



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA
Rev. Carolyn K. Hetrick
1st Sunday of Christmas, December 27, 2020
Sermon Title: "Holding Christ"
Sermon Text: Luke 2:22-40

When our daughter Catherine was born, she was the object of hopes and dreams, the first grandchild in both Michael's and my family, so you know those grandparents had been anticipating, to some degree ever since we had gotten married. When they learned the news, that anticipating led to purchasing, as only first-time grandparents can. I remember the joy welling up in our parents the first time they held that longed for little one. Perhaps you know that feeling. It was even more acute for my father-in-law, who had leukemia. Perhaps knowing Cat was the only grandchild he would ever hold and know. That sword would pierce our hearts in time. Imagine one who saw time differently, getting to hold that longed for one that first time.

About a week or so Cat's birth, among the many cards and gifts was one from Wilbur and Martha. It made me pause- I had to think at first who they were. Wilbur, or "Wib" as he was known, and Martha were an older couple who sat in the pew behind us at church. It never dawned upon me that our little one would be so precious to them. Sure enough, the next Sunday in church, they sat craning toward the back door, and then beaming with expectation as we arrived. I was disarmed by Wib's eyes glistening as he said, "We were hoping you'd be here today!" Martha was just hoping beyond hope for a baby snuggle.

Cat had a rough delivery coming into the world, but as Martha scooped her up and drew her close, it was as if all of the hope and assurance and joy of the world gathered right there in that embrace. A moment to carry us all into the joys and challenges to come, and in some ways a word and moment to cling to. I had no idea that our daughter would be so adored and precious for someone outside my family. It was almost beyond belief that they too had been waiting for this moment, waiting to send that card, waiting to see us walk through the door and hold that child. If they had said, "Now Lord we can go in peace" it really would not have surprised me. I still have their card among our treasured things and the memory of faces almost incandescent with such love still blesses.

That's how I envision Mary and Joseph's astonishment, when Simeon scooped up the Christ child in his arms, but I can also imagine the fullness of the moment. Many artists have depicted Simeon holding the infant Jesus. Often, he looks very stilted, or formal, almost like he is holding an inanimate object, but my favorite is by a modern-day religious artist, Ron DiCianni. His interpretation is of an elderly man, head lifted heavenward, eyes closed, tears streaming, clutching that baby closely. His heart seems overflowing with almost indescribable profound gratitude and relief, as perhaps other pains and struggles melt away. He is clutching this baby, so protectively, yet so lovingly, at peace.



For Simeon, all of his hopes and prayers were for the longed for prophecies to be fulfilled- for the end of oppression, for the restoration of God's people, for life to have abundance and joy and a future. For a Savior to come into a weary world. These things perhaps speak to our hearts even now.

The Holy Spirit moved in him, as in Mary, birthing hope for salvation in the here and now. He was inspired, believing, hoping and trusting that he would meet the one God promised would come.

All of those yearnings found themselves embodied in this tiny, days-old baby. It may not have been how he imagined God would act, but if that is so, no one focused there. What fills this moment is the overpowering vision of God's love come to life. The culmination of emotions and prayers gathered in this embrace. God has blessed Simeon.

And then Simeon blesses God.

That little phrase catches me- the gospel doesn't say that Simeon praised God, or thanked God- he blessed God. Simeon is cradling God as a baby in his arms. Almighty God, infinite love embodied in one so small. I wonder if we can imagine ourselves there, holding Christ in our hands?

It reminds me of teaching our little girls to cup their hands to receive the bread of communion, like you are cradling something precious. One of the moments I most cherish in person, is when some come forward for communion, instead of reaching out, they cradle their hands. I watch eyes meet, and follow that tiny wafer as it is placed in the cradling hands. Some pause with tears of fulfillment or gratitude in their eyes, like the culmination of wherever they had been, being met by the promised Savior who lets them hold him for that moment.

Holding Christ lovingly as a sacred and beautiful blessing, before carrying that blessing on in peace.

I confess my hopes and prayers are for that day to be in person to come again. I know more fully how Simeon must have felt before that day in the temple with Jesus. But I also now imagine how he walked on holding after that precious encounter, holding it close to his heart. In all the days that followed, that blessing remained.

We are given the gift of not only encountering but embracing Jesus, born for us. You may not have considered it, but we too get to hold the baby and be filled with the love of the ages meeting us. It's not the image that fills our hymns but maybe it should, being given the blessing of nestling baby Jesus. Holding this frail and yet mighty gift of God's love.

Perhaps we ponder how it will be to next hold the sacrament, but in the meantime, how are walking with the blessing we who have held the Christ child already retain?

How does holding the Christ child change how we move in the world as those who are given the gift of holding Jesus, dwelling with us?

I think about that baby. When we are holding a baby or something that is precious to us, we move differently in the world. We are more aware of who and what is around us that we don't want to bump into. We don't want anything to endanger what is most precious, We move more gently, more peacefully, with more intention. And we want to show off the baby.

And I wonder how might we be changed by remembering others around us are holding the promised baby too?

Amidst all our hopes and fears of all the years, we are given this precious gift. If we allow that image to guide us, and remind us that we really are meeting and bearing the Child in the world, maybe we would rush less, push less, savor more, love more.

May we pause this day and allow this divine love and blessing to fill us. The world still has it weariness, but may we remember we carry this blessing and peace.

Amen.

"Simeon's Moment" by Ron DiCianni, reproduced with permission of the artist. www.TapestryProductions.com.