



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

January 3, 2016

"Encountering Hope" (Encounters With Jesus Series)

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I trust you are off to a great start to the New Year! I'm sure you have seen the various programs all over the TV or articles on the web prognosticating about the year ahead—speculating about everything from oil prices and the stock market, to presidential elections and the war on the middle east, and to the always important, what will Kim Kardashian do next?

All of this prognosticating got me thinking. There is something about human existence that seems to always want to know the future. I think it comes out of a deep need to be reassured that life will be okay; that we won't be blind-sided by anything harmful to our lives. We tend to be an anxious race and knowledge about the future lessens those anxieties and gives us a sense of hope.

When you think about it, when we *don't* have hope we can easily become cynical and jaded, or maybe even despairing in life.

In the 1950's there was a professor at Johns Hopkins named Curt Richter who conducted a study on rats. He would take rates and put them in a large jar of water and measure the time where rats swam

around before they died. He put some of the rats in the jar and left them to swim. They all died...some surprisingly quickly.

Other rats, Richter would let swim, but then lift them up out of the water and then place them back in to swim again. Richter found out that when he picked them up and held them just for a little while before putting them back they swam much longer than the rats that were left alone, and all survived.

Richter reasoned that the rats learned that they were not doomed and the situation was not lost. In short, when they had *reason* to keep swimming they did. He concluded that when you eliminate hopelessness the rats do not die.

Humans are obviously different than rats, but one similarity stands out: Hope can do wonders to keep us going. How many of us could use a little hope this morning—just to be assured that things have the possibility of getting better in our lives?

Today we begin a new series of sermons to start the new year. We will delve into the various episodes where people encounter Jesus in the Gospels and how these people are affected by these encounters.

The first encounter of Jesus by someone beyond Christmas day, was an encounter of Hope. It comes via an incident with a couple of elderly folks named Simeon and Anna. As we look at their encounter we can see things that both encourage us and deeply challenge us.

Their encounter happens at the temple in Jerusalem about 40 days after the birth of Jesus. Joseph and Mary went to the temple to make an offering, as was the Jewish custom for a woman after she gave birth.

Let's replay this story, but in slow motion, and see what we pick up. Remember that whenever you go to interpret the scripture it's helpful to keep in mind the historical and cultural context. And it is the historical context of Luke 2 that makes Anna and Simeon's words about Jesus seem incredibly amazing.

First of all, both of these characters are up in years. Anna is described as being at least 84 years of age. We don't know Simeon's age, but we can speculate how old he is by his comment that now he is ready to die because he has seen the Messiah, the consolation of Israel. Young men would not be talking in such terms.

**T**heir responses to their encounter with Jesus is particularly striking for several reasons.

A few moments ago we read these words 2.28-32: **28** *Simeon took (Jesus) in his arms and praised God, saying: 29 "Sovereign Lord, now let your servant die in peace, as you have promised. 30 I have seen your salvation, 31 which you have prepared for all people. 32 He is a light to reveal God to the Gentiles, and he is the glory of your people Israel!"* His declaration of God saving the Gentiles is quite remarkable, as you will soon see.

And then Anna's remarks in verse 38: *"At 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."*

What is striking about these remarks is how they can say these things in the days they lived, especially when you think of what transpired in Israel since the time they were children.

Anna, as a childless widow, knew poverty for a long time. This may be why she lived at or near the Temple. Both Anna and Simeon, in their long years of life, also saw or heard about their share of murderous tragedies and misguided politics.

When they were toddlers they likely heard of how a former Jewish king, Alexander crucified 800 Pharisees and had their wives and children slaughtered in front of the men who hung on the crosses.

Then as a young people they saw the wars with Pompey and Julius Caesar, as well as the take over of Israel by Rome.

Later when Herod the Great was a king appointed by Rome to rule over Judea, they soon learned of his brutal ways of ruling. He was so paranoid and crazy that he killed *his own wife and sons* because he felt they were a threat to his throne. (Remember also that this same Herod would soon kill many infants in Bethlehem not too long after this scene in the Temple).

Imagine how *you* would look at the world if that happened in America today? How much hope would you have in your heart and hearing about and seeing all of that?

Moreover, being around the temple so much, they would have seen and heard all kinds of teachers teach about how the coming Messiah who would change all this mess and defeat the Gentiles. Yet, despite all they heard, the mess seemed to grow larger, not better, as the years went on.

My point through all of this is that in their long lives they saw and heard plenty to become cynical and jaded about God and His promises, or about things getting better in the world. Pagans had invaded and took charge of their country. The puppet king of Israel, Herod, was a corrupt and psychotic ruler. The priesthood at that temple was corrupt and unreliable for spiritual leadership.

But despite that spiritual atmosphere, that political atmosphere, that oppressive society and those pagan enemies, they saw Hope when they encountered Jesus.

They saw in Christ something else breaking into their world that had a greater power than the depressing signs around them. They saw that the future of eternal change

has now entered the present peril and the world would now be increasingly characterized by God's Kingdom come, His will done on earth as it is heaven.

Do we still view the future with this lens of Hope because of *our* encounters with Jesus? Or have we succumbed to a bit of cynical pessimism, or at least a lukewarm apathy about our future as a world?

Yes, we have a lot to be concerned about just like Anna and Simeon did. I can assure you their praise *is not* some sort of Little Orphan Annie, the sun will come out tomorrow, kind of childish optimism.

They didn't stick their heads in the sand when they praised God. They had a very clear vision of how treacherous and dangerous and foreboding life can be. But they found Hope in Christ, anyway!

So I ask, "What did it take to hold such vision, such faith, such hope despite all the evidence to the contrary?"

Doesn't so much of what is happening around us today seem to scream 'Jesus is not Lord' or 'God doesn't seem to care' or maybe 'He doesn't exist?'

Let's face it; it's easy to be jaded and cynical or even despairing these days—when terror and war and racial problems and vicious partisan politics are blasted across every news page and program.

Have you ever seen on the History channel, or on the National Geographic channel, or other channels like them that talk about Armageddon and the end of the world? Why does this sell well?

Is it because we are somehow drawn with a weird interest on how things are going to blow up or burn up? What's up with that?

We have to be careful with too much of this lest we end up seeing the world in a manner which psychologists call: *Awfulizing*.

Awfulizing is a psychological term that refers to an *irrational* and *dramatic* thought pattern characterized by the tendency to *overestimate* the potential seriousness or negative consequences of events, situations, or perceived threats.

Like when you get lower than an "A" on a test and think, "Now things are just awful; I'll never get into a good college!" Or you don't get to the meeting or to your office as fast as you want and so the whole day becomes...awful! Or the person you really like doesn't ask you out. "Now my life is just awful!" (you get the picture).

You know why some of us turn out to be perfectionists or people pleasers? Because we are plagued by the thought that life would be awful if even a few people didn't like us. Or if someone thought we didn't do a great job—that would feel awful!

And as every psychologist knows when you get in that paradigm, that habit of "awfulizing", it contributes to anxiety, depression, and phobias of all sorts, as well as a host of other struggles. And when life *often* looks Awful, we start to feel Hopeless.

That's what it does on a personal level. What might happen if this type of thing was heard all the time on a larger scale?

Turn on the radio: "That's awful!" Turn on the TV: "That's awful!" Pick up a newspaper: "That's awful!"

Pretty soon the whole narrative of society, the narrative of the world picture is awful! Now my concern as a Christian is, "Are we being the Voice of Hope to that awful narrative of the world?"

What does it sound like to be a voice of Hope in a seemingly awful world?

I'm sure everyone in this room is familiar with at least some of Martin Luther King's inspiring speeches. When I think of him I think, here is a guy who is seeing and experiencing so much Injustice, hatred, and ungodliness. Yet, when he has a chance to speak up he did not say: "I have a complaint!" He said, "I have a dream!" And that seemed to work so much better, didn't it? Why might that be?

After all, dreams see the same things as complaints do. They *address* the very same things as complaints. They are not blind to evil. BUT they express something a complaint cannot—and that is Hope. And they make us want to press forward and make that hope a reality.

Complaints make us want to disdain, or demean, or separate, or protect ourselves from the thing or people complained about.

So my question for us is, "Is the non-Christian world more familiar with Christian Hope...or Christian Complaint?" What is the cost to our world if it is mostly the latter?

You may be thinking, "Steve, do you live under a rock? Have you

not read a newspaper? Do you not watch the TV News or websites? There's a lot to 'Awfulize' about!"

True, but can you see, at least a little bit, the growing evidence of the Kingdom of God?

Today there are over 2 billion Christians in the world. That's a lot of people! When I first became a missionary in 1984 there were 40,000 children dying from malnutrition and starvation each day. Now it's about 20,000 (that's not good but it is way better).

Until recent times many parents lost their children to sickness. Think of the diseases significantly reduced or eradicated over the past 100 or so years. Also, according to the U.S. Census Bureau, the average life expectancy at the beginning of the 20th century was about 47 years. A century later, that number had increased to 78 years.

Until recent times, the rule of law in countries even like France or Germany was a joke. In 50 years we in the United States went from segregation to now having an African American man in the White House. Some things seem to be improving. Is some of the Kingdom of God coming?

Look, I get it. There is a lot to work on in the world, but I'm sure God's Kingdom comes and His will is done a lot better through the lens of hope rather than cynicism and despair.

As Christians, by our very definition we should always see life with hope: because we always see life with Christ...because we always see life with the power of the Holy Spirit.

**B**ecause we always see life with the Promise of God's Kingdom come and His will done on *Earth* as it is in Heaven.

We often pray, (like later today after communion) for God's Kingdom to come and His will done on Earth as it is in heaven. Now do we say that with one foot stuck in pessimism? ("Lord, Your Kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth...but I really doubt it though.") Or do we pray that with both feet firmly planted in passionate hope and expectation?

In your heart of hearts this morning, what do you place *your hope* in to make the world better for 2016? A certain political ideology? Or in certain legislative measures? Military supremacy? Economic prosperity? Technological power? Your health? Your looks? Your job security? Your education?

All those might be good things in and of themselves. In fact, God can use any of those elements to improve the world. But we have to be careful that we don't make good things into ultimate things; that we don't make things that help into saviors. If we are honest, when we consider those things in terms of their success, aren't they often inconsistent and unpredictable?

What happens when those "good things" we hope in take a down turn? When our political party is not in office? When our hope for legislation about marriage or abortion gets defeated? When our military cannot weed out every single enemy or evil on every *single* street in the world? Or when our markets crash? Or when our technology leads us to greater levels of vulnerability? Or our health, job security, or retirement funds start to

deteriorate? How will we respond then? Will we awfulize or get anxious? Will we become jaded or cynical? Or worse yet, will we blame, demonize and vilify certain folks in the process and seek to wipe out or at least wall off "those people" who seem to threaten our way of life? Not reach out more to those who threaten our way of life, not evangelize more those who threaten our way of life, not pray more for those who threaten our way of life—but wall off or wipe out. Words of hope? Or cynicism?

My point is, when we put our ultimate Hope in things other than God, than the gospel Jesus, as a means to transform the sins of societies, or eradicate terror from our world, or heal our deepest soulful problems—it will seem like a second rate solution.

And when that happens, we will start reaching for other saviors to make things right. And we may even end up forgetting to oppose demons and start to demonize our opponents. It gets real easy to demonize opponents when our hearts are not full of hope.

The bottom line is, we cannot hope in countries or ideologies or people or political parties or technologies or health and wealth to save humanity, because every one of those things *need saving themselves*...don't they? And it will likely not do too much good to look to or depend on things that need saving.

As we look forward to 2016 do we really believe that Jesus Christ is THE solution for what ails us as a society? Do we believe that His Holy Spirit is more powerful than any terror group?

That His gospel is more potent than any dirty bomb. That the Kingdom of this world *can actually become* the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ?

Simeon seemed to think so!! Simeon could see that the Christ was bigger than Caesar or Herod. That their threats and terror would *not* be the last word. Simeon could see that what Christ could bring and *would* bring about change even unto those oppressive, crucifying, and spiritually vacuous Gentiles.

When Simeon saw Jesus he saw that now *everything* can get better. My brothers and sisters, can you see what Simeon saw in that Temple?

And I think this is part of the lesson God wants us to draw from the lives of Simeon and Anna. Part of what helps them keep hope is that they can see God working. Let me put point out something that we may not consider as we read through this little episode.

Mary and Joseph are at the Temple—this huge structure. Unless they were there at a very odd hour this place likely had all kinds of people coming and going. And yet *only Anna and Simeon* saw the Christ, The Consoler and Redeemer and Savior of Humanity. Why just them? After all, in that very big place there were prayers being given, offerings being made to God, teachers teaching about God—but only two people saw what God was doing.

My brothers and sisters, in all our busyness, even in the busyness of our Christian faith, are we missing some pretty important things God wants us to see?

**A**re we missing what God wants us to reflect on and respond to? And does the lack of our awareness of what God may actually be doing impact our level of Hope that we feel in our lives?

Let me introduce to a Spiritual Discipline for 2016 that may help some of us see more of the activity of God in our lives. It is a centuries old practice called The Prayer of the Examen. A Catholic contemplative named Ignatius of Loyola developed it centuries ago. Its purpose is to help you see God in your life and to live more responsively toward Him. It also creates a sense of gratitude for life and the many small blessings God provides in our days (you can read more about this at: <http://www.ignatianspirituality.com>)

I will give you a three-step version of the Daily Examen. They are: Become Aware of God's Presence, Slowly Review the Day, and Give thanks to God and Pray for Others.

It usually takes 15 to 20 minutes per day, but you can go longer. Try doing this prayer exercise once a day, or at least once weekly. You can do this in the morning looking back at the previous day, or you can do it at lunch, or before you go to bed.

Here it is in a nutshell:

### **1. Become Aware of God's Presence.**

Turn off your technological devices and take a minute or two just slow down your breathing. This will help calm and center you mind on God. You can try and breathe a prayer in and out – e.g. "He restores my soul." Then ask God for the grace to look at your day with His eyes, not merely your own.

### **2. Slowly Review the day.**

Take a *slow* and *careful* look back on the day or an event of the day. Let each hour of the past day gently pass by your experience. Linger as you remember the experiences.

As you review your day, reflect on the ways in which God was *present* to you and *how you responded* to Him (positively or negatively)? Where did you see God at work? Did you see Him in your joy, fears, suffering, or study? Did you see or feel Him in someone's encouragement, correction, or prayer? Did you experience Him in an event, a sound, a sunset, or music?

You might also want to ask yourself, when or where in the past 24 hours did you feel you were *cooperating* most fully with God's action in your life? And when or where did you feel you were *resisting* God's presence and action?

As you notice your resistances, are there actions or thoughts that require God's forgiveness? Do you need to seek the forgiveness of others? Do you need to give forgiveness and grace to others?

Then finally in this segment, ask God if there something He wants you to say, do, or change for the day ahead in light of what you now know and see? E.g. – "How can I love God and people in that staff meeting I will attend tomorrow?"

Or in that meeting with a client, or when confronting a problem with a friend or with a spouse, or when disciplining my kids, serving at church, or walking by that homeless guy I see everyday, etc.

### **3. Close with Thankfulness to God and Intercession for Others.**

Thank God for whatever you have received and ask for the grace, perseverance, and courage to live out the change that needs to be made as a result of your Examen. Then, to not let yourself be completely self-absorbed, pray for the needs of at least one other person.

When you are finished with these three steps try expressing your feelings through journaling, drawing, poetry, or even singing a song, etc. If possible share your reflections and discoveries with a good friend or your small group.

Often times I will recollect a situation where someone showed grace to me or was generous toward me or was patient with me, but I just blew right by it without any sense of appreciation of what God was providing in and through that person.

This exercise now gives me the opportunity to redeem that moment; to send an email or text of thanks. Or better yet give them a call. Or perhaps the next time I see them go out of my way to thank them or apologize to them, etc.

I can't tell you how many times I have done exactly this with my wife and kids, or with my co-workers and all kinds of folks. I would go back to different people and say, "I was just reflecting on our conversation yesterday and I only now realized how important that was for me to talk with you. God really blessed me through your words." Or you can simply say to your spouse or friend, "I wanted to thank you for that great meal last night. God was blessing me through your food!"

**A**gain, the purpose of all this is to find God *in your* life, because God *is* there—in all the mundane and ordinary, as well as the extraordinary. And the more we become aware of that the more we can be instruments of His work in our days to build a world of hope and not complaint. It will also helps us to be affirmed that we are not alone; life is *not* all up to *us*.

And perhaps most importantly, this spiritual discipline helps us to see vividly that we are always a part of something bigger than ourselves. We are not just going through meaningless routines and tasks, but we are on a spiritual journey even as we create budgets, or make business deals, or wipe the runny noses of our kids, or take care *of* our elderly parents.

I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to see that there are Divine places and Sacred spaces in *all* that we do and with *all* the people we meet. And when we recognize the sacredness of God's presence in our daily life, that can give us Hope for our lives.

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*Note: Sunday sermon texts are also available at [fpchawaii.org](http://fpchawaii.org). The audio version can be downloaded from iTunes. You may also request the audio version by visiting: [fpchkoolau@gmail.com](mailto:fpchkoolau@gmail.com)*