

Sermon Christmas 1, December 27, 2020 Holding Christmas

Grace and Peace to you all on this first Sunday of Christmas

I'm Pastor Laurie Skow-Anderson. I serve as the Bishop of the Northwest Synod of Wisconsin. I am grateful that we can be in partnership in ministry. Thank you for your support of the work we do together in Jesus' name. We all have just celebrated our first and hopefully only Christmas during a pandemic. This year our worship and family celebrations have been different, very different. This joyful season has been tinged with loneliness, disappointment, loss, and fear. We've all tried to make the best of it. And the HOPE of it all was that on Christmas Eve we heard again about how God came down to earth to a people who at the time were also struggling with great challenges. The miracle of Christmas is that God came down to us as

A baby! A baby!

During a very difficult time in history...God sent of all things...a baby into the world

When the time came...that baby was born in Bethlehem...the city of his ancestor King David

When the time came...the baby's parents, Mary and Joseph brought the baby to Jerusalem to the temple to present him to the Lord as was the custom. Every first born should be dedicated to the Lord with an offering.

These first time parents wanted to do every right by their baby.

A Mary and Joseph wanted to do it right, but what did they know, he's their first born? Mary, how do you wrap the swaddling cloth so it stays tight? Joseph, how do you hold the baby to comfort him when he cries? When are you going feed him, Mary? How do you keep him safe, Joseph? At least they didn't have to decide the right model of car seat or stroller to get! At least the baby wasn't born during a pandemic!

Mary and Joseph wanted to do what was right for their baby. On the eighth day the baby was circumcised and brought to the temple. It was the right thing to do. Just think...

During a difficult time...God sent of all things...a baby savior into the world.

A baby! A baby changes everything! How many of you who are parents had a well-meaning relative tell you that after having a baby your life would never be the same? That a baby changes everything? The birth of a baby is disruptive; it turns the parents' lives upside down. The birth of baby Jesus disrupted everything; it turned the world order upside. Jesus' birth, his life and teachings about God's kingdom/reign, and his death and resurrection changed the world.

In our gospel reading today from Luke 2 we learn that a man named Simeon was at the temple. He was a holy man. The Holy Spirit guided him to Mary, Joseph and Jesus. Old Simeon took the child Jesus into his arms and held him. Simeon held Jesus. Think about that for a moment. Jesus is handled by a human being. Jesus is have-able, hold-able. This is the incarnational wonder of the WORD of God made flesh that Simeon held in his hands. Simeon held the baby Savior of the world in his hands....like we hold the Bible, the Word of God in our hands, like we hold the bread of Holy Communion in our hands.

German Pastor Detrick Bonhoeffer said, "God freely chose to be bound to historical human beings.... .God is present 'haveable,' graspable in the Word within the church."

Simeon held the baby Jesus in his arms and told these first time parents that this was NO ordinary child. Simeon recognized that the time had come. God fulfilled the promise, and sent a Savior, a light to reveal the good news to all people. This work of saving the world would come at great cost and great pain to these parents. Before they left, Simeon blessed them.

Then there is Anna. The 84 year-old, Prophet Anna; she too knew that there was something special about the child Jesus. She knew that the time had come for the redemption of God's people in Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph didn't know what was happening. Is this what normally happens when a baby is brought to the temple? Do the temple grandparents welcome every baby like this? Simeon's gives them a blessing but warns them that a sword would pierce Mary's heart. Anna prays and sings praises to God for a baby, their Baby, for Jesus.

And then it was time to go. They had done all the right things. They had finished everything they needed to do. They left the temple and went home to Nazareth. They took the baby home. They tried as every parent through history, to do the right things and raise a healthy child. Jesus grew up. In the years to come Mary and Joseph had plenty of time to think about what had happened in that the temple that day and wonder what it meant.

Now here we are thousands of years later, reading this story and wondering to ourselves, so what? So what does this mean for me? For us Christians? For those of us who every day try to follow in the way of Jesus? To do the right things by Jesus? What does this story mean?

What touched my heart when I read this story this year, in 2020, is the image I have in my mind of the old man Simeon holding the baby in his arms and the word Simeon prayed at that moment. That conversation he had with God while he held God's son in him arms. Maybe it struck me new this year, because a few months ago I held my new born granddaughter in my arms. There is wonderful connection that occurs across the generations; grandparent to grandchild. Perhaps that experience is more profound this year because of the kind of year we've all had. The pandemic has made birthing a baby into the world more frightening and dangerous. It has been more difficult to gather together. I haven't been able to hold her very often. Everyone is anxious and fearful about getting sick.

As I have talked to folks from our Synod here in the Northwest corner of Wisconsin, I've heard how young families, parents are struggling. What is the right thing to do? Do they take the child to day care? Do they keep the child home and try to work from home? What about those who don't have a choice, who have to work and take their child to daycare and hope that they don't all get sick? How do parents have time to care for young children at home and work from home simultaneously? Home school their children, making sure their child is paying attention to online classes and finishing their homework. It's so challenging for young families right now. How can the grandmas and grandpas help? What can we do to ease their burdens a little? How can we be Simeon and Anna to the babies in our community?

Have you heard about the Babushkas? They are the Russian Grandmothers who taught their grandchildren to love Jesus even when it was illegal to be Christian in Russia. The Soviet Union was officially an atheist country for 74 years. While their parents worked, it was these grandmothers, the babushkas, who raised generations of Russian children, teaching them the Christian faith. The Communist government had dismantled the churches. The babushkas refused to allow the flame of faith to go out in their grandchildren. The government destroyed cathedrals and churches. They sent the Russian clergy to prison camps; they discriminated against believers. Those old ladies with head scarves were more powerful than the Communists would ever guess during all those years of official Soviet atheism. They were the true soul of Russian society.

An independent poll discovered that now nearly 75% percent of Russians say they are religious believers. This is truly a remarkable statistic. It is a testament to the grandmas and grandpas, the babushkas who took a stand for their faith and shared that faith with the next generation.

The babushkas were like Simeon and Anna. They held the next generation in their arms. They proclaimed the faith. They kept the flame of hope and faith burning. They guided the next generation so they would come to know and love Jesus even in the most challenging of times.

In the last months I've listen to pastors and youth directors talk about the challenges of faith formation/SS/confirmation during a pandemic. They are doing the best they can with Zoom classes and sending materials home for families to do together. But they are also telling me that some families are really struggling to participate regularly in the Zoom meetings. They are exhausted and stretched thin. Doing school on line and then adding SS or Confirmation seems like too much to expect for some. I'm really concerned about the next generation hearing the story about Jesus.

I'm thinking about the baptismal promises that parents, godparents and congregations make to teach their children the Lord's prayers, the creed, the 10 commandments, and place in their hands the Bible. It's not just the parent's responsibility. Dear Friends, it is all of our responsibility to nurture children in the Christian faith.

I wonder if we could be like the babushkas, like Simeon and Anna and help the next generation come to know and love Jesus? Maybe we could all become temple grandparents and for the rest of the pandemic and beyond find some way to share the faith with the next generation.

If you are a godparent, or if you have grandchildren, ask their parents how you can help. Could you help them do their SS lesson over the phone? Can you Zoom or facetime and read them Bible stories? Zoom in at night and do bedtime prayers together? Let them know you are praying for them. Make sure they have Children's Bibles in their homes. Make them a prayer bear or a prayer shawl/square to hold on to when they are frightened.

If you don't have a godchild or grandkids, borrow some. Every kid needs caring adults in their lives. Volunteer to be prayer partners with one of the confirmation students at church. Volunteer to set up prayer partners for all the confirmation students at your church.

Host a cross generational faith story sharing on zoom. Imagine, grandparents and grandkids telling each other their faith statements. At a church I served, a group knitted prayer shawls for all the confirmation students and a lesson on prayer, the students loved them.

Cross generational learning is so important. There is so much we can learn from the Simeons and Annas in our congregations. There is so much wisdom that we can share with all the generation. Those of us who are 50-60-70-80 years old, are the BUILDER OR BOOMER GENERATIONS. We have this great opportunity to share and model our faith in Christ Jesus with the next generations so that Gen X, Gen Y, Gen Z, Alpha Gen will also come to know and love Jesus.

Like Simeon and Anna we are holding hope in our arms. Hope of the future. We are part of a circle of generations, circle of life. We hold the next generation in our hands. I believe we do not live to ourselves, we live for the sake of the next generation... What are you willing to do so that the next generation will come to know and love Jesus?

During these difficult times it is more important than ever to for all the generations to work together to share the load, to share the faith, so that the next generations will come to know and love Jesus.

Simeon held Baby Jesus in his hands. When we are able to safely gather for Holy Communion, when we partake of Holy Communion at home, we are holding Jesus in our hands. When we read the Bible and hear the good news, we are holding Jesus, the Word of God, in our hands. Martin Luther said that the Bible was the cradle that held Christ. When we care for the least, the lost or the littlest ones we are holding Christ himself.

These are challenging days. This pandemic and all the other challenges we faced in this country this year have been very difficult. But there is hope. God's got us. God is holding US! God came down to earth as a baby to give us hope. Let us share that hope with the next generation. AMEN

Luke 2:22-40

22 **When the time came** for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord 23 (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), 24 and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, **looking forward to the consolation of Israel**, and the **Holy Spirit** rested on him. 26 It had been revealed to him by the **Holy Spirit** that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. 27 Guided by the **Spirit**, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, 28 Simeon took him in his arms **and praised God, saying**, 29 *"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; 30 **for my eyes have seen your salvation**, 31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, 32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."* 33 And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34 Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, *"This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35 so that*

the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” 36

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, 37 then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 38 At that moment she came, *and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.* 39 When they had **finished everything required by the law of the Lord**, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40 The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

10 I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations. ¹ For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch. ² The nations shall see your vindication, and all the kings your glory; and you shall be called by a new name that the mouth of the Lord will give. ³ You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of the Lord, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Psalm 148

1 Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord from the heavens; praise him in the heights! ² Praise him, all his angels; praise him, all his host! ³ Praise him, sun and moon; praise him, all you shining stars! ⁴ Praise him, you highest heavens, and you waters above the heavens! ⁵ Let them praise the name of the Lord, for he commanded and they were created. ⁶ He established them forever and ever; he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed. ⁷ Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps, ⁸ fire and hail, snow and frost, stormy wind fulfilling his command! ⁹ Mountains and all hills, fruit trees and all cedars! ¹⁰ Wild animals and all cattle, creeping things and flying birds! ¹¹ Kings of the earth and all peoples, princes and all rulers of the earth! ¹² Young men and women alike, old and young together! ¹³ Let them praise the name of the Lord, for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven. ¹⁴ He has raised up a horn for his people, praise for all his faithful, for the people of Israel who are close to him. Praise the Lord!

Galatians 4:4-7

Christmas 1 Sing all the baby Jesus songs

Entrance Hymn O come all ye faithful or Joy to the World or Hark the Herald Angels Sing

Song of Praise #276 *Infant Holy Infant Lowly*

Children's Song *Away In The Manger* before the children's sermon

Gospel Acclamation: #510 *WORD OF GOD, COME DOWN ON EARTH*

Song after the Sermon *NOW THAT I HELD HIM*—Solo Randy

Song during communion---*WHAT FEAST OF LOVE #487 OR WHAT CHILD IS THIS?*

Sending Song-*GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN*

NOW THAT I'VE HELD HIM, by Michael Card

An old man in the temple
Waiting in the court
Waiting for the answer to a promise
And all at once he sees them
In the morning sunshine
A couple come and carry in a baby
Now that I've held Him in my arms
My life can come to an end
Let Your servant now depart in peace
I've seen Your salvation
He's the Light of the gentiles
And the glory of His people Israel
Mary and the baby come
And in her hand five shekels
The price to redeem her baby boy
The baby softly cooing
Nestled in her arms
Simeon takes the boy and starts to sing
Now that I've held Him in my arms
My life can come to an end
Let Your servant now depart in peace
Cause I've seen Your salvation
He's the Light of the gentiles
And the glory of His people Israel
Now's the time to take Him in your arms
Your life will never come to an end
He's the only way that you'll find peace
He'll give you salvation
He's the Light of the gentiles
And the glory of His people Israel