

Where is our Hope on Christmas?

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Sermon on Luke 2:21-40

Some who know me know that I attended Luther College, a small liberal arts school in northeast Iowa. Over my four years there I had the honor to participate in the rich choral tradition of the school, and I found myself finishing my first semester freshman year rehearsing for the big Christmas concert, aptly named “Christmas at Luther.” This annual tradition shows off the six choirs of the school along with a full symphony orchestra, bell choir, and massive organ, over 650 college student participants in all. As a wide-eyed freshman we sang a piece called “Hope For Resolution” begins softly with a couple of verses of the traditional English carol, “Of the Father’s Love Begotten,” before adding in more voices singing a poem from the Zulu people of South Africa, *Thula Sizwe*. This song was dedicated to Nelson Mandela and Fredrick Wilhelm DeKlerk and their work to reconcile South Africa, and it recognizes the immense diversity of the nation, painting a hopeful portrait of a possible world that could peacefully coexist.

It is through that lens, the lens of reconciliation between peoples, that I read today’s scripture lesson. Here is this man Simeon, who has lived in Jerusalem and has waited decades upon decades for what has been promised to him: to see the reconciliation of Israel. Finally, with the energy of a 7 year old flying down the stairs on Christmas morning, he holds the Christ child and proclaims, Now dismiss your servant in peace, Oh Lord. “At last, God, you can finally take me. My eyes have seen your salvation.” Simeon has lived in waiting and hopeful expectation for years, and his hope has finally given way to great joy. Filled with the Holy Spirit, Simeon’s song continues with something that is earth-shattering. He proclaims while holding Jesus that it has been prepared in the presence of *all* peoples and that he is “a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.”

For context, Simeon’s speech is the last of three small “hymns” that appear in Luke’s birth story, the other two being Mary’s Magnificat while visiting Elizabeth and Zechariah’s Benedictus upon the birth of his son John. While all three of these praise God for remembering God’s covenant with Israel, this one is different. This one includes the Gentiles. This one includes “those other folks.”

Throughout the Gospel of Luke we see this recognition that the reign of God is not just for a select group, but something available to all. We see it first when the Angel appears to the shepherds, “Behold I bring good news of great joy *for all people*.” The Angel does not say “for some people” or “for Jewish people,” or “for the people who know me” but “for *all* people.” This is something revolutionary in the time of Jesus’ birth and during the writing of Luke’s Gospel and I argue that it is revolutionary in our era as well. One only has to check the latest headlines to see how often we draw lines of association in our world. We have been hardened and have developed an unwillingness to engage in conversations with others who are different, unwilling to challenge our own personal worldview and our preconceived notions.

I had the great privilege to visit South Africa as a month-long capstone trip my senior year at Luther where we travelled all over the country, including to the Zulu nation, to learn about how South Africa had adjusted to a post-Apartheid world and its lasting effects. How could a nation that had been so scarred and seemingly irreparably damaged come together again? How could there be any sense of unity? Mandela and de Klerk worked together to dismantle the devastating and oppressive Apartheid government and they oversaw the creation of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. This body oversaw a process of truth-telling and honesty; a government-sanctioned space for some people to share their heartache and frustration, and for others to confess and ask for forgiveness for their sins. This painful healing process was successful in restoring and reconciling the nation to one another, in part because it allowed for dialogue and for peoples' voices to be truly heard. People who had not previously been given the opportunity to talk were given a platform for their voices, and out of a uniform, monotonous world, a rich diverse group of voices were heard. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission succeeded because it promoted a sense of unity rather than uniformity.

How often do we want to bring people together, but accidentally seek for uniformity over unity? How often do we find ourselves wondering how much simpler life would be if we all had the same ideas about something? Too often in our world we end up hoping for uniformity in our world, where everything is exactly the same, rather than embracing the messy richness that comes from acknowledging difference and embracing *unity*. This year's confirmands know the value of unity over uniformity well, as it was the topic of discussion a few weeks ago. We talked about how we communicate and solve problems in the church, and we came to the realization that church and our broader world would be boring beyond measure if we all thought the exact same thing and agreed completely all the time. Diversity is essential for our world, and God acknowledges this. "Bring in more voices, give them equal standing in the rich tapestry of voices in the world."

When I sang "Hope for Resolution" during my freshman year of college, I remember how much I loved the piece and how that belted final crescendoed note reverberated through the hall, but I also remember wondering why on earth we were singing it during a Christmas concert. There are no shepherds, and no wisemen mentioned. Only Jesus Christ, the savior of the nations, the redeemer of our world. When we take away the shepherds and the wisemen and the donkeys and the presents on Christmas morning, we are left with something simple and pure.

Thousands of years ago, God revealed Godself to us on earth not to prove the existence of some otherworldly deity, but to show what our Lord God is like. God doesn't only want to invite one person or one group of people, rather God wants us all. In a paradox that seems so inconceivable it can only be true, our all-powerful, all-knowing God came to us as a weak, innocent, vulnerable human baby, embracing the beautiful, messy diversity that comes with being human. **Where is hope this Christmas?** Our hope is in a God who literally embodies our deepest fears, knows our every weakness and our every insecurity, and still beckons us together.

There is hope this Christmas. As we deck the halls and pour a glass of eggnog, we celebrate the joyful arrival of this infant child, both fully human and fully divine, born into a subjugated class of people, born to an unwed couple with so little money to their name that they couldn't even afford a proper sacrifice for the Son of God, the Healer of the Nations. There is hope this Christmas that God will move through us and we will be enveloped by the Holy Spirit just as Simeon and Anna and countless others were. There is hope that we will embrace the multitude of voices and stories that exist outside of ourselves and listen to God speaking through the beautiful tapestry of humanity all around us. There is hope that we will be reminded of the much larger story in which we have the privilege to play a small part. Despite everything else in the world, there is hope this Christmas because God is not done with us yet.