

Return to Nazareth
January 1, 2006
The Rev. Barbara E. Davis
First Presbyterian Church
Psalm 148
Luke 2:22-40

As we wipe the sleep out of our eyes this morning, we find ourselves on the precipice of remembering and anticipation. New Year's Day, today, falls right in the middle of the Christmas season. The fact there is a season of Christmas and not just one day of Christmas is sometimes lost, but I dare say that most of you with whom I talked were putting the twelve days of Christmas into practice this year. You are seeing one side of the family on one day and another the next, you had two quiet days at home before you fly to see grandma and grandpa or before your oldest friend flies to New York to be here for the New Year's weekend.

It has been a week of rest, a week of recuperation, a week of unexpected warm weather, a week of helping your oldest child put the finishing touches on their college applications, a week of putting together toys you thought were assembled, a week of running to the store for batteries, to return gifts, to pick up another gallon of milk and a pound of butter. It has been a week of college football every evening, rather than having all the games crammed into one day.

It has also been a week of return; you have returned perhaps more than once to many different places. You have returned to home where you grew up and have now returned to your adult home in New York City. Your guests have returned home; you have said hello, goodbye, happy holidays, happy new year one more time. So that by the time we get to this Sunday in the middle of the Christmas season, we are ready for a day that marks our calendars and ourselves as brand new for another year. We have done a great deal of remembering and we are ready to do a little anticipating of what is to come the next time around. Our remembering sets the stage for our sense of anticipation to grow.

For the past weeks, the church unfolded before the world its ancient stories of expectation and hope. We asked the world to join in our peaceful vigil. Waiting, as you all know, is the most difficult part of any creative endeavor. Inherent in the act of waiting is the challenge of both communal and personal reflection. Here is where we make known our own passions and our own hopes for the days still to be revealed. Somehow we have to take this vigilance and hope forward into the New Year to sustain ourselves as we prepare to begin everything all over again. We have to learn to balance the ability to grieve last year's losses and disappointments with the appreciation of next year's opportunities and possibilities. For many of us, this requires that we give up control so that we might embrace a certain amount of spontaneity. This day is what a leap of faith entails - moving forward, even when we haven't cleared a path or mapped out a destination. Ready or not, like it or not, we are heading forward into a new year.

Obviously, there is little we can do to disrupt or advance the passage of time. Our work today must entail an understanding that although we begin today where we left off yesterday, in actuality we are called at this moment to make a new beginning. The

fragments and pieces that we haven't finished picking up and putting together will remain unchanged without our assistance. When we return to pick up yesterday's pieces, we return with a little more insight, because just like the passage of time from day to day we are never quite the same.

Every year there are news segments and newspaper and magazine articles about how to more effectively pick up those pieces; we are encouraged in the process of reflecting and planning our "resolutions: to embrace that we are never quite the same. Everyone professes that old joke about how their resolution for this year is to not make any resolutions, and an exercise that should just be a good conversation starter turns into one last task for the year.

I've never been one for resolutions, perhaps because I operate under my own high scrutiny year-round, but I do have several New Year's Day rituals to which I look forward. Along with a giant bag of chips and a bowl of salsa, with the sounds of the game in the background, every New Year's Day I sit with a pile of books and make of list of the top ten ones I want to try and read this coming year. Categories have become a problem, so I have resolved this by making a list of novels, poetry, plays, and non-fiction (at least from each category should be in the top ten) and then a secondary list of books I really want to finish in the coming year. These are books I have started, sometimes more than once, that I want to actually not have to put on the list next year. Needless to say, there is probably no better way to condemn a book to the shelf for the year than by putting it on the list. Nothing makes a book less appealing to my mind than having it on the list.

This year, a small crisis has erupted over this project. I can't find last year's book list; I have no way of evaluating how I have met with my expectations of year ago, there is no list to which I can return. My return is dependant only my mind, which remembers only one book from the "books I want to finish" list from this year, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a book I finished after several years over this past Thanksgiving weekend. With this victory in hand, I've decided not to look very hard for the lists, and there is a glorious freedom returning with only this remembrance of completion from the list.

When we transition from the old to the new, it can be complicated; it is not easy to find the balance of completion and hope that is needed. New Year's celebrations and rituals help us to bring order to the passage of time, but truly using that time to address the real emotions that arise in this transition is a complicated process. Part of what makes the process so complicated is that too often our return is only to the negative. Reflecting on our year in a way that constantly says, "I don't want to be like that anymore," devalues the things we did manage well. Now don't misunderstand, if we are honest, there should be a long enough list of things we wish we had done better, but it doesn't hurt to think also about what we did well or what we are thankful for from this past year.

In all of this however, there is much that seems beyond our actions and resolutions. It is hard to know what to do with the anxiety we feel about the future. We, like many of our sisters and brothers around the world, are living under these strange and chaotic times. The New Year will be born out of this chaos. If we are to assist in the return of the New Year, we must provide imagination and alternative voices to the world.

The story from Luke's gospel is important to hear on the first Sunday of 2006 because Mary and Joseph and Simeon and Anna bear witness to the combination that is needed to return in a new way in this New Year. This Gospel passage provides us with a

sense of completion. Mary and Joseph going to the temple so that Mary can be purified and Jesus can be dedicated puts an important closing ritual around the birth story. Simeon and Anna in their recognition and anticipation, voice what the parents cannot yet express, a hope for a future that is beyond imagination.

Mary and Joseph embrace this anticipation and recognition, but they know it is not a place where they can stay. They must take this child, this newborn son, and return to Nazareth. They returned to a complicated process of remembering and looking forward. They were no doubt remembering their life and expectations before they were visited by angels; they were no doubt trying to hold onto the joy and celebration of the birth, the star, the visitors, the amazement, all of which gets harder and harder to remember the farther away they get from Bethlehem. In returning to Nazareth they are embracing what Anna and Simeon put before them, they are taking the long view. Mary and Joseph are likely, even with all the joy, to have anxiety about the future. They return as new parents; they return knowing, as all parents come to learn, that a large part of this journey will not be theirs to finish.

As they return, it is the witness of Simeon and Anna as their guide. They bear witness to the continuation of memory and the anticipation of a future full of hope. Both Simeon and Anna recognize who Jesus is and foreshadow what he will do. The text is clear that neither one of them can expect to see the way the hope they hold in their arms in the baby Jesus will unfold. They are witnesses to a future they will not see; but in seeing the hope of the future, they were filled with praise. Simeon and Anna seem to embody Archbishop Oscar Romero's words in his writing that we are "Prophets of a Future Not Our Own" where he says:

*It helps now and then to step back and take a long view.
The Kingdom is not only beyond our efforts,
it is beyond our vision.*

*We accomplish in our lifetime only a fraction
of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work.
Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of
saying that the kingdom always lies beyond us.*

*No statement says all that could be said.
No prayer fully expresses our faith. No confession
brings perfection, no pastoral visit brings wholeness.
No program accomplishes the Church's mission.
No set of goals and objectives include everything.*

*This is what we are about. We plant the seeds that one
day will grow. We water the seeds already planted
knowing that they hold future promise.
We lay foundations that will need further development.
We provide yeast that produces effects
far beyond our capabilities.*

*We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of
liberation in realizing this.
This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.*

*It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning,
a step along the way, an opportunity for the Lord's
grace to enter and do the rest.
We may never see the end results, but that is the
difference between the master builder and the worker.
We are workers, not master builders, ministers, not
messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own.*

Now, along with Archbishop Romero, I don't take the word prophet lightly, and it feels a little bit strange to claim it as a mantle for ourselves, but if we are willing to follow the footsteps of Simeon and Anna, we are truly embracing the conviction of the prophets, that we work, not for the end result, but for the opportunity to be part of a new beginning.

In too many ways our world is just as difficult to find hope in as the world of Simeon and Anna. We are almost numb to the violence in Iraq, it has become such a part of the information we take in at breakfast. Devastation of wind, fire, rain, and earthquake seems amplified, rather than aided, by systems that seem woefully ill-equipped to help. Seeds of peace that are planted seem to often be hacked off as they reach for the light or worse, pulled out at their very roots. Our hope is often lost in frustration that things seem to continuously get worse. No amount of action on our part seems to have an impact.

Simeon and Anna can inspire us to act as willing partners in a future not our own. When analyzing Simeon and Anna's courageous witness to a hope-filled future, we are reminded that a hopeful future is not a future without pain and responsibility. Being prophets of a future not our own is an act of conscience. It is the ability to discern whom we will serve, the choice to live lives that respect that interconnectedness of all life, the courage and imagination with which we respond to the things that have been done to us.

Our world will always need witnesses willing to follow in the hopeful and imaginative footsteps of Simeon and Anna. Our world will always need people to assist with the arrival of a new future - a future that recognizes human life as a value that transcends political agendas. Our world will always need prophets willing to hope in a future that does not always look like there is much to look forward to. The story from Luke presents us with a challenge for the New Year. The story asks us to think about who we would like to become in 2006. The story serves as a way to concretely reflect on how we will assist others in becoming who they desire to be. The story encourages faithful reflection and action and commitment to a new future. The story encourages partnership, a willingness to fulfill our role. The story encourages trust in return, knowing we will be held up and supported.

The dawn of the New Year serves as a reminder that we are constantly returning to become people of forgiveness, people of compassion, people of imagination, people of transformation and risk. The beginning of the New Year makes me anxious. In the beginning I always long to see what will happen in the end. I don't thrive in times of ambiguity. I have a certain amount of faith that my work, my labor throughout the year is

making a valuable contribution to my family, my community and my congregation. But what I really want at this beginning is the assurance, that only an ending can bring, that I have involved myself in situations where my presence was needed. I don't want to miss the chance to know exactly what is possible.

Returning is a way to appreciate and understand one's ability to survive the transition from the old into the new. Like the writer staring at a blank page trying to give life to her words and ideas, we are returning to the New Year trying to give life to our promises and expectations.

Friends, we won't be able to read the concluding paragraph to 2006 on this morning. These are days when we have to live on faith and trust. Being prophets of a future not our own means that we re-vision our work yesterday for the sake of tomorrow. Despite the uncertainty, we can assist in the birth of the future with our choices of conscience and with our creative flexibility. In 2006 let us continue to bear witness people who are not afraid to return, full of hope in tomorrow's opportunities and possibilities.