

THE UNEXPECTED WITNESSES

LUKE 2:21-40

INTRO: *Hope is a word that can be used in many different ways. On a long, very rough crossing of the Atlantic Ocean, a seasick passenger was leaning over the rail of the ship turning several shades of green. A steward tried to cheer him up by saying, "Don't be discouraged, sir. No one's ever died of seasickness yet." The man looked at him with sad, nauseous eyes and replied, "Don't say that! It's only the hope of dying that's kept me alive this long!" When Douglas MacArthur, the great World War 2 general, retired from the military, he addressed a joint session of Congress. In that memorable speech, he made a very sad comment. "I am closing 52 years of military service. When I joined the Army, even before the turn of the century, it was the fulfillment of all my boyish hopes and dreams. The world has turned over many times since I took the oath on the plains of West Point and the hopes and dreams have long since vanished."*

You can use the word "hope" to refer to things that are both superficial and serious. "I hope I get to work on time. I hope the dentist doesn't find a cavity. I hope I get invited to the party." All superficial matters. "I hope my marriage survives. I hope they don't find cancer. I hope he becomes a follower of Jesus." All serious matters. Someone has observed that your deepest hopes reveal what's really important to you. What do you long for in life? What are your dreams? What are the deepest desires of your heart? On what or in whom do you depend for the fulfillment of your hopes or dreams? God, yourself, others, luck, hard work? Everyone hopes. But not all hopes are created equal. The validity of your hopes and dreams are only as good as the foundations on which they're built. What are the foundations of your hopes and mine?

Today, I invite you to consider two final witnesses to the wonder of Jesus' birth. We've considered Joseph, the forgotten witness; the angels, the supernatural witnesses and Herod and the wise men, the unusual witnesses. You might call Simeon and Anna the unexpected witnesses to the Incarnation. They have a lot to teach us about hope. Hope is a very real and important part of the Christian experience. It's also a very significant part of the Christmas story. Let's read about them. **READ, p. 1015.** Simeon and Anna's hope was built on God and God alone. I'm challenged by the quality and depth of hope that I see in their lives. I see in Simeon and Anna that...

A HOPE BUILT ON GOD PERSEVERES.

The Jewish people of Jesus' day knew a great deal about hope. The great prophets of the Old Testament – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel – had proclaimed a profound hope that God would do something miraculous on behalf of His people. The Jews of Jesus' day hoped that the Messiah would come. The majority hoped that he'd be a great political leader who would save them from their enemies – particularly the hated Romans. They wanted to see the nation of Israel free, independent and powerful. Other Jews, however, didn't share those

dreams of political power and material prosperity. They longed and hoped for something called the Kingdom of God. They hoped for a Messiah who would bring about a return of the Jewish people to God. Their lives were marked by quiet watchfulness and prayer. That describes both Simeon and Anna. Simeon "...was eagerly waiting for the Messiah to come and rescue Israel. The Holy Spirit was upon him." (Luke 2:25 NLT) Anna "...talked about the child to everyone who had been waiting expectantly for God to rescue Jerusalem." (Luke 2:38 NLT) Waiting... looking forward to – that's the language of hope.

Simeon and Anna had a hope that persevered. All we know about them is found here in Luke 2. Simeon is described as a godly man... probably elderly... perhaps a priest serving in the Temple. He was a student of the Old Testament. The passages that referred to this mysterious Person – the Messiah – who would bring in the Kingdom of God fascinated him. You learn something unique about Simeon here. The Holy Spirit had in some way revealed to Simeon that he wouldn't die until he had personally witnessed the Messiah with his own two eyes. I'm convinced Simeon had waited many long years to have this promise fulfilled. Simeon was consumed with hope – a hope built on God.

When you pray the Lord's Prayer, you pray that the Kingdom of God will come. Do you know what that means? Do you really hope for God's Kingdom to come? I find that I hope and long for pretty shallow, superficial things most of the time. How about you? The truth is that much of the time we never get around to hoping for what matters. The underlying, pervasive, persistent hope in Simeon's life was to see the Kingdom of God break into the world like the light of the sun breaking into the darkness of night at dawn. Simeon wanted to see God act and move and he wanted to be a part of that. He wanted to see God put things right. He wanted to see God change people's hearts. Above all, what Simeon longed for was God Himself and just more and more of God.

Do you long for God? Do you want God's Kingdom to come? Do you hope – like Simeon hoped – that other people will discover Jesus and make Him the King of their lives as you have done? Simeon was consumed with hope and persevered in that hope. When Jesus entered this world some 2000 Christmases ago, God's Kingdom took a major step forward. But there's something still hidden and not fully present yet about God's Kingdom. There's coming a day when the Kingdom of God will come with such irresistible force, such incredible power, such mind-blowing majesty that all any of us will be able to do is just weep in amazement. That's what Simeon hoped for. And because it was a hope about God and built on God, it was a hope that persevered.

Then there was Anna. She shared Simeon's hope despite the cruel fact of great sorrow in her own life. She'd been widowed at an early age and had spent most of her life as a single woman. In Jesus' day, a childless widow who never remarried faced both financial poverty and social stigma. But Anna hadn't become bitter, hostile or hard towards God, other people or life itself. Quite the

reverse. She drew closer to God as a result of the losses in her life. As a pastor, I've seen sorrow or great loss have one of two effects on people. It drives some people to God and it drives other people away from God. Tough experiences in life either create hope or despair. Hard times have a way of revealing what you really think about God. When you see bitterness and resentment towards God, you can be sure that a struggling person has concluded that God is unfair or unjust. When you still see trust in God and love for God, you can quite sure that a struggling person believes God is his or her only hope. Anna's deepest hopes were wrapped up in God – just like Simeon. Nothing that life had thrown her way could rob her of her deepest longing, because her deepest longing was for God Himself. She had a hope that persevered.

Here's the kind of thing that happens when your ultimate hope is in God, in the things of God or the Kingdom of God. You see quite clearly your own failures and weaknesses, but you don't despair or give up because it's not about you. You go through hard times and difficult circumstances aplenty, but you don't give up on God. You hold on to the fact that Jesus came into this world. He died and rose again. You put your ultimate hope for both the present and the future in God alone. When your hope is in God, you no longer see just this world. You can see beyond this world and this life and see the face of God. When your hope is built on God, you no longer see just sin, sadness and heartache. You also perceive clearly the triumph of God's grace and love in your life, in the lives of others and ultimately in the world itself. You can have a hope built on God. You can have a hope that perseveres next year and every year.

ILLUS: *Research was done on some rats years ago that produced some unexpected insights into hope. When rats were placed into a jar of water they quickly have up swimming and drowned. But when a rat was rescued several times by removing it from the jar, it apparently saw enough hope in the situation and so it would tread water for hours. I'm not suggesting you're a rat. Nor am I saying that God experiments on you. But here's a thought. Shouldn't you as a follower of Jesus be able to tread life's rough waters longer and further simply because you've already been rescued by God's power in your life? You already know God will not let you drown in life's stormy seas. You know you serve a good, gracious and great Father. Like Simeon and Anna, you too can have a hope that perseveres because it's built on God. I see in Simeon and Anna that...*

A HOPE BUILT ON GOD INSPIRES.

What is inspiration? It means to give something or someone life! The Bible says, "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead." (1 Pt 1:3 NIV) What kind of hope? A living hope! Do you find putting your hope in God inspiring today? You should! That hope is built on a God who chose to become a little, defenseless and dependent baby... who then walked this earth for some 33 years making people whole and

speaking God's truth... who then died on a cross for you... who then rose from the dead and ascended back to Heaven... who will one day return in great power. That very same God lives in you through the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. The Bible says, "...And the mystery is that Christ lives in you, and he is your hope of sharing in God's glory." (Col 1:27 CEV)

What makes the message of Christmas so inspiring? Santa and his reindeer? Peace on earth... white Christmases... jingle bells? No, it's a hope in God that inspires you! The message of Christmas is that God loves you. God cares about you. God has provided a way of salvation to you. God makes life's sorrows bearable. God forgives your sin when you confess it. God gives guidance. God gives you the ability to share His love with others. God holds your future secure. Hope that is built on God is inspiring – it gives life! What sustained Simeon and Anna through those long years of waiting? Wasn't it the confident expectation that God was going to come through in the end? Anna was very old but she never gave up hope. Do you hear the inspiration in Simeon's hope? He says, "Lord, I am your servant, and now I can die in peace, because you have kept your promise to me. With my own eyes I have seen what you have done to save your people." (Luke 2:29-30 CEV)

Maybe I'm reading between the lines, but it sounds to me like Simeon believed in Heaven. If Heaven is a myth, then loving and knowing God is a waste of time. If eternal life is a fable, then why not just be selfish and live for yourself? If human beings really don't spend eternity either blessed or damned, why ask God for opportunities to share the good news about what He's done through Jesus with other people? If God's Kingdom will not come one day in great power and incredible glory, why work against racism, or try to stop the killing of unborn children, or feed the hungry or support those trying to end disease, poverty or human trafficking. Why be bothered about anything in the present if there is no future? The whole Christian life is built on hope. Godly hope never asks you to withdraw from other people or life's problems. Instead, it inspires you to get out there and make a positive difference in Jesus' Name –bring a little of Heaven's glory into life's often painful and seemingly hopeless situations. Its hope built on God and in God that gives you the energy for the long journey of life. Only godly hope makes life meaningful and truly enjoyable. Hope built on God inspires.

ILLUS: *David Watson was an accomplished leader, author and pastor of one of England's great churches. He died of cancer at the age of 50. One memorial service in his honor was held at St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Over 2,000 people, including the Archbishop of Canterbury – the leader of the Church of England – and many other notable people filled every available seat. Many people had to stand. A great servant of Jesus had died and people from all across the city from many different races and stations in life had gathered. The Church of England has a lot of pomp and pageantry in its worship services. Part of that is something they call festal shouts which are just great statements about God that they literally shout out as part of the worship experience. As the*

memorial service began, the congregation was reminded of David Watson's favorite festal shout: "Our God reigns." Suddenly, the shout began in the back of that great cathedral and then swept across the rows of beautifully carved mahogany pews in a rising crescendo. "Our God reigns. Our God reigns. Our God reigns." Some who were there that day thought for sure that all of London could hear that thundering chorus. That's godly hope – that's God's people proclaiming the enduring truth – our God reigns. Inspiring! Finally, I see in Simeon and Anna that:

A HOPE BUILT ON GOD TRIUMPHS.

Because of what God has done in the past and what He's promised in the future, you can have a hope that triumphs in the present. You can still have godly hope in 2011 even though life is unfair. Each of us knows good people who suffer great tragedies in life. Children die of cancer. Marriages fall apart. People starve to death. Innocent people die of cholera in Haiti. Young soldiers die in Afghanistan. The abuse and mistreatment of human beings around the world staggers the imagination. Yet, as a follower of Jesus, God calls you to live out every day joyfully and hopefully. God doesn't want you just to exist for so many years. He wants you to live your life built on a hope that triumphs in life and over life because of all that Jesus has done.

Isn't that the message of Christmas? But you can only truly understand Christmas when you understand and accept what happened at Easter – the cross and the empty tomb. That's where you see God's triumph. That's where He created a future of absolute certainty, joy and blessing for you and me. Simeon could look at the baby Jesus and see God's triumph down the road. He said, "With my own eyes I have seen what you have done to save your people, and foreign nations will also see this. Your mighty power is a light for all nations, and it will bring honor to your people Israel." (Luke 2:30-32 CEV)

God's triumph is still to be fully realized. There's so much more to be hoped for! After all, the Bible says, "The world has now become the Kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he will reign forever and ever." (Rev 11:15 NLT) That hasn't happened fully yet. When will it? No one but God Himself knows. But we know Jesus is coming back. We know that there will be an end to sin, evil, war, disease, hate, and above all, death itself. God has said so and our hope is built on Him. There's nothing uncertain about your future, because God Himself knows and owns your future. How does the Bible put it? "And we believers also groan... for we long for our bodies to be released from sin and suffering. We, too, wait with eager hope for the day when God will give us our full rights as his adopted children, including the new bodies he has promised us. We were given this hope when we were saved. (If we already have something, we don't need to hope for it. But if we look forward to something we don't yet have, we must wait patiently and confidently.)" (Rom. 8:23-25 NLT) And triumphantly, too!

ILLUS: *During the 2008 presidential race, John McCain was asked by Time magazine to share his "personal journey of faith." McCain shared a powerful story of something that occurred while he was a prisoner of war in Vietnam. His captors would tie his arms behind his back and then loop the rope around his neck and ankles so that his head was pulled down between his knees. McCain was often left like that throughout the night. One night a guard came into his cell. He put his finger to his lips signaling for McCain to be quiet and then loosened his ropes to relieve his pain. The next morning, when the guard's shift ended, he returned and retightened the ropes, never saying a word to John McCain. A month or so later, on Christmas Day, McCain was standing in the dirt courtyard when he saw that same guard approach him. He walked up and stood silently next to McCain, not looking or smiling at him. Then he used his sandaled foot to draw a cross in the dirt. They stood wordlessly looking at the cross – John McCain and that North Vietnamese guard - remembering the true light of Christmas, even in the darkness of a Vietnamese prison camp.*

CONCL: Yes, there is a whole lot wrong with this world. And there may well be a whole lot that's wrong in your own personal world today. But there is hope. Not glitzy hope. Not shallow hope. Not hope dependent on people or yourself. There's the kind of hope that's symbolized in a manger, a cross and an empty tomb. That's real hope. That's the kind of hope that perseveres, the kind of hope that inspires and the kind of hope that triumphs. Simeon and Anna had that kind of hope. And you can have that hope as this year comes to an end and a new one begins on Saturday. It's the hope that's built on God.