**Being Present with Assurance**

**Luke 2: 22-40**

**The Last Sunday of 2023**

After worship last Sunday, some people asked me what Juhee and I were going to do on Christmas Day. I answered, “my plan is to stick on the ground and not move at all after this busy season.” Of course, that didn’t happen because our dog Joy was sick. From the early morning, he threw up 5 times in 12 hours. He didn’t have any energy. He could not eat or drink at all so eventually, we ended up going to Ocean State Veterinary Hospital. However, even while driving to the hospital, I was still not sure if going to the emergency room on Christmas Day was a wise decision. You know, dogs sometimes throw up and then they get better. Maybe Joy would be well after a day. Also, being Christmas I expected we might have to wait for hours. But at the same time, all the information I read about why dogs vomit and when to be concerned made me worry about Joy because he could have a blockage in his abdomen. I knew why dogs throw up and guessed that Joy might have only an upset stomach, but I did not have confidence in my judgment. If I had assurance that Joy had a simple upset stomach, I would not have taken him to the expensive ER on Christmas Day, but I was not sure what it was, so I took him to a specialist.

What I would like to say is that knowing and assurance are not the same thing. "Knowing" is about possessing knowledge or awareness, while "assurance" is about having confidence or certainty in the reliability or correctness of something. Knowing is a component of assurance, but assurance extends beyond knowing to include a sense of trust and confidence. At this moment, I want you to reflect on if you know about the Christmas story or if you have assurance of the message of the Christmas story delivered to us. The overwhelming message of the Christmas story assures us that God is with us. As God’s children we should have and proclaim the assurance of hope, peace, joy, and love to those who need it most in our ordinary lives.

**Simeon (to hear) and Anna (Grace)**

That’s what Simeon and Anna did in the temple. As we all know, no extraordinary religious experience lasts forever. After an extraordinary Christmas night, everything went back to normal. The song of the angels was stilled and the bright star in the sky was gone, the three kings from the East headed back to their home and the shepherds went back to their flocks. While “Mary treasured all the words of the shepherds, wise men and angel and pondered them in her heart, the exciting fever of the Christmas Spirit had passed. Joseph and Mary got back to their ordinary lives, feeding the newborn baby and changing his diapers. Just like us, forgetting the significance of God’s calling in our busy lives, Mary and Joseph might have forgotten the significance of Jesus’ birth in their busy and tedious ordinary lives. But God met them again in their ordinary lives and assured them through two persons.

In their ordinary custom of practicing their faith, Joseph and Mary took Jesus to the temple for purification and there they met unexpected guests, Simeon and Anna. According to Luke, Simeon was a righteous and devout man, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. (vs 25) He was a person who learned how to listen. In fact, his name, ‘Simeon’ means ‘heard.’ Dr. Lisa wrote, “It was what he was born to do. So, he listened. Day and night he listened. He was listening for the future. He was listening for hope, the consolation of Israel… Day after day, he went to the temple to listen. He heard the cries of the people. He heard the songs of the loud, happy, celebratory prayers that seemed so brash but goodhearted anyway… He heard the wordless prayers that were wept from swollen and reddened eyes, wrung out of twisted scraps of cloth between hands gnarled with pain and fear. He heard the proud and grateful prayers of people who knew how blessed they were. He heard them and wept and laughed with them. He heard them all.”[[1]](#footnote-1) He was present in the temple with faith and hope and listened. Simeon heard more because he listened more deeply. And because he listened deeper, he heard the sighs of the Spirit when he saw baby Jesus. This is what we need to learn and practice on the threshold of a new year. Deep listening to the Spirit, right here and right now.

During our Advent book study, we learned about Christian mindfulness. Dr. Amy Oden defines, “Christian mindfulness as the practice of paying prayerful attention in the present moment to God’s abundant life.” We often unconsciously assumed that God is somewhere up there, but the Christmas story keeps telling us that God is with us right here and right now. We need to attend to God in the present moment by intentionally seeking and listening to the signs of the Holy Spirit. This is what Simeon did in his listening and hearing. When he saw Jesus, he knew that he was the Messiah he had been waiting for. Filled with joy, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” Joseph and Mary were amazed at what was being said about Jesus. Anna joined Simeon’s praise. “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.” It sounds like a great duet sung by Simeon and Anna. For Mary and Joseph, Simeon’s and Anna’s words were the assurance of the significance of Jesus. It was the assurance of what they heard from the angels, wise men, and shepherds.

**Listening deeply and being present with Assurance**

Simeon and Anna were present in the temple with faith and hope for salvation, and they gave the young couple, Mary and Joseph, the assurance of their calling to be holy parents. This is what we are called to do. Deeply listen to the Holy Spirit and be present with assurance to those who need it most. My clergy friend, who is also my mentor, shared with me his experience of his time in seminary. He immigrated to the United States when he was in a high school. You can imagine how hard his school life must have been. He couldn’t speak English well and the financial situation of his family was not good. He somehow got into a university majoring in chemistry and graduated. Then, he decided to go to seminary to become a pastor. However, theology was completely new to him and he didn’t really do well in the first semester. He was afraid that he might be kicked out of the school because of his inability. He struggled with low self-esteem and lack of self-confidence. One day in his second semester, his academic advisor called him into his office. He imagined the worst, because he was not doing well. Deeply depressed and discouraged, my friend with his head down, told his advisor, “I don’t really expect anything of myself.” Then, his advisor got closer to him and held his shoulders with his big hands and shook him! He looked him in the eye and said, “But I expect something great from you.” That was the wakeup call for my friend, he said. He didn’t see the great possibilities and visions God saw in him, but he was able to realize them through the gaze of his advisor. With the unwavering support and assurance of his advisor, he studied hard and became the student speaker at his graduation ceremony. His advisor could have simply disregarded a young Korean immigrant man, but I believe he was able to discern and hear the signs of the Holy Spirit and see what God saw in him. His presence with assurance opened up a new future for my friend.

I believe that this is what we are called to do, deeply listen and be present with assurance. This task of being present with assurance does not require us to be young, healthy and wealthy. Both Simeon and Anna were in their advanced age, but they still had undimmed eyes to see and keen ears to hear the signs of God in the present moment. I believe that we can do the same for others. Amen? As we move into a new year, let us continue to practice attending and listening to God right here and right now. Be present with assurance to those who need it most. Open your hearts to let all gifts from God flow through. Amen.

1. https://www.umcdiscipleship.org/worship-planning/our-spirit-waits/first-sunday-after-christmas-day-year-b-lectionary-planning-notes/first-sunday-after-christmas-day-year-b-preaching-notes [↑](#footnote-ref-1)