

Living in Light of Eternity
 Psalm 148; Luke 2:22-40 – First Sunday after Christmas
 December 31, 2017
 The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

What are you looking forward to? The season of waiting we call “Advent” is over. All the Advent candles and Christ candle are lit. Here we are on the First Sunday after Christmas and the very last day of 2017: A day that calls for some reflection on the year gone by and the year just about to bust open at the stroke of midnight, tonight. Anybody here ready for our brand, new year to begin? Before we uncork the champagne, let’s think for a moment. What are you really looking forward to, hoping for in 2018? For yourself, your family, our church, our nation, the world? Take the pencil in the pew rack, and write the first three things that come to mind on your bulletin. Or, if you prefer, make a mental note of the first three things, large or small, that pop into your mind. What three things are you are looking forward to in 2018? Go.

If I asked Mary and Joseph that question on day 40 of baby Jesus’ life, I’m willing to bet that they were looking forward to one full night of sleep, as they headed to Jerusalem to fulfill their religious obligations there. I imagine they were exhausted and exhilarated. Not quite sure of what they are doing as young parents and also wondering just what kind of baby they are now raising. If you think about it, in some ways, saying “yes” to the Angel Gabriel was the easy part. Certainly saying “yes” to such an extraordinary request took amazing faith. But actually raising this baby Jesus 24/7? That’s the hard part.

Remember the day you left the hospital with your first baby? This very tiny, yet very demanding entity, wrapped expertly by the nurse, put into your arms to take home and raise? That’s when the panic can set in, underneath the balloons and the smiles as you are being wheeled to the door of the hospital. I remember vividly the day in late August of 1987 when we were collecting ourselves to leave the hospital with our first newborn baby, Emily Sarah. The hospital gave us very specific instructions about umbilical cord care. But what about everything else? My mom was there at the house the first few days, so we still had a great safety net to fall back on. But then she went home and there we were. Now what do we do? Where are the operating instructions when we need them?

Let’s think about Mary and Joseph: They didn’t have any “How to swaddle your baby” YouTube videos to watch. And they probably didn’t have a safety saddle for the donkey ride home, either. All they had was this vulnerable, tender baby who needed to be fed and changed every night and every day. And talk about expectations, everyone from angels to shepherds to kings had told them: this little guy is none other than the Messiah, the Lord.

Bleary-eyed and bewildered by all that had taken place, Mary and Joseph may have been wondering *why* God chose them and just how they were doing so far with this big new job as they walked into the temple that day. They were a Jewish couple practicing their religion following the Torah, the holy law regarding childbirth, for the child and the mother to the letter. Eight days after the birth of a son was the day to circumcise him and so they did. Check. Now, 40 days after the birth of Jesus: the mother and son had to go to Jerusalem to the temple to redeem the son and purify the mother. That was the law in Exodus 34 and Leviticus 12. In

today's scripture lesson Luke repeats five times that they were proceeding according to the "law of the Lord." They were going by the book, as they traversed this new, and to our eyes, precarious plan for salvation.

You may be wondering about these laws: Redeem the child, purify the mother: What's that about? In those days, they believed every firstborn son of the people of Israel, belonged to God. Therefore a law was set forth in Exodus that the child must be redeemed from God and given back to the parents, by offering an animal to God in his place. Purification of the mother had to do with their belief in the sacred and dangerous power of blood, which held the power of life. The blood of childbirth rendered women "unclean" because the blood flow gave women a dangerous power that they needed to be released from, before they could safely reenter ordinary society. At the birth of a son the period was forty days, after which the woman could come to the temple with an animal offering to be purified, rendered "clean" and allowed to reenter society.

Luke specifies that Mary and Joseph brought turtledoves or young pigeons as their offering. This detail signals just how poor Mary and Joseph really were. Turtledoves or young pigeons were acceptable substitutes for a lamb, if the mother cannot afford it, so we are told in Leviticus 12:8. Another reminder that the parents whom God chose to birth and raise the Lord of Lords and King of Kings were of the poorer, working class. Mary and Joseph had made it to day forty when our story begins. Yay them! We can't really know what they were looking forward to that day, but we do know that something extraordinary happened when they got there.

Just as they entered the temple, a strange older man approached them. There must have been something about him they trusted, because before they knew it, they were letting this man named Simeon take their baby into his arms. He was full of energy and anticipation. The air around them pulsed with possibility. Maybe, just maybe, God was about to reveal something, a glimpse of a vision that would help them to see more clearly how this squirmy baby of theirs was going to turn into the Messiah, the Lord.

This strange, man named Simeon, we are clued in by Luke, was a prophet who kept his eyes on God and let his path be directed by the Holy Spirit. In verse 25 we are told, "this man was righteous and devout, "looking forward to the consolation of Israel." Simeon was looking forward to the salvation of Israel, to be accomplished by the long awaited, much anticipated Messiah, the Savior. Simeon had been waiting many years for this. Do you think in all those years he was expecting the consolation of Israel to appear in the form of a vulnerable baby born to a poor couple from a tiny, obscure village?

I don't. I imagine that Simeon was also surprised. His long wait was over. But this baby? Now? Only the Holy Spirit could have given him the vision and the insight to see and to seize this moment for what it was. Perhaps at first glance so much less *and* so much more than what Simeon had anticipated. God's gift to Simeon was just a glimpse and a passing moment of connection. A chance to touch and bless and move on. In this short exchange, there was so much more. We are told prior to seeing Jesus, Simeon had been looking forward to the consolation of Israel, but in this divine moment: Simeon's vision was expanded. Did you catch that shift? It's subtle, but significant. After all those years of anticipation, when he actually sees the baby Jesus, the revelation extended to include all the world: "a light for revelation to the

Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” This was a salvation vision that was far wider than he had ever imagined: Simeon’s moment of epiphany. And I’m guessing his words outstripped his understanding of what he was actually saying.

But that was not all. This way of salvation would not be pain free or easy. Simeon issued a somber, chilling warning to his mother Mary: Her baby boy Jesus had a hard road ahead that would cause her pain. Deep pain. A sword would pierce her own soul. Overcoming sin and death with Divine Love was going to be a mighty battle with opposition at every turn. Widening the lens of our compassion comes at a price. What had she said “yes” to? Perhaps the hardest part was still ahead of her.

Just then, Anna, the prophet appears on the scene and has the same “epiphany” or “showing” as Simeon: this was the child whom God had sent to redeem the world! Could this be just what Anna had been praying for night and day for over 60 years? Right here, before her very eyes? Anna, Luke carefully identified in our story as being from the tribe of Asher, not a priestly tribe. Not the tribe known for proclamation or cutting edge prophecy. Single, poor, marginalized Anna was in the right place at the right time and she saw and she believed. And she could not remain silent. Old Anna, from the humble tribe of Asher, was the first one to proclaim salvation through Christ right there in the Temple.

This is an amazing and often overlooked story in our sequence of infancy narratives. In it we are given a great gift. We are given a glimpse of how to *live in light of eternity*. We get to see Simeon, Anna, Mary and Joseph on the one hand, going about their regular day, doing the next best thing they know to do. And then the Holy Spirit catches fire: Their divine exchange enlarges the vision and deepens the insight for all four of them.

These older prophets and prayer warriors give these young parents affirmation, words of wisdom and warning. And for Simeon and Anna, just seeing the baby Jesus was enough. Simeon was ready to depart this world in peace. Anna started sharing the Good News. Not because they had seen the whole story. Nor because they had it all figured out. But because at that very moment they were *living in light of eternity*. Simeon could see, could embrace, and be at peace with his small part in the big plan. Living in light of eternity, Anna could speak out and share the good news, as she never had before.

What about us? How can we choose in 2018 to live and move and have our being ever more fully in light of eternity? Let’s think about what we need to let go of that is not so important really; and what we need to grab onto and work for, with all our muster and might. How can our daily lives could possibly connect to the power that raised Jesus from the dead, the LOVE through whom all things are possible? This is not easy. We don’t all get to have a Simeon hold our child and bless us so directly. With so many competing voices shouting at us, how *do* we “hold fast to what is good” How do we keep our eyes and hearts open to see and embrace the Light that will set us free from our pettiness, our fears and insecurities that can eclipse this gift that is all around and within us?

I want to share a deep insight and answer to this question written by Steve Hayner as a journal entry on Dec. 9, 2014. Dr. Steve Hayner had been the extremely successful President of Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia for five years when that April during Holy

Week, he noticed symptoms that led to a diagnosis of pancreatic cancer spread too far to operate. Cancer has a way of making things get very real very fast. It tests our metal and shakes us to the core. His journey since that point became a daily trial that he and his wife, Sharol, (a good friend of mine) chose to share through journal entries on the Caring Bridge web site that year. He wrote these words on December 9th, which turned out to be about eight weeks before he died and entered the church triumphant. His words offer insight on "living in light of eternity" that I want to share with you today as we stand at the threshold of a new year, a good time to consider how we might live the year ahead in a different light:

Steve Hayner wrote:

Life can be confusing like this. We go through times that are encouraging and times that are discouraging. Often our feelings about what we are feeling are themselves confusing. Honestly, it's difficult to maintain a consistent perspective unless you are a person with an unusually stable personality.

When our children were teenagers, and going through a stage where it seemed like every little thing took on immense proportions, I used to say to them, "So what do you think this is like in light of eternity?" In other words, is this really worth the fuss? But I have realized that it's not just kids who have a tough time with perspective. It's all of us. We blow so many things out of proportion. Little things become huge issues. And even big things become issues that seem much bigger than they probably are. Whether it is a stressful circumstance, a difficult relationship, a confusing problem, or a shameful failure, there is so much in our lives that feels like it will overwhelm us.

But the fact of the matter is that "in light of eternity" most of what we face takes on a different proportion. Circumstances pass. Relationships can be healed. Even horrid failures are cut down to size by time and by God's grace at work in our lives.

Living with a life-threatening, terminal disease has a way of providing a different perspective. At least it can. Eternity is a little closer--a little more tangible... How do I live with consistency from day to day when my circumstances continue to vary?

What seems to be important now, as it has been throughout my illness, is that I keep my eyes on those things which remind me of eternity. There are loving relationships, for example, which call me back. And there is the centrality of joy, gratitude and service to be considered every day.. All of these qualities keep my heart facing eternity rather than wallowing in inward confusion. It is the eternal focus that keeps me steady. Love embraces me. Joy uplifts me. Gratitude settles me. Service focuses me away from myself and back on the lives of others. When I lean into love, joy, gratitude and service, I worry less, because eternity surrounds me and God's grace upholds me.

What does the inconsistency in my health mean in light of an eternity which is already assured? Ultimately day-to-day inconsistency means little when I live with my hand firmly held by the One who is the same yesterday, today and forever."

Living in light of eternity, Old, old Simeon with his failing eyes, could see the salvation of the world in this tiny Jewish baby. He offered blessing and warning: the way of Jesus would yield

pain and controversy, but also salvation & healing for all. Widowed, sidelined and silenced Anna saw Simeon blessing the child filled with the light of eternity, she started to speak with a new voice to all who were looking. Their wait was over and so is ours. If we remember to open our eyes. If we choose to look for Jesus and embrace the part we are given in making LOVE visible.

God broke the silence with the cry of a baby boy. "I Am Who I Am" come to be one of us. From the pain and blood of childbirth to the betrayal, the rejection, and the agony of the cross. God became flesh: Jesus felt your pain, Jesus wept salty tears; Jesus bled (there is power in the blood) in order to heal our world of hurt. Jesus showed us the way to repair and rebuild what has been broken, the way to restore what has been devastated. We did our worst and God chose to raise Jesus from the dead. Showing us that LOVE wins. God has done God's part. What about us?

The waiting is over. Our Advent wait has brought the Christ child. Yup: in some ways we're still pretty much the same people with the same problems, same hopes and fears we had before Christmas. What's really different--except that we may have some new cool stuff, other stuff to return, and more than the usual amount of garbage and recycling in our bins? What can be different is right here (eyes) and right here (heart).

In the light of eternity, what are you looking forward to? This year, when you get into a state of high anxiety or confusion, remember to ask that one question: "How does this matter in light of eternity?" Let the Holy Spirit fire illuminate that eternal light on your situation however small or large. Hold firmly to Jesus' hand in every situation, especially the ones that are hard. Instead of just looking for a quick fix, let God expand your vision to see what the pain may be teaching you. Looking for Jesus every night and day will expand our vision and deepen our compassion.

When our younger daughter, Hannah, was about three years old she used to stand by our bed when we were still sleeping early in the morning and quietly say to one of us, "Open yo' eyes." She stood there, just waiting patiently for us to wake up. I hear God saying to me, to each of us, and to all of us, "Open yo' eyes!" Look and see the world in Light of Eternity. What does God want us to see? What do you suppose God is looking forward to in 2018? What is Jesus waiting for? No mystery there. Jesus has proclaimed to us: Good news to the oppressed; binding up the brokenhearted; proclaiming liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners; comfort for all who mourn; saying "yes" to the work of building up, raising up, repairing what is ruined and devastated. Breaking the cycle of fear and revenge; looking for Jesus in eyes of those we do not understand.

How do we do that? One word, one gesture, one touch at a time; Your word, your action, your choice to open your eyes a little wider, to let God into your heart a little deeper. No one else can do your part, but you. Take a look at your list of three things you that are looking forward to in 2018. Live into them in light of eternity. In this New Year, let us live each ordinary and each extraordinary day in light of eternity. Amen.