“***Living On Hope***” by S. Finlan, at The First Church, Dec. 27, 2020

[**Luke 2:22-40**](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=51)

22When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. . .

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. 26It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. 27Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, 28Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,
29 “Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word;
30 for my eyes have seen your salvation,
31 which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
32 a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

33 And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. 34Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed 35so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

36 There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, 37then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. 38At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

39 When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

In this season filled with hope and joy, we have waited with anticipation. Many years ago, there were those who also waited, waited for the Messiah’s arrival, and then were honored with a visitation.

I look at these two saintly singers, Simeon and Anna, as people who lived on hope, “looking forward to the consolation of Israel” (2:25). The Holy Spirit revealed to Simeon that he would not die before seeing the Lord’s Messiah. Simeon meets Joseph and Mary at the Temple, and recognizes the baby Jesus as the child of promise. Raising the baby in his arms he cries “now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; my eyes have seen your salvation” (2:29–30). He foresees that this baby will grow up to save Gentiles and Jews alike: “a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel” (2:32). That’s some strong hope, meant for the whole human race!

The prophet Anna seems even more devoted, if possible. Even at age 84, “she never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day” (2:37). She recognizes the messianic child as well and begins praising God and talking “about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38). Simeon’s and Anna’s hopes are the highest hopes of the Jewish people. And their words announcing the importance of the baby remind me of the way that English aristocrats would be announced by a servant when they entered a room: “Joshua ben Joseph, Messiah and Deliverer.” In this case: announced and celebrated. There was an intense expectation among the Jewish people at this time. It tended to be nationalistically focused, but some Jews believed that the Messiah would also draw the Gentiles to worship the Lord, as we hear from Simeon.

This story illustrates how God honors the hopes of honest people who persist in their faith. They probably seemed to most people like harmless eccentrics hanging around the Temple all the time. But God saw the dignity of their hope, and found a way to honor it. Their hope was based on their faith that God’s promise, affirmed to them by the Holy Spirit, would come true in their lifetimes. They were honoring Jesus, but, in an important way, God was honoring *them* by giving them a chance to realize who this was who was brought to the Temple. For us, it is an example of how God wants our dreams to come true, if they are worthy dreams, and he did that for Simeon and Anna. And now they have forever become part of the story of the life of the God-man who incarnated here on this world, and wherever this story is told, they will be part of it. Like the magi before them, they showed honor and respect for the child of promise, and we respect them for that.

Now let us hear the message given to *us*, that we are loved by God, and that we are actually lovable. Let our hopes be borne up by our faith in God’s love as revealed by Jesus. Let your faith join the chorus of the faithful from Simeon and Anna down to the present day, people who have put their hope in this uniquely loving human being. He is the “image of God” (2 Cor 4:4) and the “Prince of Peace” (Isa 9:6). He is the embodiment of our hopes, and the promise of peace and joy. Yet he was approachable and humble. Once when someone called him “Good teacher,” he said “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone” (Luke 18:19). I wouldn’t want to handle this rigidly and make a doctrine out of it. Rather, it shows Jesus reverently referring everything to the Father, wanting to encourage in others the humble devotion to the Father that he himself practiced. And when we honor God, we may be honored in return, as Simeon and Anna are honored by us, as exemplars of faith. Let your hope be fulfilled. Let faith and love fill your hearts.

We have come through a lot this year. We have learned about the hardships of others, and we have had some of our own. We have learned that we can’t take health and safety for granted. Let us chalk it up to experience, and keep learning. Let us trust God to guide our learning. Let us grow in ethics, wisdom, and responsibility, as well as in faith. Make 2021 a year for loving and learning and joy.