

"The Hope of Simeon"
Leviticus 12:1-8; Luke 2:22-33
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It was the early 1980s and waves of joblessness and crime were sweeping over working-class areas of New York City. In Black neighborhoods, the Police Department--still overwhelmingly white--had become an occupying force, deepening the misery and the injustice. Inside a Brooklyn church, the Rev. Herbert Daughtry, a long-time veteran of the civil rights movement, was recruiting young Black New Yorkers to organize Brooklyn's struggling communities as part of the National Black United Front, a Black empowerment group. Spotting Eric Leroy Adams--then a local college student—he thought he saw something special in the young man. Looking straight at him, he told him directly that it was time for him to join the New York Police Department, that the Black community NEEDED someone to make change from the inside. “You got to be out of your mind,” Adams recalls telling the minister. The LAST thing in the world he ever wanted was to be a POLICEMAN!

However, that chance encounter with Rev. Daughtry turned out to be one of THE GREAT DEFINING MOMENTS in Eric Adams' life. Not long afterwards, he DID join the N.Y.P.D. and then went on to serve 22 years with the force. He co-founded 100 Blacks in Law Enforcement Who Care, a group that protested police brutality. He also served as president of the Grand Council of Guardians, a statewide group of Black law enforcement officials. When contacted by phone, Rev. Daughtry, now 90 years old, said that Eric Adams stood out. “It was a tough time and he was rather precocious. He didn't just want a job. He was concerned about the lack of progress, the gang violence, the addiction.” As of midnight yesterday, that SAME Eric Adams, now 61, was duly sworn in as the 110th Mayor of New York City and the vision that Rev. Daughtry had for him so many years ago was finally realized. See now what can happen when God gives you a special revelation about someone!

Well our New Testament lesson for this morning contains the account of an event very SIMILAR to the one that occurred to a young Eric Adams almost forty years ago, indicating that God STILL works in mysterious ways TODAY even as God did more than two thousand years ago. Eight days after Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary had him circumcised as was required by Jewish religious law. Then in accordance with the law of purification, she had to remain in her lodging for over a month where she could not touch any holy objects. When the days of her purification were fulfilled, she and Joseph then traveled from Bethlehem to Jerusalem where they headed straightway to the Temple to present the required sacrifice. The law ACTUALLY called for giving a lamb, but it permitted the less costly offering of two doves or pigeons for those who could not afford the lamb. That Joseph and Mary offered up two doves instead indicated their lower economic status, that they belonged to the class of Israel's “pious poor.”

Once the doves were sacrificed, the young couple prepared to present their child to God, as the first-born male represented the first-fruit of his parents' relationship and thus belonged to the Lord. While Joseph and Mary were standing in line with the infant Jesus in her arms, an old

resident of Jerusalem by the name of Simeon unexpectedly came up to them. We are not told anything about him other than that he was "just and devout," that he watched and waited for the restoration of the Israel, and that the "Holy Spirit was upon him." MOST importantly, Simeon had received from God a "promise" that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah with his own eyes. Gazing upon the face of this small month-old baby in his mother's arms, he finally beheld what he had waited his whole life to see- the long-awaited deliverer of Israel. After years of peering into the faces of young men and old men, he catches a glimpse of a small infant and recognizes in ITS face the mark of greatness. But if there was glory in that baby's face, there was also a mark of tragedy upon it. This child would become a sign spoken against; a sword piercing his mother's heart; a prophecy ultimately fulfilled at Calvary. Yet, as dark and terrible as that shadow was, he ALSO saw how it would bring salvation and light- to not only the JEWS, but to the ENTIRE WORLD. Simeon had been waiting his whole life for the fulfillment of Israel's hopes, for the accomplishment of God's promises before he died, and NOW God was honoring his word.

Now let's put on our REALITY glasses and ask ourselves what it was that REASON and COMMONSENSE saw that day. After all, the one he was convinced would become ISRAEL'S DELIVERER and HUMANITY'S REDEEMER was really nothing more than a tiny infant in his arms; a powerless, speechless baby unable to yet change or feed itself. It would be YEARS before that child would be old enough to leave his mark on the world, that is, if he was lucky enough to even LIVE that long. You see, back then, the infant mortality rate was abysmally high and average life expectancy was around 35 years of age. Right around the time he'd be delivering his first sermon, Simeon would ALREADY be long dead, as would all the OTHERS who had made their way to that manger scene to worship him. Meanwhile, nothing would have changed- Herod would still be on the throne and Caesar still expanding his vast empire. The reality was that whatever salvation this child represented was STILL nothing but an incipient PROMISE, a far-off HOPE that may or MAY NOT even come to fruition.

Simeon, on the other hand, happened to have his FAITH glasses on and thus he was able to see what reason and commonsense NEVER could. His devotion lay in nothing more slender, nothing more tenuous than a single "promise," a simple word of hope he had received years before and one he refused to give up on- AND THAT WAS ALL. He fervently believed that God would restore both the Jews and the Gentile nations and bring them all under his rulership. He believed the prophets when they foretold the day that God would send a "Deliverer." This "Messiah" would not only break the bondage of Rome suffered by the Jews, but all chains EVERYWHERE. God's peace would fill the earth driving all hatred and suspicion and war from off its face- he clung to this hope with an unyielding passion and refused to let it go. He had the faith to believe that the One who would spark a revolution of love would come in his own lifetime, and that he would SEE that individual with his own two eyes. And so for forty, fifty, possibly even sixty years he lived in fervent anticipation of this event. Every day became a new opportunity to meet more people and to peer into more faces- with nothing more than a SIMPLE PROMISE to inspire him by.

Church, like Simeon, we TOO have been on a mission with little more than a PROMISE to go on- a two thousand year-old word of hope concentrated in a person whom some modern-

day scholars don't even think existed or at least doubt the very words that have been attributed to him. When I first became serious about my Christian faith close to half a century ago now, I gave up any dreams I might have had to become a writer or a journalist to pursue what seemed a completely insane idea to most of my friends- the ministry. I found myself transferring from a large, prestigious university where I had many friends and very few constraints to a small, conservative Bible college where one didn't "smoke or drink or chew, or go with girls that do." I went from fraternity parties and dreams of much future success to a NEW life dominated by Bible studies and prayer meetings and various forms of evangelistic outreach. I then spent four years in seminary taking classes, writing papers, and preparing to pass our denomination's grueling Standard Ordination Exams. This was followed by six MORE years in semi-rural Pennsylvania where during that period I remained the lowest paid full-time minister in the entire presbytery. From there I returned to New Jersey to pursue a doctorate- not to become a professional academic or just to have additional letters before and after my name, but to equip myself for becoming a BETTER minister. For a decade, I lived in some of the roughest neighborhoods in America, even pastoring predominately Black churches at a FRACTION of the salary that others with far less training and education were making to help me better realize that dream I had received years before.

Well decades later, I'm able to look back and say that this journey--one which has taken me all throughout this great country we live in, has FAR EXCEEDED any expectations I may have had about my life. Like many other ministers, I have often felt like a modern-day Abraham, as one who left behind his homeland to follow a call without any guarantee or clear understanding as to what or even WHERE that final goal or destination would be. I can assure you that it has not always been the most PLEASANT of trips and there have been times when I questioned whether I had even been wise to undertake it in the FIRST place. Regardless, I can look back over it all and appreciate what a great adventure it has been- one I would gladly do all over AGAIN in spite of the years of loneliness, hardship and sacrifice it often entailed. As a dear friend of mine--a Princeton/Cornell-educated surgeon who became a medical missionary to the poorest of the poor in rural India for more than forty years--once said to me:

"David, I haven't a single regret for any of the decisions I've made over the years. Sure, I could have built up a practice here in the States and retired a very wealthy man, but as a member of God's kingdom, you don't measure wealth by the world's standards, but by GOD'S. I'm now retired, live comfortably on a small pension, have my wife, my family, my health, and my church to thank God for, along with some of the most wonderful memories anyone could possibly have. On the contrary, I would say that I'm pretty RICH!"

Friends, all of us who claim to be Christian and thus members of Christ's Body, his Church, have staked our lives on nothing MORE SLENDER or MORE TENUOUS than a single promise made many years ago, one which we continue to read in our Bible, hear preached from the pulpit, and confess along with the rest of God's saints. But this is no ORDINARY promise but one we believe has come from GOD; a vow that was first sworn to Abraham and then reaffirmed again and again- with Moses and David and Jeremiah and others. Like them, we TOO have our "FAITH GLASSES" on, "walking by faith and not by sight" as the scriptures say. The truth is that none of us has EVER seen God face-to-face; none of us has EVER heard God's

voice with our ears. Yet we believe that we are God's children and that he makes our heart his home- not because we FEEL God in us, but because it has been PROMISED to all who trust him. We believe Jesus was the Son of God, the Messiah, not because we have PROOF of it- there can BE no such proof, but because, like Simeon, we believe the PROMISE. We believe that his death and resurrection has cleansed us from sin and guilt, not because we have AUDIBLY HEARD the words, "You are forgiven!" but because it's part of God's PROMISE to us. We believe that when we die, eternal life AWAITS US as our inheritance. And WHY? Because we have been PROMISED that. We believe that Christ will RETURN AGAIN and INAUGURATE a new heaven and a new earth- WHY? Because it is the CONSUMMATION of that same promise. Although we have already waited two thousand years and may STILL have to wait ANOTHER two thousand years for its fulfillment, we believe it ALL THE SAME because God has PROMISED it to all those who love and seek him. Let people call us foolish or idealistic or naive or even a bunch of dreamers- no doubt Simeon was called such. But we know that that dream, that promise is an even GREATER reality- one to be more trusted and relied upon than all the facts and historical truths that can ever confront us.

Simeon lived during a time of great hopelessness amidst much political division, a time that was little different from our OWN. The Temple and its priesthood had come to control every aspect of Jewish daily life. In their mindless pursuit of profit, the priests were allowing commerce to be openly conducted in their holy Temple and selling their most important religious offices to the highest bidders. Outraged by what he saw, Jesus began overturning their tables and throwing the money changers out, exclaiming, "Do not turn my father's house into a place of business!" Meanwhile, the tax collectors, religious leaders, and politicians collaborated with their Roman oppressors, for their very livelihood and existence were dependent upon the support of the Romans over and against their own people. Most terrifying of ALL was the growing despair they felt that their God had finally forsaken or given up on them after so many centuries of infidelity and willful disobedience. Nonetheless, Simeon PERSISTED in faith and God REWARDED his faithfulness by making him among the first witnesses of the Messiah.

Honestly speaking, the PRESENT time we live in seems eerily similar. Though since the time of Jesus, the characters are different and the circumstances greatly changed, there's still a palpable sense of fear and despair felt EVERYWHERE you go. The past year began with an attack on the Capitol Building and the very foundations of our democracy. Now, twelve months later, we are confronting the resurgence of an even MORE infectious form of Covid called "omicron" in a nation more divided than any time since the Civil War. A recent survey indicated that more than half of Americans—53%--considered 2021 to be the WORST year of their life while the results of another survey released this past Friday shows that 70% or 7 out of 10 persons say they are even MORE fearful about the coming NEW year than were with the old.

Regardless how bad the world Simeon inhabited was, his focus remained resolute, not on the COUNTRY'S DETERIORATING CONDITION or its DECLINING MOOD but on that WORD OF HOPE which GOD had promised him. He looked beyond how Israel had ALREADY waited 1700 years since the promise was first given to Abraham; he looked past all the evidence that his people were more oppressed than ever; he ignored the fact that he had been watching and waiting for the majority of his life without any appearance of the Messiah and

INSTEAD focused on what was to him an EVEN GREATER reality, one rooted in a promise God had given him many years before. He had been told that he would not die before he had first beheld the face of God's Messiah, of Israel's great Deliverer. That would be the sign for him that the redemption of humankind was soon to follow. However, while he had to have been surprised that that face belonged, NOT to one of Israel's greatest kings, NOT to one of her most famous generals, and NOT to one of her wisest rabbis, but to a small, thumb-sucking infant, the child of a poor and unremarkable couple, he ALSO remembered, as God had once told Isaiah, "My thoughts are not your thoughts and my ways are not your ways"

If there was one truth that Simeon treasured above ALL OTHERS, it was that God always honors his promise, that God can be trusted to remain true to his word every time! It may not always be answered in the way we'd like or according to OUR timetable, but we can be confident that if God says something, it will be done. In the same way that Simeon WOULD one day see the long-promised Messiah for himself, REGARDLESS of how many years it would take, so can WE trust God's word of promise TO US. And WHAT is that promise? We find it at the conclusion of the Great Commission Jesus gave to his followers, an announcement that becomes his concluding words in the Gospel of Matthew: "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the ends of the age!" Here was Christ reaffirming what HE had learned in his OWN relationship to God, what the PROPHETS had never stopped iterating throughout the course of Israel's long history, and what ordinary Christians like YOU AND ME have discovered in OUR personal walk with him: "I the Lord your God love you with an everlasting love, and nothing—NO NOTHING!—will ever separate you from either my presence or my love! Despite what questions may enter your mind or fears intrude upon your heart, we will deal with that together. Just be confident of this one thing, that you will never be alone for I am with you ALWAYS—even till the end of time!"

Friends, THIS remains God's word to us- a promise to keep treasured in our hearts. The fact is that unless your name is Nostradamus, NOBODY knows what this new year will bring, whether the news FOR ANY of us will be "good" or "bad." What we DO know is that, like Simeon, we will not become fixated or overly-concerned about events which lie beyond our control. Instead, we shall remain focused upon that which ALONE is eternal and unchangeable- God's pledge to us that he will walk beside us wherever we journey and provide us the inner strength we need to overcome whatever it is life may hand us; that he will equip us from out of the abundance of his OWN resources so that we can stand tall in that day and surmount whatever challenges come our way. Just as God led his people--the Israelites--through the desert and brought them safely into the Promised Land, so he is no less able to do the same FOR US. He has assured us that though the mountains crumble and the hills turn to dust, though the skies turn black and the rivers dry up, our God will never abandon us, that NOT EVEN DEATH can separate us from him. However, we must HOLD tightly to this promise and never let go of it- HIS promise that he will LEAD us, he will GUIDE us, he will PROVIDE for us, he will REFINE us, always giving us whatever we NEED and not just what we WANT. For even as God was faithful in sending his Son into the world, and just as he was faithful in allowing his servant Simeon to behold his face, God will likewise be faithful in accomplishing all he has promised TO US- and of THAT we can be certain! Amen and amen.