

Hopes and Dreams
December 30, 2012
Luke 2:22-38

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord²³ (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’),²⁴ and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.’

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.²⁶ It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah.²⁷ Guided 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,²⁸ Simeon 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.³⁴ Then 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 opposed³⁵ so 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,³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day.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.

Some of you who know my husband know that he is a devoted fan of the Cleveland Browns. Yes, the Cleveland Browns. His father is a native of Cleveland and Dave lived in Cleveland when he was a young child. It is the one thing Dave and his father have in common. Dave may not hear from his dad in months, but if the Browns score a touchdown his dad will text his jubilation.

I cannot think of two more miserable colors to put together, but for better or worse, brown and orange are the colors of Cleveland, and we have lots of brown and orange at our house. Given that most typical sports stores don’t even carry Browns paraphernalia, Dave’s friends and family have to go to great lengths to get him stuff. He has a blanket, pillow, parking sign, teddy bear, figurines, hats, coats, t-shirts, sweatshirts and the most awful sweatpants in sports history.

A study in 2006 determined that Browns fans were the most loyal fans in the NFL. The study was largely based on fan loyalty during winning and losing seasons, attendance at games, and challenges confronting fans (such as inclement weather or long-term poor performance of their team). Cleveland’s “dawg pound” is the most visible expression of fan devotion found each

home game in the bleacher section on the east end of Cleveland Stadium with hundreds of crazed, canine-clad fans making drunken spectacles of themselves in support of the team.

What is crazy about Browns fans is that they have not done anything noteworthy since 1964, which happens to be the year Dave was born. They have never gone to the Super Bowl and it doesn't look like they will any time soon. There was three years, known as the "dark years" at our house, when the Cleveland Browns didn't even exist. Art Modell moved the Browns to Baltimore and Cleveland was without a team – even then, Dave continued his subscription to the Cleveland Browns news. For a number of years they were known as the "cardiac kids" because of their ability to stay in a game to the very end and then lose in spectacular fashion. I thought Dave was going to have a cardiac event with a few of those games.

He keeps hoping, and waiting. Maybe this will be the year. The team seems to spend a lot of time "rebuilding" if you ask me. They can't seem to get out from under the curse of losing. When they won three games in a row this year Dave was giddy, but that was short-lived when the Redskins pummeled them and the Broncos crushed them. "There's always next year," is the team motto. And Dave keeps waiting. If they ever do win a Super Bowl, Dave can die a happy man.

I tell you this because I always think of Dave when I read the story of Simeon and Anna. Here are two elderly people who have waited their entire lives for God to deliver. The loyalty of Browns fans is nothing compared to that of Simeon and Anna. Through years of discouragement, set-backs, losses, and unfavorable conditions they persisted in their devotion to God. Simeon kept going to the temple, and Anna, we are told, never left. They were there - pouring out their hearts in prayer, worshipping God, remaining faithful, and never losing hope. They never lost their hope.

When Jesus was put in Simeon's arms, he said he could die a happy man. He saw what he waited all those years to see. Anna was equally jubilant. She was eighty-four years old and she spent almost sixty of those years widowed. And she gave all sixty of those years to God, praying and fasting in the temple, night and day. In all those sixty years, that baby was the best thing that ever happened to her. That baby was the answer to her prayers, because she knew that baby would change everything.

What I find amazing about Simeon and Anna is not that they hoped and dreamed, it is what they hoped and dreamed for. They hoped and dreamed for something beyond themselves. They hoped and dreamed for a world with God visibly present. It was this hope and this dream that gave shape to their lives. And then one glorious day their hopes and dreams were realized as Jesus was placed in their arms. They could say, "Amen."

For what do we hope and dream? What gives shape to our lives? What do we spend all of our lives reaching for? These are the questions that Simeon and Anna stir in me.

"I have a dream..." Those are powerful words when stirred with the conviction of faith and shaped by a vision of God's almighty kingdom.

One preacher said it this way...(MLK, Jr. 1963, excerpt from the "I Have a Dream" speech.)

I say to you today, my friends, so even though we face the difficulties of today and tomorrow, I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream.

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal."

I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood.

I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.

I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day, down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification; one day right there in Alabama, little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

I have a dream today.

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

What is YOUR dream today? Can you dream bigger than your personal health or finances? Can you dream bigger than your family or your own kind of people? Can you dream bigger than the world's problems? Can you dream like a person who believes God has not given up on this world? What is YOUR dream today?

I kid around with Dave about the Cleveland Browns, but I know that his dream is much bigger than a winning season for the Browns. In his tender moments he will tell you what it is like to watch Haitian children, side by side with pigs, root through smoldering piles of garbage and waste for a scrap of something to eat or sell...and how over a million of those same children don't have any access to education. I know his dream is that no child should have to live like that...and that's a big dream.

But what we know, like Simeon and Anna, is that our hopes and dreams shape our lives. Our hopes and our dreams shape our prayers. Our hopes and our dreams shape our purpose for living. Our hopes and our dreams shape us.

It's funny...when Jesus grew up...and taught us to pray...he fixed in us a hope and a dream. Let this be your hope. Let this be your dream. Let this be your prayer. Let this be your heart's desire – the thing that shapes the whole of your life, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." Believing it WILL happen and DOES happen puts us in the company of Simeon and Anna, who persisted in hope, who never gave up.