

December 31, 2017  
Luke 2:22-40  
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## **“New Beginnings”**

**Good morning and happy New Year! Christ has been born, and we are still walking in the light of that new promise. We still have a story to tell. The gospels don't share the same account of what happened immediately after Jesus' birth. The two gospels, Matthew and Luke, which mention Jesus' birth at all include different details about the story: Luke doesn't say much about Joseph, Matthew doesn't give us many details about Mary. We can kind of put the stories together -- in fact, that what we usually do. This gets trickier, though, in the days, weeks, and years after Jesus was born.**

**The gospel of Matthew tells us about King Herod, and the visit from several astrologers from the East, who ask about the new king. This is not good news for Herod -- a paranoid Roman puppet king -- and when he doesn't get a report back about where specifically that baby is in Bethlehem, Herod orders that all of the baby boys in Bethlehem be killed. Can you imagine what a terrible assignment that would have been for the soldiers who had to carry out those orders? Let alone for the parents of those infants? It's a horrible, ugly story, and one we won't linger on this morning. We'll meet those astrologers next week, though, when we celebrate Epiphany and the coming of the wise men. After Matthew records their visit, an angel appear to Joseph in a dream -- again -- this time to warn him to take his wife and infant son and flee to Egypt to escape from King Herod.**

**Luke's gospel tells a gentler story of Jesus' earliest days: a story which introduces us to a man and a woman who were not magicians or astrologers or kings, but would certainly have been friends. They appear nowhere else in the Bible except this account from Luke, and I think their story is especially appropriate for New Year's eve.**

I don't know what your plans are for the rest of the day -- mine will be fairly modest, mostly getting unpacked and trying to sort out what time zone I'm in after some travel last week. Many people, as you know, will be spending the evening drinking, gambling or generally carousing. There will be more sober, but still festive celebrations of kids at Camp Mack, or friends gathering to play games, or family gatherings left over from the Christmas holidays. These celebrations are geared around ringing in the new year: stepping across the threshold from 2017 into 2018. In some traditions, like first-footing in Scotland, the first person to enter your home in the new year is believed to set the tone for the entire year to come. New year's eve turns out to be a great time to consider this text from Luke 2 about two old people and a new beginning.

Anna is the woman who just visited our worship service. As you heard, she is a prophet, 84 years old. Luke tells us she's very old; no one here should take that personally: it was rarer to live to that age in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine, and the people who did were greatly respected. Age and antiquity were valued in that culture. Anna's compatriot at the Temple in Jerusalem is Simeon; we're not told how old Simeon is, but the Holy Spirit revealed to him that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. Simeon and Anna have been waiting at the Temple for a long time. Single people, united in purpose.

I think these old people, along with their counterparts, Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist whom we meet at the beginning of Luke's account of the birth of Jesus, have something to teach us about new beginnings and faithful endings. Here's a question which I suspect has been considered during late night conversations in college dorm rooms, as well as by families at nursing homes. I don't know, but I suspect the answers may be different at the beginning of your life than they would be at the end of it. You may have asked yourself or someone else this question. *Would you want to know the time and circumstances of your death?* That's the question which hovers over this story of Anna and Simeon, and to some extent, the gospel accounts of Jesus' birth and ministry. An awareness of our own mortality can sink us into apathy and despair, or it can keep us going, knowing that there are still things to do, and we want to accomplish those things while we can.

**Anna and Simeon give us a model both for waiting faithfully, and for being willing to move on when the time comes: this is a beautiful balance of acceptance and purpose. Simeon and Anna each praise God when they see Jesus presented for purification at the Temple; for Simeon, it means the fulfillment of a promise: God's promise to the nation of Israel to send the Messiah, and the Holy Spirit's promise to Simeon that he would see the Messiah before he died. Part of Simeon's song of praise is that now he can die in peace, because he has seen God's promise fulfilled. The other part of what we hear from Simeon is the darker side of God's promise; Simeon warns Mary that the future will be difficult: this child will be opposed by many, and a sword will pierce her own soul. Essentially what Simeon tells Mary is, "You have a very special child, and your lives are not going to be easy."**

**I believe that every new beginning brings a part of the past along with it -- that's because we carry the past with us. There are things about the past -- good and bad -- which we cannot change, and we deny them at our own risk. I know this past year has been difficult for some of you; perhaps it brought pain that you would have rather avoided. Maybe even pain which pierced your soul. A new beginning will not erase either the experience or the memory of pain, but it can help us to move past that pain. My prayer for myself and for each one of you at Creekside, is that with God's help, we can be a community of faith which supports and blesses one another, and shares the promise of Jesus Christ. Whatever we bring from this past year -- or years further back -- God's promise is for all of us. The same promise that Simeon and Anna rejoiced and gave thanks for: Christ has come! God has given us a hope and a future, a plan for salvation that is present for all people. This is not promise that the future will be simple or pain-free, but as we look into a new year, we are reminded that it is God who can heal the past we cannot change, and it is God who holds the future.**

**Part of the work we are called to do in the coming year is to determine the balance of acceptance and purpose that we carry forward together as a congregation. We have visionary, capable, and committed leaders on our Board and ministry teams to guide this discernment. But fine leaders, if they're going in different directions, will not get us where we hope to be. Great ideas need planning and resources and**

cooperation to become great realities; it may take time to get folks to commit to these ideas. Some people are likely to hedge their bets and not commit fully so if something doesn't go well they can say, "I knew that wasn't a good idea. I could have told you it wouldn't work."

What I pray for Creekside in 2018 is a willingness to risk hope. Whether you are old person who is waiting to see that God has kept his promise, or a young person who wants to be part of a future that looks different than the past, Anna and Simeon remind us that when Christ is with us, amazing things are possible: we need to be ready to recognize and rejoice when we see those possibilities. We need to be able to encourage one another when new beginnings present new challenges to overcome. We need to be willing to accept the past but not let it keep us from the purpose that God is calling us to discover together as a congregation.

I am not going to ask you whether you are making a new year's resolutions -- that's kind of a personal question, maybe it's none of my business. But I want you to know what I am committing to for the new year. I'm sharing this hoping for your encouragement and prayers, and with the knowledge that commitments that mean the most do get made just once a year, they are renewed weekly, daily, sometimes hourly.

My goal is to be the best follower of Christ and the best pastoral leader that I can be, by the grace of God. I commit to regular Bible study and daily prayer. I commit to pray for members of our church family, and listen for direction about where God is leading our congregation. I commit to give each of you the benefit of the doubt: I will assume that you love Christ and are trying to do what is best for Creekside, even if we disagree. I will respect your right to disagree with me. I will weep when you are weeping; when you laugh, I'll laugh with you. If you're laughing with me, and not at me, this will be easier. I will do my best to honor, respect, and thank you for the work you do and the talents you share. I will do my best to accept critique and criticism with humility and grace. I will acknowledge my failures, and ask forgiveness when I need to.

I will do my best to embody the values, the mission and the love of Jesus Christ, in this community and our larger community. I will

**never forget that God loves you and that Christ died for you, and that nothing can change the truth of that.**

**I don't know exactly what 2018 will bring for Creekside -- no human being knows that. But I have hope -- even more than that, I have faith--that God has a purpose for us as individuals and as a church. The fullness of the purpose is yet to be revealed, but we begin by accepting the past and looking forward. The story of Anna and Simeon is a story of how a new beginning can happen in the lives of the same old people. This is a day of new beginnings! Amen.**