

1 EPIPHANY  
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FIRST, MARSHALL  
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ISAIAH 61:10-62:3; LUKE 2:22-40  
*Hope Against Hope*

*Dear friends in Christ: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.*

*Prepare our hearts, Lord, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own that in hearing we believe and in believing we obey your will revealed to us in Jesus Christ. Amen.*

Think for a moment about how you would respond if I were to ask you the question, ***What are you hoping for in life?*** I guess the first thing we should do is come up with a common understanding of the word **hope**. And what better time is there to talk about **hope** with Christmas memories still so fresh in our brains?

Let's start with the *easiest* arena – or *maybe* it's the hardest!



In *economic* news, you may have noticed that last year's (2015's) Christmas season sales were not quite up to par. But expectations were high that 2016's ***Christmas commerce*** might just lead us into:

- a land of *milk-and-honey* filled with of *lots-of-money*,
- a financially filled ***promised land***,
- a seventh-heaven filled with seven-figure salaries.

**With that in mind, how do you think Wall Street would want us consumers to define the word HOPE?**

-covet, crave, want, wish, desire, demand, purchase, spend

With no shame intended, our capitalist economy wants us to define **hope** as **craving things in life**...Right?

This is not a **value** judgment, it's neither **bad** nor **good**, it's just the way our economic system works:

*A healthy economy – needs people – in the stores – spending money.*

But the problem with encouraging us Americas to **buy more things** is that it's a **lot** like encouraging a...

-liar to...not tell the truth...;

-a dieter to...have another dessert;

-a drinker to...have another cocktail...you get the picture.

So that's *Wall Street's* vision of hope...**but** is it **God's**?

**Now** let's ask: how would *sinful human nature* define the word *HOPE*?

In the 1991 movie entitled simply, Hook, Robin Williams stars as Peter Pan-ning. You remember Peter Pan, the boisterous boy, the plucky pre-teen, the courageous kid who was *never gonna grow up* – **did** and got himself an education, a wife, a job, two kids, a mortgage...and, **somewhere** along the way, he also got himself seduced into a very **adult** way of thinking that **life** is **all** about **success** – and, as they say, *nothing spells success quite like m-o-n-e-y*...money, money, money!!!



Well, Captain Hook makes a raid into Peter Panning's predictable, profitable, productive life and kidnaps his children. Hook then tries to turn the kids against their father by promising little Jack and Maggie that their parents don't really **love** them...that their parents are providing for the kids **only** because they are such needy and greedy children.

Then Captain Hook goes on to quote the self-centered litany of every child in every age: *I want a cookie! I want to stay up! I want, I want, I want, me, me, me, mine, mine, mine, now, now, now!*

**That**, I think, is what ***human nature*** at its basest believes is hope...that if I WANT it hard enough, the world will have to give it to me...but, again, is that **God's** definition of hope...?

Maybe we should look for our answer ***in the Bible***. Let's start by getting one fact securely set on the front burner of our brains: there are about 160 references to the word **hope** in the Bible – ***and not one of them is about wanting more money OR more things...***

Turn to our Gospel lesson (Luke 2:22-40) in the bulletin or in your pew bibles on page 935. As you heard earlier, it's the story of Simeon and Anna singing the praises of the baby Jesus in the temple.



When they arrive, an old man and an old woman both see the child and are somehow filled with God's Spirit. It leads them to speak of what it means to finally reach the end of their waiting, to finally feel the fulfillment of their dreams, to finally see with their own eyes the promise for which they had prayed for years...

We're told that the experience moves the prophet Anna to leave her day-after-day, month-after-month, year-after-year, decade after decade regimen of fasting and praying...to finally speak.

And speak she does – to anyone who will hear – about the good news, as the prophet Isaiah said, that this is the child who *has been born for us*, that this is the son who has been *given to us*, that this is the one who will be named *Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace*...that this little Lord Jesus is the Light of Life.

The sight of THIS child also leads good, old, Simeon,  
 -a man who was righteous and devout,  
 -a man upon whom the Holy Spirit rested,  
 -a man whom scholars believe was actually a Temple priest,  
 -a man who had been waiting for years for God to bless Israel,  
 -the sight of this child leads him to take the baby Jesus in his arms, to smile at the world, and say,

**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."**

How would you define hope for the prophet Anna???

How would you define hope for the priest Simeon???

It might be **easier** to ask: **what in these verses does NOT define hope?**

What a **fantastic** image of *peace*...

An old woman...and an old man...waiting their entire lives for a word of hope from God, that their nation would be saved. Yet on this day, when their aged eyes fall on that tiny little baby, they discover that their dreams, though lofty, were way too low, way too narrow, way too small.

Peter Mayer has a wonderful song called *Loose in the World*, as in GOD is loose in the world.

*The Word went leaping off the pages  
Breaking in the windows and leaping over walls  
All you asked for was a cool glass of water And you got a waterfall*  
Not only will this child save Israel...he will be the light of revelation to the entire world!!

There was a lot of talk during the last election about what this country needs in a leader. And, as it happens in most elections, about half the country voted for one candidate while the other half voted for another. But in spite of the rhetoric and our basic desire to want to control life, we were not called to elect the savior of the world, right?

As one Facebook post proclaimed,

*On the morning after Election Day, Jesus will still be King.*



Politicians come and politicians go, and none will ever fix the world's problems, or remove the sting of sin from our souls. Nor will you or I **ever** accomplish **such** lofty goals – as good old Martin Luther put it, from the moment we're born to the day we die we are always at one-and-the-same time, both *saint* **and** *sinner*.

However, it's also true that virtually every day of our lives we will:

- meet a family member,
- encounter a stranger,
- come upon a neighbor or friend with whom we can share a bit of hope.

Hope, like that of Simeon and Anna, hope that's fueled not by a desire for more things or more money, but by the desire to see God's gift of good news in Jesus Christ:

- nurturing the souls of our families,
- nurturing the souls of our neighbors,
- nurturing, even, the souls of our enemies!

That, I believe, is God's gift of hope...

So now, back to my original question, ***What are you hoping for in life?***

The question is neither **rhetorical** nor **idle**...in fact, it aims at the very core of our hearts. As the Swiss Protestant theologian, Emil Brunner, once put it: "*What oxygen is to the lungs, such is **hope** to the **meaning of life**.*"

You and I are called by Jesus Christ to be messengers of hope in a world that's dying to hear a word of good news. **Embrace** that call as **Simeon** embraced the **baby Jesus**, and **sing praises** to the Lord, as did the **Prophet Anna**, and share this vision of hope with the people that God puts in your life.

*May the God of hope fill you  
with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope  
by the power of the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:13)  
Amen.*