



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church  
Asheville, North Carolina  
31 December 2017  
Sermon: "Holding On, Letting Go"  
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block  
Rev. Richard Coble

Galatians 4:4-7  
Luke 2:22-40

**Richard:** What a year!

**Samantha:** And tonight, we say goodbye to 2017! I can't wait to celebrate the new year, even though I don't like how the holiday mandates me to stay up till midnight. Don't tell me when to sleep!

**Richard:** Actually, I'm not a fan of New Year's, and it's not just because I have trouble staying up past 9:00, though I'm sure that's part of it. It's all the pressure that comes with it. Do you remember last year, we had just had this divisive election and everyone was on edge? I felt like the new year would bring some change, something new, but in many ways this year has felt heavy all over again.

**Samantha:** I know what you mean. Every new year feels like it holds so much promise - we look forward to it, count down till midnight, because we want to believe that it will mean a fresh start. And after a year of ups and downs in our world, country and individual lives, I think it's safe to say, we could all use a fresh start. Maybe finally this year all that we have been waiting for will somehow, some way be possible.

**Richard:** But it can also feel draining, right? Coming back to this place year after year, waiting and waiting for a fresh start. What do we do if our hopes for the new year aren't realized? What do we do when we have no assurance that what we have been waiting for or expecting for so long will actually happen?

**Samantha:** That's certainly something Simeon and Anna knew a lot about. They had been holding onto hope for a Messiah their entire lives - year after year - how'd they do this for so long?

**Richard:** And how did they feel when Jesus finally arrived? As a baby?

**Samantha:** Perhaps their story has much to teach us about how to balance what we are waiting for with what God is bringing to us.

**Richard:** Perhaps we need to hear their voices speaking to us now. What were thinking, feeling? How does their experience speak to ours today as we await the new year?

**Samantha:** What would Anna say? Richard?

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**Richard:** [ Anna's Story ]

We married young. That wasn't so unusual in my day. Yes, (laughs) we were just kids, he and I, Mark and I, my Mark. You see, love wasn't so important in those days. Marriage was more for survival, honor, but love, love wasn't necessarily part of it. But we, Mark and I, we had love; I loved my husband Mark, and he loved me.

Maybe it was because our passion burned so bright that it burned out quickly. No, I'm being ridiculous, aren't I? Because, you know, it wasn't passion that killed Mark; it was the war. Seven years? That's all we had.

After seven years of marriage I was still just a kid, well, in my twenties. How was I to know how much longer I would be here?

Years go by, years, and you just keep going. I'm 84 now. I've lived two lifetimes without Mark, but, but, I still miss him. How can I be this lonely? I miss him still. Maybe its age. I've outlived my friends, my family. There's the other women of the temple, but, I don't know, there seems always to be this distance between us, like a sheet has been pulled over me, and I see the world, the world sees me, through this screen, through this distance.

So, I wait. I wait and I pray, and I prophesy. I am Anna, the prophet. I fast, because I know, the salvation of us all, it's coming. Listen to me: It's almost here. Don't you expect it? It's got to be, almost here.

Not that the signs point that way. In 84 years, I've seen my share of tyrants on this land. When I was born, the Jews, we ruled ourselves. Our great Kings, but then Rome, that awful general Pompey conquered us, ran over our people, took our men, took my Mark.

We never had a chance. Tyrants, all of them; this Augustus calls himself the son of a god. Its heresy, is what it is, when empire is equated with God, when empire grants itself absolute power. Don't they realize that the judgment of God, the real God, is upon them, upon Rome, upon Caesar! Upon anyone who claims ultimate power over our souls and our lives, not realizing that our lives are already promised to God. Our God is coming. It seems far away, yes, but, but God is coming.

Can't you feel it? And when God comes, those who are alone will be comforted, those who are trampled will be lifted. "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low." It's almost...

Wait. Wait! Can it be? No. Yes! Yes, it's here! He's here, do you see? Do you see? Do you see him? Do you see him? In that old man's arms? That man, holding the baby? See how the Holy Spirit rests on them both!

Here, here is our salvation, the salvation of Israel and the Gentiles. Oh, but he's a baby! An expectation, come at last! Come at last today!

But what does this mean? I've been waiting for decades, my whole life, really, for love, for justice. My entire life, changed in this instant, seeing this baby, this grace come at last.

How will I release this expectation? What if it isn't what I was expecting? How do I make way for this reality, this child, just a baby, when I have longed for so much, expected so much, dreamed for so long?

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**Samantha:** Anna had been waiting for years with great expectations of a Messiah who would come and make everything right, but then she saw Jesus in the temple, and he was just this tiny baby.

**Richard:** It just goes to show you, sometimes the things that give us life don't take the form that we have been expecting.

**Samantha:** I know what you mean: Sometimes expectations can distract us from what is happening right before our eyes.

**Richard:** From what God is doing, right here, and right now.

**Samantha:** We have to let go of our own plans in order to make room for something new.

**Richard:** I wonder, what expectations are we all holding on to? What do you need to let go as the night sets on a long, long year?

**Samantha:** Where do your arms feel heavy? What is keeping you from making space for something holy and new?

**Richard:** Please take a moment now to write your thoughts down on this paper found alongside your bulletin. Then bring your paper up to the basket. Let go of what you have been holding on to and receive a fresh, blank piece of paper. We will be lifting up some of these thoughts during the Prayers of the People.

*(Congregation brings strips of paper up to the baskets).*

**Richard:** 2017, for all its difficulties, also brought some beautiful, unexpected moments, moments of grace. Being called to this church was such a moment. Last year, I had no idea I would be moving to Asheville; I hadn't even heard of Grace Covenant.

**Samantha:** I've been here for almost two and half years, and I have also learned to expect the unexpected. Ministry is always changing. Advent and Easter feel different each year, and often times some of the most grace filled moments come in those in-between, unplanned times.

**Richard:** Like the conversations we have in the Narthex after service. Or praying in the homes of the people we visit.

**Samantha:** Like welcoming in the women of Room in the Inn. Or the long van rides with the youth on our way to mission trips.

**Richard:** The life of faith is one of surprises - one that calls us to loosen our expectations and keep room open for whatever God lays in our hands. I'm learning that anew every day.

**Samantha:** For instance, we hear the Christmas story every year. We think we know all there is to know about Jesus' infancy. It can be hard to really be surprised, really be amazed.

**Richard:** That's why we need to hear Simeon. What can he teach us about what it literally means to hold Jesus in your hands - for the very first time? Samantha?

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**Samantha:** [Simeon's Story]

I have never held something so fragile, yet so powerful in my hands.  
Even when my son was born, all those years ago,  
I was too afraid to get too close to him his first days here on this earth - afraid that I would somehow break him,  
hurt him with my hands.

My hands – calloused and painted with dry blood from years of stacking stones,  
from years of crawling through the temple door,  
praying that my eyes would see what they most longed for –  
the Messiah standing before me.

The years have not been kind. Cruel, really.  
I can't remember how long it's been since the fever wouldn't cease, since she's been gone.  
I can't remember how long it's been since the sword pierced through his young heart –  
when the Roman soldiers burst through our door.  
Those were dark nights, lonely days.

There were times when people insisted that God has forgotten God's promise to us.  
There were moments when I felt that God had forgotten my name.  
How long must one wait for Messiah?

But every time I wanted to turn away, curse the Lord's name,  
a sensation would move through my thinning hair,  
like a soft wind in the early morning,  
and I was reminded again that God is here.

And I felt certain that the Spirit was speaking - I would live to see the Lord!  
And so led by the Spirit, I gave my life over to the temple,  
to God's holiest place in hopes that salvation would come...

But what's this? Not what I expected at all.  
God promised a Savior, a King, a Redeemer...  
and in my hands, is someone so small, so unexpected.

He doesn't seem afraid of me. He doesn't fuss or cry.  
I hold him up in my wrinkled palms.  
I bring him close to my face and hum the melodies of the ancestors in his tiny ears.

He feels like home. Like memories. Like something new.  
How am I to know all that he will do, all that we will say, all that he will face?

And yet I do know that the world is filled with pain and evil –and he will surely taste it all.  
But I trust that he will do all that is intended.  
I trust in his young parents to make him strong and tender.  
I let go of every worry and trust in this gift from God – of God.

And so I do what I must, what I can no longer hold within - I praise the Lord.

With a voice hoarse and weak, I shout with all my might:  
*Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, according to your word;*

With joy in my heart, I sing the strongest I can:  
*for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,*

With the corners of temple echoing with song, I rejoice:  
*a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel."*

I let go of the burdens of life and I hold God high in my hands,  
I hold the hope that salvation brings.  
I hold the promise that God has come, that God is here right here.

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**Richard:** Just think about Simeon and Anna with that baby, not knowing what to expect, having their worlds turned upside down.

**Samantha:** He surely wasn't what they were expecting and maybe that's the point.

**Richard:** Their words today remind us faith is not really about expectation, about having all the answers. The essence of faith is trust.

**Samantha:** And when they saw Jesus, they realized God had chosen not to act alone. God was inviting them into God's work in the world. This baby was going to grow, to stumble, to fall - this baby needed them as they needed him. This was a relationship that was just beginning.

**Richard:** And when they sang praises to the Lord, when he was held up, Simeon and Anna were accepting this world-changing gift. They were promising to take part in all that God was doing through this child.

**Samantha:** Can we hold Jesus today, really hold him, as if for the first time? What difference would this make in our lives?

**Richard:** How will the gift of Jesus Christ be a gift to you in the coming year? What will you do with what you hold?

**Samantha:** Please write your thoughts down on your new piece of paper. And then hold onto it. Take it with you. Find a place for it on your mirror, in your wallet, in your home. Remember who we hold in our hands.

*(Congregation writes on new strips of paper)*

**Samantha:** So, wherever this next year leads, we move into the unknown with trust, because in our hands we hold Christ.

**Richard:** This child invites us to live in a new way, to work and grow alongside God, and to shape the world for the better.

**Samantha:** The work will be hard, the future uncertain, but what Simeon and Anna teach us through their words, through their story is that - God is with us.

**Richard:** Thanks be to God.