



“I believe, I believe, I believe.”
Scripture – Luke 2:22-40
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, December 30, 2018

“I believe, I believe. It’s silly, but I believe.” Susan Walker repeats this refrain in an effort to convince herself that Santa Claus *is* real, and that he has managed to find the gift this little girl’s heart desires — a picture-perfect house for Susan and her mother to live in. Many of you know Susan Walker. She is the precocious child at the center of the 1947 classic, *Miracle on 34th Street*.

At this point in the film, Susan has grown quite fond of the “nice man with real whiskers” whom her mother hired as a last-minute replacement to play Santa in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade. As the story unfolds, we learn that this jolly, old man, who goes by the name Kris Kringle, is not merely *playing* Santa Claus ... He *is* Santa Claus. And, though Susan was never allowed to set aside common sense to embrace the magic of Christmas, she has dared to believe that Kris Kringle is exactly who he says he is and that he has the wherewithal to grant her Christmas wish.

But when Susan rushes to the tree to examine the gifts waiting for her on Christmas morning, there is no sign of the gift Kris Kringle promised to get for her. Yet — with a little encouragement from her mother — Susan holds onto hope, and begins reciting her own personal mantra: “I believe, I believe, I believe.” In Susan’s case — belief is fulfilled. Kris Kringle sends Susan and her mother on a drive that takes them past the very home she had requested for Christmas. When Susan jumps out of the car and runs up the hill, she discovers an empty home ready for a family to move in, with a bedroom just like the one she imagined and a backyard swing waiting for a little girl to come play ... And a sure sign that this gift was Santa’s doing — the cane that Kris Kringle has carried throughout the film leans against the fireplace. In the end, little Susan Walker gets her wish. She delights in a promise fulfilled and sees that her faith in Kris Kringle has not been unfounded.

Now a childhood’s exercise in believing beyond the limits of common sense is different from the mature faith of the characters we meet in today’s Gospel reading. And I’m not just talking about the *object* of their faith, which is a big difference indeed. Susan is a young girl who has been raised to be skeptical. Until Kris Kringle shows up in New York City, there has been no room for magic or imagination in little Susan Walker’s childhood. She doesn’t even entertain the possibility that Santa could be real until he’s standing right in front of her, real whiskers and all. Unlike her peers — Susan has not spent Christmas mornings looking for reindeer hoof-prints in the snow. She has not examined the Living Room carpet for traces of ash and soot, or counted the cookies left on the plate by the fireplace. Susan has not spent her childhood looking for signs that the magic is real. Rather, she opens herself to possibility, and — within a matter of days — receives proof that her new-found belief in Santa Claus is well-founded. Needless to say, Susan Walker has not practiced the discipline of waiting with expectant hope. Of trusting year in and year out that promises will be fulfilled, that her faith is not in vain.

Anna and Simeon, on the other hand, have spent their lives watching and waiting for a sign that age-old promises will be fulfilled — promises that God will draw near to redeem their people. These faithful souls have practiced this discipline — Simeon, as he has surveyed every new face in the temple court, wondering if *this* is the one to redeem Israel; Anna as she has fasted in the temple night and day for some sixty years. These two have trusted, and hoped, and prayed for God to prove faithful, for God to send the long-awaited Messiah. Yes, Anna and Simeon’s experiences of faith are quite different from little Susan Walker’s. But, still, I imagine them repeating her practiced refrain: “I believe, I believe, I believe ...”

I imagine Anna murmuring “I believe, I believe” over the growls of her stomach, as she fasted and prayed for the redemption of her people. And I imagine Simeon whispering to himself, “I believe, I believe” as he hobbled down the temple steps, disappointed after another day of waiting in vain for the Holy Spirit to blow the Messiah his way. I imagine that — some days — this mantra was the only thing that propelled Simeon back to the temple and that inspired Anna to kneel in prayer. Because there are days when faith does not come easily. Days when hope seems futile and salvation, a distant dream. Days when the notion that God will follow through on a promise seems a fool’s fantasy. There just are days like this, even for the most righteous and devout of God’s people. But — despite these days — these two righteous and devout servants of God watch and wait for the promised Messiah. Year in and year out, Anna and Simeon go about their routines and rituals — Anna waking each morning to the sound of worshippers examining the turtledoves and pigeons for the *right* one to offer up to God; Simeon wandering around the temple courtyard, surveying the pilgrims from Galilee and Jericho and Bethlehem in case the Messiah might be hiding in the crowd. Always anticipating the moment of joy, always anticipating the moment of fulfillment when they will see the Messiah materialize in their midst.

“I believe, I believe, I believe.” I have to wonder — during these years of waiting — how many babies did Anna and Simeon watch being presented to the Lord? How many exhausted new parents did they see stumbling in, weary from sleep deprivation and overwhelmed by the obligation of dedicating their firstborns? Did Simeon ever imagine that *this* would be the way he would meet the Lord’s Messiah? Did Anna ever envision salvation dawning with the birth of a fragile babe? Did these faithful servants ever dream that they would behold something so extraordinary in this ordinary ritual, in the everyday occurrence of a faithful family practicing an ancient rite set out in sacred Scripture? Or did Anna and Simeon — like everyone else in Palestine — assume the Messiah would come in glory, riding into Jerusalem on a warrior’s steed to deliver his people from the clutches of Rome? Did they watch with expectant hope for crowds greeting their Savior with palms and shouts of “Hosanna,” and then — after another day of waiting — go to sleep uttering the mantra: “I believe, I believe, I believe.”

But today this mantra turns into songs of praise and shouts of joy! The Holy Spirit guides Simeon to the temple to witness the extraordinary in this oh-so-ordinary moment — a young mother carrying her precious baby boy, a father following close behind with a pair of unsuspecting turtledoves to be offered up to God. Simeon knows that this is not just another cherished child brought to be dedicated to the Lord ... this is *the* child, the promised Messiah, the One for whom he and the long-suffering people of Israel have waited. So, as soon as Mary and Joseph and Jesus enter the temple, Simeon scoops up the child in his arms and declares: “My eyes have seen your salvation! A light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel!” And — soon — Anna, the prophet, joins in, proclaiming: “Look! This is the One for whom we have prayed. This child will deliver us from all that holds us captive. This child will bring healing and hope!”

Years of waiting and watching and hoping and praying have led to this moment ... This surprising moment, when a common family brings in a not-so-common child and an everyday ritual overflows with God’s amazing grace. Simeon and Anna’s waiting is over. The community’s waiting is over. The Lord has fulfilled the promise. The Messiah has come; God dwells in the midst of the people. And, with this sign, these righteous and devout servants know that their faith has been well-founded. Anna and Simeon join the growing number of people to receive the good news of great joy that a Savior has been born, and they join the chorus of worshippers glorifying and praising God for all they have heard and seen.

We, too, have just proclaimed this good news of great joy for *all* people — including those of us who are two thousand years late to the party. “Gloria”s are still ringing in our ears, our knees still ache from kneeling at the manger. We have only just begun to rejoice that, “A child has been born for us!” For some of us, these glorious celebrations are the things that sustain our faith. The majesty of singing, “O Come, All Ye Faithful,” fills us with hope and joy. The peacefulness of a candle-lit “Silent Night” assures us that “all is calm, all is bright.” For some of us, these majestic moments are enough to remind us that God dwells among us. We come to worship on Christmas Eve to cradle Love in our arms. And we are so aware of Christ’s presence that we walk away from the manger anointed by a newborn’s spit-up and the Holy Spirit, still feeling the weight of God-Incarnate in our arms. For some of us, this is enough.

But, I wonder, how many of us are still watching and waiting for a sign of God’s faithfulness in this season of Christmas? How many of us are like Anna and Simeon — straining aged eyes, looking eagerly for a glimpse of God’s grace? How many of us kneel at the manger to pray for God to be made manifest here and now ... for Jesus to come into *our* world and dwell in the middle of the tsunami wreckage and in the hallways of the hospice wing and in the kitchen where your marriage is falling apart? How many of us are like Anna and Simeon, watching with expectant hope for the House of God to be filled with the *presence* of God? How many of us return to this Sanctuary — week after week, year after year — longing to see the salvation God has prepared for us? Sometimes coming with a generous dose of little Susan Walker’s skepticism. Sometimes trying to convince ourselves that our trust is not in vain. Sometimes propelled only by that familiar mantra: “I believe, I believe, I believe.” Because we all know there are days when faith just does not come easily.

Yet, still — like Anna and Simeon — we find that there are also days that the Holy Spirit surprises us. Not necessarily in the way that God surprises the shepherds, by sending a multitude of the heavenly host to share tidings so good that they inspire lowly laborers to seek out the Savior of the world. But through our everyday rituals — through practices so routine that we forget they have the power to reveal the Holy One in our midst. Through common things — like bread and water and wine — that, in an instant, make real a not-so-common grace ...

Like that day — not so long ago — when Dr. Jones poured water across little Leonardo’s forehead, and assured him: “The truest thing I can say to you is that you are a child of God.” And I could see from your joy-filled faces and a few tear-filled eyes that you believed that too. It just took the ordinary, extraordinary act of baptizing a beloved baby boy to remind you. And like that time, years ago, when a stranger to our community joined us for worship on Christmas Eve. She could hardly believe that she would be welcome at the Table. But some of you assured her that the Bread of Heaven and the Cup of New Life were for her, too, and she joined the throng streaming forward to take her seat at the Lord’s Table. I hear the sacrament touched her so profoundly that she asked if she could take her little, plastic communion cup home with her ... a reminder of the grace she tasted here, in God’s House. And like that moment many of you witnessed when a newcomer walked down the center aisle just before the sermon and urgently plunged his hands into the font, as if he believed that water had the power to sustain life ... which, in a way, it does. I don’t know what he was seeking when he came into this sacred space, but I believe he found it when some of you shepherded him to a seat and sat with him for the remainder of worship. And those of us who were blessed to witness this outpouring of love could feel — at least, in that moment — that God is in our midst.

They are just routine rituals — everyday expressions of faith. As commonplace as two sleep-deprived parents presenting their baby boy in the temple. But, sometimes, we discover that these ordinary moments become extraordinary, as the Spirit opens our eyes to see salvation. Sometimes God surprises us by showing up, just as promised, to bring healing and hope. And we rejoice that the One who is born among us as a fragile babe still breaks into our world, in ordinary, extraordinary moments that inspire us to proclaim: “We believe! We believe! We believe!”

Prayers of the People ~ Bob Stoddard

Spirit of the Living God, we cannot, like Simeon, claim to be righteous or devout, but you have come upon us too and guided us to this sacred place. We had excuses for not coming: too tired from all our Christmas preparations and cleaning up; too involved with family and friends, too preoccupied with other priorities or too burdened with worries. Yet you, O Spirit, have quietly brought us here today. Therefore, O God, reveal yourself to us in this hour of worship. Open our hearts to know that in confessing our sins we have been forgiven; in hearing your Word read and preached, we have been informed and inspired; in singing familiar hymns we have felt joy and in giving thanks we have acknowledged again your overwhelming grace.

As we go forth from this sanctuary, endow us, O Holy Spirit, with the empathy of Jesus as we provide support and comfort to Margie Lounsbury, Kay Johnson and others who are homebound, to Margaret Hodges, Joyce Ruston and others in the hospital, to those among us who are grieving personal losses and painful separations, to those contending with a frightening diagnosis or facing surgery and to family members and friends battling addiction. Bless our ministry to one another in our Church family, O God.

O Parent God, we pray in the name of the child Jesus for the staggering number of children in crisis throughout the world, including the 200 children in our state's homeless shelters; the countless Indonesian children affected by the tsunami, the hundreds of immigrant children separated from their parents at our border. We pray especially for the grieving parents of seven-year-old Jakelin Caal and eight-year-old Felipe Gómez Alonzo who both died in detention. We pray for the 700 Palestinian children held in Israeli military prisons this year, 2.5 million Syrian children who are refugees in their own and neighboring countries, the five million children at risk of starvation in Yemen. Grant us the will and the courage, O Christ, to speak up for these voiceless children and, through our giving and direct action help end their suffering.

In our own city, state and nation, we remember and pray today, O Lord, for Federal workers going without paychecks and the victims - and families of victims of gun violence. We pray for the families of the 144 law enforcement officers killed in the line of duty in 2018, most recently Cpl. Ronil Sing in Newman, California. We are especially thankful, O Prince of Peace, for the good work and success of our police in reducing violence and crime in Wilmington. May we be supportive of all efforts to make our neighborhoods as safe and kind and caring as Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood.

As we prepare for a new year, instill in us, O Christ, the discipline of true discipleship. Guide us to make wise use of our time, talents and resources to reveal your presence in our midst. All this we pray as you taught us saying: **"Our Father..."**