

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“A Crown of Beauty”
Thomas G. Speers, III
Christmas 1-December 31, 2017

Lessons: Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Luke 2:22-40.

We have some new friends here in Wilmington we are just getting to know. We had them for dinner early in the fall. In this family, there are two girls and one very young boy named Xavier. He’s really still an infant, about a year old, old enough to be walking, or more accurately running and much of our evening involved watching his older sister attempt to corral him as he ventured off at great speed in new directions. He had an extraordinary reservoir of energy. After dinner, after he’d had the chance to use up some of that energy, I had the great joy of picking up this little guy, who slowly relaxed in my arms and then fell asleep on my shoulder, with his tiny fingers reaching around my neck. There is nothing quite like holding a little child.

James Baldwin writes: “A newborn baby is an extraordinary event; and I have never seen two babies who looked exactly alike. Here is the breathing miracle who could not live an instant without you, with a skull more fragile than an egg, a miracle of eyes, legs, toenails and lungs.”¹

In this Christmas season, we celebrate the miracle of the Christ Child and the miracle of every child. The rest of the world may have moved on, but for these twelve days, we in the church continue to celebrate God’s presence with us in that little baby. In the best of worlds, Barbara Brown Taylor points out, a baby is evidence of a love affair that has taken place and that certainly is the case with this baby. God has loved humankind since the moment God thought us up, but the relationship has always been a rocky one. In the Christ child God says: “From now on you do not have to come to where I am, however much I would like you to. I am so crazy in love with you that I will come all the way to where you are, to be flesh of your flesh, bone of your bone. I will do it all, and all you have to do is believe me--that I love you the way you are, love you enough to become one of you, and that I love you to death.”²

In the miracle that is the Christ child, God comes to us where we are. This is the same God who proclaims through Isaiah today: I will give you a new name. In a world and a year that has been too full of divisiveness and division, of a failure to listen to and learn from and with each other, God says, I will give you a new name. Doesn’t that sound good? We don’t have to keep on going the way we are going, instead, “You will be a crown of beauty in God’s hand.” That is part of God’s new name. The next time you run into someone on the other side of the political spectrum, or the other side of any spectrum, consider that they may be a crown of beauty in God’s hand and see if perhaps you can learn something from them.

Simeon was righteous and devout and looked forward to the consolation of Israel. He was there in the temple when Mary and Joseph brought the child Jesus to present him in the temple as was their custom. Taking the “miracle of eyes, legs, toenails and lungs” into his arms, Simeon was able to proclaim: “God, you can now release your servant; release me in peace as you promised. With my own eyes I’ve seen your salvation; it’s now out in the open for everyone to see: A God-revealing light to the non-Jewish nations, and of glory for your people Israel.”³ Holding that baby changed Simeon’s

¹ James Baldwin, *No Name in the Street*, in *The Living Pulpit*, Vol. 4, #4, October-December 1995 © The Living Pulpit, Inc.

² Barbara Brown Taylor, *Decked Out in Flesh*, in *Mixed Blessings*, Cowley Publications. © 1986.

³ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message*. NAV Press. © 1993.

world.

In a similar way, Anna, a prophet, described as being of a great age at eighty-four (some people here might refer to her as a young woman). Day and night, she prayed at the temple, and when she saw the child, she too rejoiced and spoke to everyone around about that child.

It is amazing how the world is exactly the same and also entirely different when you hold a baby in your arms. John Stendahl suggests that Anna and Simeon offer a paradigm of our own experience. “What we have is hardly more than they had. We have the scriptures that school us in hope and attentiveness. We have stories and covenants and signs. We have moments, or the memory of moments, when the tender compassion of our God has come close enough to see and feel. We have something like the shepherds would have had, recalling all their lives a night of mysterious glory, or like what the magi brought back to their homelands, a vision of a different kind of king and kingdom. Their eyes had seen the glory of Israel, the light for the nations.

“We have that as well, though for us the world has resumed its accustomed form and, in the light of day, seems largely unsaved and unchanged.”⁴

It would be years after this encounter in the Temple that Jesus would begin his ministry. Anna and Simeon were likely gone, along with many of the shepherds, and likely the magi too. They didn’t get to see the miracles, the feeding of the five thousand, the speaking with authority, the healing, the compassion; they only held the baby and that was enough. “They have a faith that leans forward into the promises of God, even when they have no idea how those promises will be fulfilled.”⁵

Like Anna and Simeon, we know about God’s promises and we don’t know how they will be fulfilled. We may not be here when they are fulfilled, but we can prepare the way; we can lean forward into God’s promises. Right here, we worship in a building made possible because people who lived before we were born, leaned into God’s promises and left us our good heritage. We have discovered the Christ child, because they helped him to be born anew in their time in this place.

Brother David Vryhof writes about Meister Eckhart, the 13th century German theologian and mystic who taught us that the real meaning of Christmas is not only that God’s son was born in a stable, but that Christ is born in us. “*Here in time we celebrate the eternal birth that God the Father bore and still bears constantly in eternity, and which is also now born in time, in human nature. St. Augustine says that this birth is happening continually. We should ask ourselves: If it doesn’t happen in me, what good is that birth after all? What ultimately matters is that God’s birth should happen in me.*

“What good is it, Meister Eckhart asks, that Christ was born in a stable in Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago if he is not also born in me?

“*How can this be?* we say with Mary. How is Christ to be born in me?

“The answer is the same, *The Holy Spirit will come upon you. It is God himself who will accomplish this in you.* You have only to be, like Mary, quiet, open-hearted and receptive to the Spirit at work within you. Say with her, *Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*”

How can we cultivate a spirit of quiet receptivity like Mary’s? Vryhof suggests three ways:

“*By opening our hearts to wonder.* It is remarkable that the world is, that we are here, that we can experience it. Open your eyes to see it, your ears to hear it, your hands to touch it – and be amazed! Everyday!

By cultivating a spirit of gratitude. Give thanks for the world, for the beauty of the earth, for the wonder of human existence, for the gift of life. Give thanks for each person you know, those you love

⁴ John Stendahl, Holding Promise: Luke 2:22-40, in The Christian Century, December 4, 2002 © 2002.

⁵ Thomas G. Long, Sunday, December 28, 2014: Luke 2:22-40 in The Christian Century, December 16, 2014. © 2014.

and those you find difficult to love. Open your eyes to the beauty and wonder of every person – and be thankful.

By opening our hearts to compassion. An open heart feels the suffering and pain of the world and responds to it. Compassion and a passion for justice go together. “The purpose of the Christian life,” writes Marcus Borg, “is to become more and more compassionate beings.”

“*We are all meant to be mothers of God...*,” wrote Meister Eckhart, “*for God is always needing to be born.*” Open your hearts and let him be born in you.”⁶

For all those who like Anna and Simeon have come to God’s house to pray, look for signs of the Christ being born anew in our midst, leaning into God’s promises and proclaiming our new name, celebrating God’s new reality that we are crowns of beauty in God’s hands.

Let us pray: Living God, moved by the coming of Christ to our lives, we seek to be your people. Show us again who we are. Give us your new name. Help us to live in faithful covenant with you and with one another. Let the peace of Christ guide us, and let Christ’s message in all its richness live in our hearts that we may praise you without ceasing. Amen.

⁶ Br. David Vryhof, Mothers of God, in Society of St. John the Evangelist. www.ssje.org. December 20, 2012.