a thousand and add forever."

"That kind of yearning leaves a mark. It is a look that I see in the faces of other parents and I can spot it at twenty yards. You want your child to get better so much that you literally become that desire. It is the prayer you utter on going to bed, the first thought upon waking, the mantra that floats into consciousness, bidden or unbidden, every ten minutes of every day of every year of your life. Make him whole, make him well, bring him back to us."

Hopes and Fears of All The Years... A Christmas Message

Simeon waited for "the consolation of Israel" with every fibre of his being. He had become that desire. The fifth century theologian Augustine made the often quoted statement, "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee." All of our best and deepest longings are merely reflections of the one longing—the heart consoled by the love of God. The great British Catholic believer G. K. Chesterton said ironically that even the man who knocks at the door of the brothel is looking for God. Even these desires and longings that we fulfill in self-destructive ways can be the yearning for intimacy with and affection of our Creator.

But Not All Will Receive Him

As much as Simeon exudes this longing for the eternal, many seem not to have that same spark. We seem quite satisfied with the day to day stuff. We get up in the morning, go to work or school, put in our days, pursue our promotions, seek to better our incomes, explore our hobbies and interests, but never look much higher than the hear and now. The way C. S. Lewis puts it is that we are too easily satisfied. "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

Even more I marvel at the fact that there appears to be many or maybe even most who blithely walk this planet seemingly without evidencing little, if at all any longing for a connection with the living God. Simeon's prophetic words over the Christ child indicate a realism along these lines. This Jesus, the son of Mary and Joseph, will be a focal point of division, a stumbling block. In v. 34, 35 Simeon says, "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." (Luke 2:34, 35). Simeon is a God's prophetic vehicle warning Mary and Joseph that their child will be the object of separation. The sword that will pierce their soul will be the piercing of their son on the cross.

I happened to tune into a interview this week between Lee Strobel and Hugh Hefner. Lee Strobel is the host of a new television series called Faith Under Fire and a well known Christian author (*The Case for Christ* and *The Case for Faith*). Unfortunately Hugh Hefner needs no introduction. In the interview Strobel was pushing Hefner to explain the high percentage of people who believe in God in this country. Hefner said that belief in God comes from our human need to explain the ineffable so we posit a god to bring about a bit of control. He said that he felt pity for people of faith because of their self delusion. He made it clear that he wanted nothing to do with what he called "the biblical God." Then

Hopes and Fears of All The Years... A Christmas Message

Strobel asked him, "What difference would it make if we could demonstrate that Jesus had been raised from the dead?" For a momentary glimmer I saw an interest in Hefner in the eternal. He said with some animation it would prove that there was an afterlife. "That would be good", he said. But then he reverted to the belief all of this was unknowable. God was great mystery. His here and now philosophy reasserted itself and the door was closed.

Hugh Hefner reminds us that for every Simeon, there are many more who are sleep walking through life. The prologue of John's gospel says the saddest thing that could be said about Jesus, "He came to his own, and his own received him not...The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not understood it" (John 1:11, 5). But there will come a time for us all, a time that C. S. Lewis calls *The Great Divorce*, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done', and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'" (The Great Divorce, p. 69) Jesus is the stumbling block that we all must deal with.

We bend our wills to God's will or God will allow us to have our own will apart from Him. This may not fit with our image of Christmas, but it certainly was Simeon's message about the Christ child.

But what difference is there for those who are on the God-hunt, rather than those content with mud-pies

The Holy Spirit's Work

Let me reintroduce you to Simeon in the broader context of this story. We are told that Mary and Joseph followed the pattern of all good Hebrew parents, they had their male child circumcised eight days after his birth. This was the sign that they were a part of the chosen people of Israel which traced their roots back to the Abraham, the father of Jewish nation.

On the 40th day of Jesus' life they came to the temple to accomplish two things that are conflated together. First, purification. "When the time for their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed..." (Luke 2:22) In actuality it was not their purification, but Mary's purification. A woman was considered to be ceremonially unclean for a period of 40 day after giving birth, and had to come to the temple for a rite of purification. At the same time there was a second rite, "to offer a sacrifice that was in keeping with what it is said in the Law of the Lord..." (Luke 2: 24) It was at this time that the first born male child was to be redeemed, meaning that they offered a sacrifice on behalf of their son, and paid a "ransom" of sorts to the priests. If you were well off, the sacrifice of a lamb would be custom, but if you were poor "pair of doves or

Hopes and Fears of All The Years... A Christmas Message

pigeons" would suffice. Mary and Joseph presented what was considered "the offering of the poor."

Unbeknownst to the true first family, God had his faithful one at the temple "waiting for the consolation of Israel." We are immediately told what set Simeon apart from the "mud-pie" people. Luke tells us that "the Holy Spirit was upon him." In the next two verses again the difference maker is the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is both a revealer of truth and the orchestrator of events. "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 the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required" (Luke 2:26, 27). In other words, this was no chance encounter but Simeon was a key player in God's drama that he brought on stage right on cue.

Let's shift from the intensity of Simeon's longing to what he was longing for. It is interesting and no coincidence that the delicious word "consolation" is the same word that Jesus used for the promised Holy Spirit. At the end of Jesus' ministry, at the crisis moment when he tells his disciples that he is going to leave them, he gave them this promise and assurance, "And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever...I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you." The word translated Counselor is the same word in Luke 2:25 translated "consolation"; it is the word *paraclete*. Jesus sent "another counselor", which means he was the first *paraclete*. He was the one Simeon referred to as "the consolation of Israel."

This is one of those words that it is difficult to translate because there is no one word English equivalent. Literally the paraclete is "one who comes alongside to help." The word is variously translated "counselor", "comforter", "encourager", "advocate", and "helper". For Simeon Jesus was the fulfillment of "the hopes and fears of all the years." He was the one who would bring completion and the one toward which all history converged and from which all history diverged. As Dan said last week, "Jesus is not just the reason for the season; he is the reason for all seasons."

Jesus is our paraclete, the one who comes alongside to help, the consolation of Israel, primarily as our comforter.

Comforter

Certainly one of the meanings of consolation or to console is to bring comfort. If you are a fan of Handel's Messiah you might already be able to hear the opening tenor soloist singing the words from Isaiah:

Hopes and Fears of All The Years... A Christmas Message

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her
That her hard service has been completed,
That her sin has been paid for,
That she has received from the Lord's hand
Double for all her sins." (Isaiah 40:1,2)

Israel at this time was living under the shame of subjugation. Given the history of the prophets they knew that when they were under the domination of a foreign, pagan power, that this was a sign of God's punishment. In the midst of this grief and heartache, there was the longing and promise that God Himself would intervene and be their defender. "Comfort, comfort ye my people."

The Lord is pictured as a mother who comforts her children in Isaiah 66:13, "As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you; and you will be comforted over Jerusalem." Jesus takes up the image of a mother hen as He looks over the city of God. Can you hear his desire to bring comfort to their grief, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem...how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings."

The Holy Spirit is our comforter, the one who comes alongside to help. He is the presence of Jesus with us and in us, who promises to never leave us or forsake us. Grief and loss are regular occurrences in this life. It comes in many and various forms:

- Death of a loved one
- Death of a dream
- Death of a season of life (empty nester, retirement, physical capacity)
- Death of a friendship
- Death of a plan
- Failure to live up to a moral ideal
- Not getting what we want
- Loss of health
- Financial reversals

Where do we go with these? Who will understand? Who cares deeply enough to be there with us? I will tell you who, "the man of sorrows, acquainted with grief." Simeon tells us that the consolation of Israel, our comforter, is our Savior. Mary and Joseph were instructed to name their child Jesus, because "he save his people from their sins" (Matt. 1:21) Simeon prophesied these words over Jesus, "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light of revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."

Hopes and Fears of All The Years... A Christmas Message

The late Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld made a profound theological statement when he wrote, "How proper it is that Christmas should follow Advent—For him who looks toward the future, the Manger is situated on Golgotha, and the Cross has already been raised in Bethlehem." Jesus was the one born to die in our place.

What we celebrate in the God becoming flesh in the babe born in Bethlehem is that God has entered into our full human experience of grief and loss. C. S. Lewis begins his wonderful treatise on grief entitled *A Grief Observed* with this arresting observation. "No one ever told me that grief felt so much like fear." Fear of what? Being alone. In the aftermath of the loss of his wife Joy, he felt utterly alone. He had known fullness in this late-in-life marriage, like he has never known before. He had opened himself to and reveled in love. And now Joy was gone—literally and figuratively. Grief. Fear. Utter aloneness. Any deep longing feels like fear, being alone. The father with the autistic son who yearns, "make him whole, make him well, bring him back to us", is crying out of loneliness to someone.

That someone, maybe unbeknownst to him, has come to us and gone all the way to abandonment on the cross. For when Jesus died in our stead on the cross, he was experiencing on our behalf the utter forsakenness of our grief and sorrow. He could say, "You have not gone anywhere I have not gone. I am with you in this loss and grief." In my experience we can survive any of life's setbacks if we are accompanied by companions who love us and stay with us. Yet even more we have a **Paraklete**, who comes alongside to help, who promises to never leave us or forsake us. He has demonstrated that love by dying for us.

Charles Colson tells the story of the astonishing rehabilitation record of the *Humaita* prison in Brazil. There is only a 4% recidivism rate in this prison compared to 75% in the rest of Brazil and the United States. On a tour of the *Humaita* prison an inmate showed him the reason why they were so successful. He took him to the cell block that had been known for its torture but now only housed a single inmate. As they reached the end of the cell block and he put the key in the door, the inmate said to Colson, "Are you sure you want to go in?" Colson said, "Sure. I have been in isolation cells all over the world." The inmate slowly swung the massive doors open and Colson saw the prisoner in that cell; it was a crucifix—the prisoner Jesus, hanging on the cross. His guide said, "He is doing time for all the rest of us."

From where does the comfort and consolation come? "Surely he took up our infirmities, and carried our sorrows...and by his wounds we are healed" (Is. 53:4, 5).

Hopes and Fears of All The Years... A Christmas Message

Yet we must do something. We must enter into the grief over our sin, embrace our losses, acknowledge the longings and hopes of our heart and take them to the Savior. Only as we place our trust in Him, and invite Him to take us permanent residence in our hearts, can we have assurance that the lover of our soul and only comfort in life, is the one who remains with us forever. Like Simeon we have been given the ultimate gift. But what good is a gift if we don't receive it and open it. Give yourself a gift in this Scripture season by inviting the **Paraclete**, to not only be with you, but to come into you.