



Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. **AMEN**

This is a sermon written by our Bishop of the NW Synod of Wisconsin, Rev Dr. Laurie Skow-Anderson.

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 everything right by their baby.

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 to 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 to day 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 sometime 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 gives them a blessings 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 wonder 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. Bishop Laurie said that it struck her new this year, because a few months ago she held her newborn granddaughter in her arms. It is true that 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, to hold our children and grandkids. We all haven't been able to hold our own loved ones very often. Everyone is anxious and fearful about getting sick.

With the pandemic, I think it has been a real struggle for parents. Do I send my child to school, or do I keep them home to learn virtually. Just what is the right thing to do? What do parents 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 grandma 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 have struggled with the challenges of faith formation here at Christ the Servant. Difficult time for sure. Do we cancel Sunday school and confirmation or go zoom? Struggling to figure out what is best, we decided to take some time off at the height of the pandemic in Park Falls and then go back to in person meeting with social distancing and wearing masks. Guess I feel that faith is caught even more than it is taught. Hard to catch the teacher's faith on zoom or facetime on your cell phone. Plus, I think the children are zoomed out and then they zoom out with school on line. Sunday school on line was the last thing they needed. Yet, I am still concerned about our next generation hearing the story of 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, all 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? Above all, 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 partner with one of the confirmation or Sunday school students. Someone could take it on to host a cross generational faith story sharing night. Imagine, grandparents and grandkids telling each other their faith statements. At Holy Cross, where I did my internship to be an AIM, we did a wonderful program call PJ's and Prayers for the youngsters. There are many ideas that could be put to good use here at CTS.

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.

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 need to 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 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. I hope you will give some thought to what you might do to share your faith with the younger generations.

Simeon held Baby Jesus in his hands. We are blessed here at Christ the Servant that we are able to safely gather for Holy Communion. When we do so, 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.

Yes, folks, these are challenging days. This pandemic and all the other stuff 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**