

The Legacy
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Rev. Dr. Anne Fisher
December 27, 2020
Luke 2:22–40

At the birth our daughter, Elizabeth, my parents came to see me in the hospital. Elizabeth was barely 12 hours old. As my mom and I talked and gushed and did the things most new moms do, the nurse came in with our new baby. To all of our surprise, she went straight over to my father and said, “Here grandpa, your new granddaughter.” Before he could protest, she plopped the bundle in his lap and walked away.

My dad quietly sat holding the new baby, looking a little out of place. A month later, to the surprise of all of us, my father delivered a sermon entitled “To Elizabeth.” He told his congregation what we as a family never knew. He was the father of five children and grandfather of 14 and in his 76 years he had never held a baby that young before. He proceeded to talk about what was going through his mind as he looked into his newest grandchild’s piercing eyes. The intensity of a newborn’s eyes is remarkable and you cannot help but think what are those windows to the mind really taking in? He wondered what kind of world Elizabeth would see. What her experiences would be. What might happen during her lifetime? Most importantly, how her faith would grow. Would she rely upon God’s love to help her through the triumphs and failures in this world? It was the fall of 1989 – big things were happening. The Berlin Wall had fallen just three weeks before her birth. No one was sure what was going to happen next. The cold war as we knew it for so long was imploding. What other things would be in store?

Now 31 years later, my father is no longer with us. I now look up into Elizabeth's eyes through the help of technology. Her eyes are far from home. She is now living in former East Berlin just down the street from the remaining Berlin Wall that fell at time of her birth. There is a saved section which has been turned into a gallery of street art as a symbol of turning something ugly into a statement of beauty and freedom. So many tourists now barely remember what it represented and the horror it instilled. It is one indication how her generation is different from the ones before her. Her generation only knows stories. Berlin for Elizabeth is a vibrant modern city filled with diversity and opportunity. For me and my generation, Berlin was about communism and oppression by the Soviet Union. It was an unfair deal for those people in East Germany and East Berlin. To my parents, Berlin was about the horrors of Hitler's Germany. To my grandparents, Berlin marked great decadence following the Great War and Kaiser Wilhelm. What different perspectives four separate generations have of the same piece of geography.

As my father looked into Elizabeth's eyes, he could not have possibly known the trials that she would have. How as a preteen she would be told in school that the World trade Centers were hit by airplanes. For days afterward, for the first time in her life, she would look into the sky and have it devoid of all contrails of airplanes. 9/11 was a defining event of her generation. She barely remembers days of feeling safe and invincible. As she matured, she experienced one institution after another letting her down. From our government with gridlock, polarity, impeachment trials, and scandals; to the halls of higher learning which have placed unbearable debt; to our banking and financial institutions that let them down right as they were entering the work force; to the church with its strident voices on social relationships and its mishandling of sexual abuse cases that are committed by clergy. In fact,

her generation marks the first one that is not better off than her preceding generation.

In spite of all that, her generation and the ones following her also desperately want to make the world a better place. So, AmeriCorps, Peace Corps and Teach for America are filled with applicants to give of themselves in a world that has repeatedly let them down.

So many changes have come in her lifetime. So many changes in the past year. It is hard to keep up with it all. She, as with all of us, has had to deal with disruption, disappointment and loss at levels we would never have imagined. Up to now, many of us have been living in a world filled with privilege, and the assumption that we will do better than our parents. We will get jobs and achieve the career of our dreams enabling us to put money away for our retirement and to realize our dreams for the future. All the time blissfully unaware that our world, our country was moving farther apart in economic disparity and in opportunities. Dreams were unrealizable for a portion of our population because of the color of their skin. This past year, with all of its challenges, has also made us cruelly aware of the fact that we are not all coming from the same place and we do not all have the reserves or the health to manage the unseen forces of viruses and economic downturns and job losses.

In spite of all that, when you have the opportunity to hold a new life in your arms, there is a feeling of wonderment and optimism. Maybe this young child will be the key to peace. Maybe this child will be part of the solution and bring us as a world back together again. Maybe in a world where we have not yet figured out how to live together, a new voice will rise and show us another way. With each child that is born there is a sense of hope and potential.

For Elizabeth and for all of us, as we face the uncertainties of the coming year, I offer a message of hope. It does not come from vaccines

or a new political order, it is not from our own ingenuity or creativity, or intellect. It is a hope not cast by human hands but the hope comes from what God has done.

The hope comes from another who was held by an insightful man and rejoiced over by an old widow. Jesus, as a newborn, has yet to preach and teach and heal. His parents, as faith-filled Jews, took him to the temple. and two people met him for the first time. Two people who had lived long and had known their share of uncertainty, fear, disappointment and loss. They held the infant in their arms, and as they did, it filled with them hope and promise.

One was the priest, Simeon. Simeon was a man who lived in the city of Jerusalem, a devout Jew who prayed for Israel to be relieved of its Roman occupation. Most likely people would pass him by and not think twice about his prayers. Nothing was going to change. He is a lone voice offering up the hope of the future in a resigned, cynical world.

Simeon was convinced that he would not die until he saw the Messiah. He was in the temple that day when Mary and Joseph came with their new child. In the cacophony of the capital city, particularly in the center court of the Temple, Simeon saw them. When he did, he knew that the promise has been fulfilled. This old man holds the baby and knows that here in this infant lies the hope and the promise for the people of Israel but not only Israel but for the world.

Simeon, as he gazed into the eyes of the infant, also knew that the blessing has an edge. Not only will this child bring salvation and glory to Israel and the world but he will also be opposed and to Mary he says a sword will pierce her soul. The Gospel story is revealed in these short verses of Jesus' destiny and also that of the worlds.

The second voice from an earlier generation is that of Anna. She lived at the Temple and when she saw the family, she knew the potential of this baby. She knew what it would mean to the people. She lifted her voice in praising God.

What an unlikely scene. The hope for the future is held by a wise old man and an old widow. Two people, who have had their own perspective of life and who have lived through many things, open their hearts to a new voice to come. The one who is the hope for redemption for the world and who will see the world not through their eyes but in a new way.

Simeon and Anna set the stage for what is to come. These short verses lay out the course of Jesus' life and ministry. We know that Jesus' birth and life is cause of great rejoicing. We know that his life is the causing of the rising and falling of many in Israel. He will expose the ones who are established. We know that Mary is with him even to the death on the cross and that Mary would feel the sorrow in her heart.

Like so many of those who we love, our Elizabeth did not come home for Christmas. I was not able to look into her eyes to see how those eyes have changed or have long conversations about how she sees the world. I know that her world view is different than my own. Just as mine is different from those who raised me. She is making her own way in the world. She is no longer holding my hand or even looking back as she goes forward. I think about the legacy left to her and the rest of her generation. Climate change, wars, economic crisis, systemic racism entitlement, division and uncertainty. The list goes on. I would like to think that the legacy goes beyond the needs of the moment. That she has received a faith that cannot be extinguished, a hope that is more than being a naive eternal optimist and a peace that passes all our

understanding. The Messiah has come and that makes all the difference. It is the Messiah who was born and lived and died and lives again.

The world is in turmoil around us. Have we taught our children well enough so that they too know that the Messiah has come? Do they know that the evil and destruction we create with human hands and hearts cannot defeat God's love and God's presence even in the most troubling of times? Do they know that there is hope not found in our own resourcefulness, but from a God who loves them and does not abandon them?

Our world continues to groan in the labor pains of travail. It is a world that also knows that all things are possible for those who love the Lord. Some days we see that more clearly than others.

Elizabeth, like all our children needs to find her place in it not because she is entitled or deserving but because the world needs her. The world needs the voices rising up from all the generations. The world needs alternatives to suicide bombing and terror. It needs solutions to corporate greed and world hunger and partisan divides and the destruction of our planet.

One of the lasting images that I have of 1989, the year of her birth, was lying in bed with my infant in my arms listening to the Brandenburg concerto being played at the Brandenburg gate which had been closed locked away from westerners in East Germany for over 40 years. As that divide fell, it marked a new age of optimism, freedom and hope. Many of us never thought we would live to see the Berlin wall fall. We have tasted moments of peace, which points us toward the ultimate peace. We have had glimpses of hope that point us to the ultimate victory of Christ who defeats death. So, because of that baby who did grow and become what Simeon exclaimed, all of us have been freed from sin and death.

We do not know what the future holds for us, our children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. We can be sure there will be evil and sin in the world. That is pretty much a given. There will be plots and schemes executed by human hands and minds. There will be problems to solve, some will feel insurmountable. Will there be voices to proclaim another way? It is a way led by the child held in the arms of an old man who recognized the Messiah for what he is and will be.

As we sit at the end of this year and the brink of the next: we have this message of hope of light in the darkness to share with you so that you can be bearers of that message and take that light in the future. Yours and our future depends upon it. Thanks be to God who was, who is and who shall ever be, Amen.