

Sermon December 31, 2017 Introducing Jesus to the World Cara B. Hochhalter

Isaiah 61:10-62:3 and Luke 2:22-40

I couldn't believe it, but Anna talked us into going to see the new Star Wars movie...on Christmas Eve day between our morning church service and the evening Candlelight service! It was a bit much to wrap my head around...The movie seemed like all the Star War movies but there was one line that really caught my attention: Here is Rose, I think a new character in the films speaking to Finn...they are both on the "good side" and this is what was said: "That's how we're gonna win. Not fighting what we hate, but saving what we love."

Perhaps this is a good New Years' sentiment...not fighting what we hate but saving what we love. What do you love...that you would devote this coming year to saving?

Let us be in prayer: God of this incredible life, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together, be acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Luke tells this beautiful story, not Luke Skywalker, but Luke of our Gospels...about the dedication of the eight-day old baby Jesus in the temple. You can picture it. Joseph and Mary bring their baby, as was Jewish custom and religious law, to the temple...the synagogue in Jerusalem...to have him designated as a child of God. Luke wants to make sure we all know that Jesus was Jewish and his parents followed the religious laws of the day.

Parents were to bring their babies, and if they were of wealth, they could bring a lamb for sacrifice in the temple...but if they had little means, they could bring a pair of turtledoves or pigeons. Joseph and Mary brought turtledoves.

But the focus in this story is not the ritual of dedication itself....but on two other people who happened to be there. There were both elderly. There was a man named Simeon and a woman named Anna. Here's what we know about them...

Simeon was a devout and righteous man....and he was looking forward to the time when peace would come to Israel... he was "forward-looking." The Holy Spirit rested on him in all his days. Somehow he knew that God would not let him die until he saw the Messiah...God-with-us, the Christ who would show God to us through the life of Jesus.

And when Simeon saw Mary and Joseph with this little boy baby...something stirred in him.... he took the child in his arms... look at the artist's rendition of this story on your bulletin.....Simeon is filled with bliss as he is so sure, this child, this Jesus, is the One.

I have to admit that when I hold a baby in my arms during a baptism...I feel something, it does feel like a Holy thing...a blessing that radiates to us all for the hope and possibility within each child.

Then Simeon sings praises to God but is also profoundly prophetic. He says that Jesus would be a light of revelation to *both* the Gentiles, non-Jews, as well as a glory for all people Israel. Perhaps Jesus, who holds God within him, would be a peacemaker between people of all faiths, showing that God's inclusive love is larger than our own separations.

But Simeon tells Mary that some will be so opposed to this way of love...that their true inner thoughts will be revealed...and then when Jesus is killed for his teachings, Mary's own heart will be pierced. What a prophecy...what a foretelling of the impact that Jesus would have....and does have, still.

And then there is the Prophet Anna. Wonderful, older Anna who was widowed after only 7 years of marriage and since that time, pretty much moved into the temple. She spent her days fasting and praying...and now at age of 84, she, too, is moved "at that moment"....the moment when Jesus is brought into the temple. Unlike Simeon who talks with the parents and rejoices with God while holding Jesus in his arms, Anna praises God and tells the news outwards...she tells about this Spirit of God in a Christ-child...to all who are longing for a change, a new way of being in the world!

Simeon and Anna had been waiting....for this. Waiting had been a kind of spiritual practice...a listening with all their senses open, waiting even in their breathing as they prayed with the Holy Spirit.... Perhaps Simeon and Anna had the ability to see with their hearts....they had a kind of vision that looked beyond. They saw the Divine in a baby...just as we also are urged to look for the Spirit of God in each other and all people...they had a special vision and what they saw, filled them with hope!

And then Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus...go back home to Nazareth, but Jesus had been introduced to the world.

When I was in Bethlehem about 5 years ago....I remember standing on the porch of our hotel looking out over the city in the early morning...the glow of sunlight on those dusty cream-colored buildings is something to behold and I suddenly thought, "Jesus was a Palestinian Jew." Jesus who represents the essence of Christianity, was raised in a deeply Jewish family, and whose life was lived out in the land of Palestine.

The Palestinian President, Mamoud Abbas, recently claimed that Jesus was a Palestinian and according to Daoud Kuttab, a Palestinian journalist, and former Professor of journalism at Princeton University, said the Israeli Foreign Ministry denounced the idea that Jesus was Palestinian and said Abbas needed to read the Gospels!

This journalist says that for Palestinians, anyone who was born (or whose ancestors were born) on the geographic areas between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea is Palestinian. While many nationalities of people have lived in historic Palestine, including Canaanites, Jabusites, Romans, Israelites, Turks and others, the term Palestine is used in an all-encompassing way for this whole land.

Omid Safi, a writer for On Being says that Palestine/Israel is about the size of the state of Massachusetts and is key to the religious imagination of Jews, Christians, and Muslims. Jerusalem is sacred for all three.

Perhaps the introduction of Jesus into the world, brings with it the longing to see with our own hearts...to look beyond the stereotypes and prejudices that separate people from one another. It is about having another kind of vision.

There is a story of a boy who was diagnosed with a serious cancer. He was given a grant by the Make-A Wish Foundation to make a wish come true. This young boy had a different kind of vision for what he would do with this gift of money. Instead of asking for toys or trips for himself, he created his own foundation to give toys to other children who had cancer. He was able to see beyond what was expected...like Simeon and Anna who looked to the future of God's unfolding plan...

Today is New Year's Eve...the last day of the year. Some people make lists of intentions, ways they will start fresh, begin again...perhaps say good riddance to some old habits...but it is also our time to look forward.

This story of Jesus being presented in the temple feels like a wonderful New Year's story...it is a story of something of the Divine ushering in a new way, a truth so blindingly Holy, that many of us have had to shield our eyes. It is a truth of love and faith that many wrap in different languages of faith but that is the same...a deep, abiding and forgiving love that inspires our compassion for others and the openness for change into the future.

I would like to close with a New Year's prayer from Jane Goodall....

"We pray to the great Spiritual Power in which we live and move and have our being. We pray that we may at all times keep our minds open to new ideas...; that we may grow in our understanding of the nature of all living beings and our connectedness with the natural world; that we may become ever more filled with generosity of spirit and true compassion and love for all life; that we may strive to heal the hurts that we have inflicted on nature and control our greed for material things, knowing that our actions are harming our natural world and the future of our children; that we may value each and every human being for who he is, for who she is, reaching to the spirit that is within, knowing the power of each individual to change the world..."