

Messiah Moravian Church
December 31, 2023
First Sunday After Christmas, Year B
Dane Perry
Luke 2:22-40

Wise Hope

It's an interesting coincidence when the lectionary reading harmonizes with the yearly calendar as well as it does today. But is it really coincidence or is it more like Albert Einstein's remark, who allegedly said, "Coincidence is God's way of remaining anonymous"?

Typically, the transition between old and new years is portrayed as old man 2023 welcoming baby 2024 and then hobbling off into the sunset. In today's gospel passage, Simeon and Anna, two elderly pillars of the temple, also welcome a baby and then depart in peace.

Throughout their lives Simeon and Anna have demonstrated hope in dark times. They live in a heavily taxed and oppressive society. Rome had appointed Herod king of the region to rule a large population of Jews. The Jews hated him because he was a cruel opportunist and a murderous thug. Essentially, the Palestinian Jews lived in third world conditions under a military dictatorship where 90% of the people were subjugated to the 10% of the population born into nobility. Hope was not easy for them.

For us, Christmas and New Year are often times for reflection and hope. But perhaps, like me, you sometimes find hope elusive, if not absent, during the often turbulent, difficult times in which we live. That's why I found Joan Halifax's concept of "wise hope" helpful and sustaining as I think about the future. Halifax is a spiritual mentor, author and activist who often writes from an Eastern perspective.

Halifax distinguishes hope from optimism. She writes, "Hope is not the belief that everything will turn out well. People die. Populations die out. Civilizations die.... We have to understand that hope is not a story based on optimism that everything will be ok. Optimists imagine that everything will turn out positively. I consider this point of view dangerous; being an optimist can mean one doesn't have to bother; one doesn't have to act. Hope of course is also opposed to the narrative that everything is getting worse, the position that pessimists take. Pessimists take refuge in depressive apathy or apathy driven by cynicism. And, as we might expect, both optimists and pessimists can excuse themselves from engagement [and action.]

What does it mean to be hopeful and not optimistic? The American novelist Barbara Kingsolver explains it this way: "I would say that I'm a hopeful person, although not necessarily optimistic. Here's how I would describe it. The pessimist would say, 'It's going to be a terrible winter; we're all going to die.' The optimist would say, 'Oh, it'll be alright; I don't think it'll be that bad.' The hopeful person would say, 'Maybe someone will still be alive in February, so I'm

going to put some potatoes in the root cellar just in case.' ... Hope is... a mode of resistance... a gift I can try to cultivate."

Halifax advocates for "wise hope" in uncertain, dark times. Wise hope is rooted in the unknown and the unknowable. How could we ever know what is really going to happen? Wise hope is seeing things realistically as they are, including the truths of suffering and impermanence, seeing both their existence *and* our capacity to transform them. When we realize we don't know what will happen, then wise hope arises in that uncertainty as the very place in which we need to act.

It is easy to feel that there is nothing to hope for, that our political situation is beyond repair, that there is no way out of our climate crisis, that our country is struggling. When nothing seems to make sense anymore, we feel powerless and believe there's no reason to act.

Wise hope doesn't mean denying these difficult realities. It means facing them, addressing them, and remembering what else is possible, for example, like rearranging our values so that we recognize and act to address suffering right now.

We cannot know what might emerge from our actions now or in the future; yet we can trust that things will change, as they always do. But our actions, how we live, what we care about, whom we care for, and how we care really do matter all the same. History is full of people whose influence was most powerful after they were gone.

In a letter to a friend, Thomas Merton wrote: "Do not depend on the hope of results. You may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. You gradually struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people. In the end, it is the reality of personal relationship that saves everything."

With a little wise hope, we may make change, perhaps only incrementally, but change nevertheless. There's no need to know or control how it will all turn out. As The Talmud states: "Do not be daunted by the enormity of the world's grief. Do justly, now. Love mercy, now. Walk humbly, now. You are not obligated to complete the work, but neither are you free to abandon it."

The Czech statesman Václav Havel said, "[Hope] is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out." So it makes sense to shelter the homeless and the immigrant. It makes sense to sit with dying people, take care of our elders, feed the hungry, love and educate our children. While we can't know how things will turn out, we can trust that there will be movement and there will be change. And at the same time, something deep inside us affirms what is good and right to do.

For example, here in Winston-Salem the Repair The Body program seeks to address and heal racism that the white church has either intentionally or unknowingly encouraged. In this movement white Christians participate in historically black church Bible studies, worship services and social programs, not as leaders or vocal "authorities" or organizers. They participate attending, listening, contributing financially and, most importantly, creating real, equitable friendships. No other outcomes need to be expected; it is enough to hope for genuine relationships.

During the Vietnam War, the elderly Dutch-born activist A.J. Muste stood in front of the White House every night, holding a single lit candle. Often he was alone. One evening, a reporter interviewed him as he stood in the rain. "Mr. Muste," the reporter said, "do you really think you are going to change the policies of this country by standing out here alone at night with a candle?" Muste replied, "Oh, I don't do this to change the country. I do this so the country won't change me."

And so we return to the elderly Simeon and Anna who for decades have done the work of worship in the Temple and lived lives of righteousness and decency. They endured dark years of backbreaking taxation, brutal Roman oppression and corrupt government and religious leaders. Still, they do justly, love mercy and walk humbly, with realistic perspectives--and always with hope, just the kind of people who would put potatoes in their root cellar.