

“A Baby Named Hope”

Luke 2:25-38

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.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Albuquerque, New Mexico police officer Ryan Holets was used to encountering situations like the one he found behind a convenience store on September 23 – a couple using heroine in public, in broad daylight. Just like us, he has heard a lot about the opioid epidemic in our country and it, unfortunately, fuels many of the calls he receives in his job. Frustrated to once again be facing this issue, he approached the man and woman he had spotted across the way. As he walked toward them, he noticed that the woman was pregnant...very pregnant. So, the closer he came to them, the angrier he became. Not just that they were using drugs in broad daylight, but that they were putting an unborn child in danger. The first words Holets uttered to the couple that day were, “You’re going to kill your baby.” After 10 minutes of trying to convince the couple not to use drugs, Ryan heard a phrase from the expectant

mother's lips that changed his heart and his attitude toward her. She mentioned that she hoped her child would be adopted into a good and safe home. Suddenly, Ryan got an idea and he offered to adopt Crystal Champ's baby. On the spot. And she accepted. There was the small issue of having to tell his wife what he had agreed to do, but Ryan and his wife, Rebecca, already parents to four children, had talked about adoption before and he knew she would be on board. Rebecca confirmed this when he phoned from his police cruiser saying, "God called us to do this." On October 12, 2017, a baby named Hope was born.

The stories we've heard from Scripture this Christmas – angelic announcements of pregnancies, heavenly dreams, a baby laid in a manger, a multitude of heavenly hosts singing praises to God with shepherds as the audience, a star that guides rulers from the east to the Christ child – are extraordinary, while the story before us today is rather ordinary. Mary and Joseph are doing what any Jewish parents of that day and time would do for their child. It is standard operating procedure as they fulfill the holy tasks expected of a new family. On the surface, it seems like an encounter that might even happen today in this very worship space – an older saint of the church taking a newly baptized child in the faith into his/her arms and offering a blessing for the child's future. But the proclamations and prophecies and blessings

found upon the lips of the two saints in this story from Luke's gospel are profound. Simeon and Anna find themselves face to face, as close as one can get – an infant in arms – to THE baby named Hope...the Christ child who is the hope of the world. And they respond accordingly.

Can you remember what it feels like to hold a baby? To rock a newborn? To receive an infant from its mother's arms? To embrace a child in love?

It isn't hard, but it takes a specific posture. It takes gentleness. It takes awareness of surroundings. One must use his or her own body to protect...to keep safe...to uphold the body of another. In my particular stage of life and in my job as a pastor, I get to hold babies on a semi-regular basis. And not just babies...newborn babies...fresh out of the womb. And, oh, what an experience it is. I challenge anyone to hold a newborn and not feel compelled to burst into song or prayer. You cradle that little body and you smell that sweet head and all you can do is thank God and imagine that child's future and pray for the blessing of the almighty over that little life.

In that ancient story of hope being born, when Luke tell us of Simeon taking the baby Jesus into his arms, the Greek wording literally means, "received the child into his bent arms". Simeon had that posture that isn't hard, but it is necessary. The great Catholic theologian and

priest, Raymond Brown, chooses to translate the phrase as “embraced” – “Simeon embraced the child and praised God”. Imagine that interaction for a moment – new parents walking into the temple in Jerusalem while another worshipper waits at the entrance with arms open, ready to cradle...ready to embrace...ready to receive the infant.

Ready to receive the infant. These are exactly the words that could be used to describe Ryan and Rebecca Holets. Over the holiday season, CNN has continued to follow the Holets family as they embrace and raise and nurture and baby Hope. They’ve documented how Hope is lovingly dressed in hand-me-down clothes from her older siblings and rocked throughout the nights as she experiences withdrawal symptoms from heroin and crystal meth. They also continue to tell the story of Hope’s birth mother, Crystal. Cameras followed as Ryan drove Crystal to a rehabilitation facility and as he drove her back to the parking lot she calls home when she decided that she wasn’t ready. Crystal isn’t ready to take the first step in getting clean yet. But the Holets aren’t giving up on her. And for that, Crystal is thankful. Thankful that her child is safe and loved and healthy. Thankful that they both have someone in their corner. Thankful that neither of them is alone.

Simeon and Anna had been waiting. Anna in particular had been waiting for a lifetime. They had been waiting for God to show up in their

land. They were waiting on God's Messiah – the Christ – to show up and redeem Jerusalem and console Israel. And their waiting wasn't just sitting around...counting the minutes, biding their time and distracting themselves with nonsense. Their waiting was faithful. Their waiting looked like time spent with the people of God in worship. It looked like prayer. It looked like righteous living. It looked like answering God's call when the time came.

Looking back over the past three months, Ryan Holets, would say that he has spent much of his adult life waiting. For him, his job as a police officer involved waiting. Waiting for the opioid crisis to reach a tipping point. Waiting for the anger at situations where he felt helpless to subside. Waiting for the right situation to make a difference. His family life also had an element of waiting. Adoption was put on the hearts of he and his wife years ago, but they were waiting...looking out for...hoping for...praying for the right time and place and situation and child.

True Christian discipleship requires a particular vulnerability. Vulnerability in waiting. Vulnerability in receiving. Vulnerability in responding. It is not easy to do any of these things. Think about Simeon and Anna. Think about Ryan and Rebecca. Think even about Crystal. Think about how Simeon was open to, vulnerable to, the movement of

the Holy Spirit who led him into the temple and put him face to face with Jesus. Think about Anna. How lonely her existence must have been, but how deep the well of her trust in God's promises. Anna's faithful waiting and her unfaltering commitment allowed her to glimpse the redemption of Israel in her last years. Think about Ryan. His persistence with Crystal. His reception of Hope. Think about Rebecca. Her trust in God's guidance and God's timing and God's call upon the life of her family. Think about Crystal. The acknowledgment of her addiction. Her desire for a different life for her child. The gratefulness she feels in her heart for the Holets family, even if she doesn't know if she will ever get clean.

Might Ryan and Rebecca be a modern-day Simeon and Anna – receiving the gifts of the Lord with joy, with trust, with vulnerability, with HOPE...and responding accordingly? Theirs is an example worthy of following. But, be warned, it isn't easy. Vulnerability leaves one exposed. Hopes can leave one dashed. Love can leave one heartbroken. But vulnerability can also bring us face-to-face with Jesus. True Christian vulnerability can change lives and serve as a proclamation of the way life can be.

Right here is where we are living on the Sunday after Christmas and this last Sunday of 2017. Right here in the space of Simeon and

Anna and Ryan and Rebecca and Crystal. The Advent waiting is over, for we have once again celebrated the extraordinary circumstances that led to the birth of the Messiah. Hope has been born and found a home in our hearts...

But all things are not redeemed. Addiction still cripples. Tragedies still happen. Wars still rage. Families are still broken. We're still waiting for Christ to return with his new heaven and new earth. And this job of waiting can be frustrating. It can breed anger and apathy. This job of waiting needs the vulnerability of the faithful. For this vulnerability is how the kingdom of Christ breaks in. It is how the hungry are fed, the homeless are housed, the unlovable are loved. Remember, we have received the gift of THE baby named Hope. We must respond accordingly as we wait for him to come again. And, friends, come again he will.