

Luke 2:22-40
December 26, 2021
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21After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. **22**When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord **23**(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 turtledoves or two young pigeons.”

25Now 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 opposed **35**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 seven years after her marriage, **37**then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped 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. **39**When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. **40**The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

When we were doing only online worship, one of the unexpected blessings of that time was that every Thursday night at 7:30 we would do Storytime with the kids and I would sit in an armchair and read a bedtime story to the kids who were connecting online. And the parents suggested to Erin and I quite a few books that we had never read to our kids, like the Winky Wonky Donkey and the Halloween classic, Room on the Broom. But one of the books we didn't get a chance to read was one that someone shared with me a few years ago called, “The Carrot Seed.” Do you know this book? Somehow I missed out on this book when I was reading stories to my children, but now that I have married children, I’m starting to think that maybe someday, I’ll be a grandfather. And I’m sure that one of the jobs of a grandpa is to read stories to the grandchildren, right? So I think this story, “The Carrot Seed” is one that I want to have ready for them because I think it might just be appropriate for the times

we live in. But it was written in 1945 of all years, when World War II was ending but the world was still filled with the devastation of the war, the holocaust, refugees all over Europe, and atomic bombs dropped on Japan, and now that the big war was over, civil wars were starting from Greece to China. And it was in that time that Ruth Krauss wrote “the Carrot Seed.” It is a simple little book, in which a young boy plants a carrot seed. One after another his mother, his father, and his older brother come up to him and say, “I’m afraid nothing will come up.” But the boy pulls the weeds from around the spot where he planted the seed, and every day he goes out and waters it. But nothing happens for day after day. His family is still doubtful. Then one day, “a carrot came up, just as the boy had known it would.” And not only that the carrot is far oversize, bigger even than the boy, far larger than anyone expected. (quoted from Ruth Krauss in *Feasting on the Word, Year B, vol. 1, p.150*)

Hope and faith are crazy things. How could Ruth Krauss write such a book about hope and faith having lived through what had just happened in the world? How could Simeon and Anna still have hope and faith in first century Jerusalem? They are occupied by Rome, conquerors of the world, there is no longer any real king of Judea since Herod died, where was there cause for hope? Still they keep hoping and praying and going to the temple and then one day they see this young couple bring in a child to be dedicated to the Lord. One day they plant a carrot seed. What tells them that this child, this baby, will be the one that they have waited for? We don’t know. Angels? The Holy Spirit? The whisper of God in their ears? Who knows. Hope is a crazy thing.

What is amazing now is that Simeon says his famous words, now I can die in peace. He hasn’t seen Israel delivered. He’s only seen this baby. But he feels his hope has been fulfilled. Reinhold Niebuhr said “Nothing that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime; therefore we must be saved by hope.” Simeon knows that. It may be the work of many lifetimes, but he knows that God is at work in the world, that God has not given up on his people, and that’s enough.

What about us? What would be enough for you? We live in a world with Covid, climate change, constant mistrust and misinformation. We we have reason for hope? What would you like to see and then you could say, “Ok, now let me depart in peace, for I have seen enough.” Grandchildren, great-

grandchildren? Your children happy, kind and living meaningful lives? Peace on earth? You may get those things, but you may not. Maybe you'll only get the seed. Maybe you will only get a little bit of what is possibly coming, like Simeon and Anna, would you be content with that? Would you be content that the world is going to be a better place? That your loved ones don't get everything they want or that you want for them, but they are moving in the right direction? The Carrot Seed is a lot like Jesus' parable of the mustard seed—we plant something small, but it grows beyond our expectations. But we have to remember also that if Niebuhr is right then we may not be the ones who see it grow, but we are the ones who need to plant the seed.

Did you plant any seeds this Christmas season? With all the family around, did you take the chance to forgive an old hurt, or to ask someone's forgiveness? Did you help a child to understand that Christmas is not just about what is under the tree for them, but what they put under the tree? Did you help someone to understand why we give gifts on Christmas, that many years ago God gave a precious gift to us? Did you drop some money in the Salvation army kettle? Did you plan in your Christmas budget to give away a percentage of what you were going to spend? Seeds, all of those are seeds.

Niebuhr also said, "Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore we must be saved by faith." When the carrot first comes up, it doesn't look like much of anything. Just a bunch of greens, one can't see the beautiful orange carrot growing underneath the ground. Just so the seeds that we have planted this year, in our lives, in the lives of others, in this church, may not look like much yet, but our faith tells us different. Sometimes our efforts don't look like much, sometimes they even look different than what we want. When we speak the truth, even in love, it can be difficult. When we have to repent of what we have been doing wrong, it can be wrenching to our souls. Growth can be painful at times and others may not recognize it for what it is. How many times were Simeon and Anna ridiculed for believing all those years when it was obvious that the Messiah wasn't coming? And when he did come, he wasn't quite what they expected was he? But they had faith, even when they could not see what was growing underneath their feet. Do we? Do we have faith, to keep going, to keep planting and watering, even though what we are getting

to come up isn't what we expected? It may not make sense yet, but it will—for we are saved by faith. Niebuhr also said, “Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore we must be saved by love.” Like many others, I love the Christmas eve service. The part I love the most is the half hour before the service starts. I love seeing people I haven't seen in a while, especially the children of this church who have grown up and moved away. It's then I try to take a few minutes and walk around and see who's here, what they've been up to, what is happening in their lives. It is a joy for me to know that they want to come back here. It helps me to believe that this is a place they remember as one where they were welcome and valued, that this is where they were loved. That is something that you make happen each Sunday, each day, that this is a community founded on love, the love God has for us in Christ and the love we have for one another. At our best, that's who we are. And this year, for those of you who have been with us in person, one of the hardest things is that one of the sounds of love has been too often absent, the sound of children—kids talking through the service, infants crying. In order to keep them safe, in order to keep each other safe lots of parents have kept their kids home. And I've missed that. That's what the church should sound like. Maybe that's the someday-grandpa talking again, but those are the sounds of a loving community. Planting carrot seeds, planting seeds of hope, nurturing them in faith, working together in love. That's what should be happening at Christmas time, and all the time. But now Christmas is almost over.

What happens now? Now in the words of the old prayer:

When the song of the angel is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost--To heal the broken--To feed the hungry--
To release the prisoner--To rebuild the nations--
To bring peace among brothers and sisters--
To make music in the heart.

Let those be the seeds we are planting.