



January 1, 2012
Pastor Jeremy Vaccaro
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

The Creep that Stole Christmas: Loss Luke 2:22-24, 36-40

When I was in Jr. High my parents surprised me by getting an English bulldog. I always wanted an English Bulldog, but they were just so expensive that it didn't seem like a practical idea. But at some point, my parents found a really good deal and decided that they would split the cost with me. I always joke that I bought the front half, and they bought the back half. Since he was my dog, I had the privilege of naming him. So in my creative genius, I named him Meathead. Meathead was an amazing dog; he was probably the smartest dog we ever owned. I loved that dog. You ever have a dog like that? Well one day, when I took Meathead outside so he could do his business, he took off into the orange groves with the other dogs. He'd done it a few times before and would usually come back within a few minutes, but that day I waited a long time and he wasn't back. I can still remember today how deeply anxious and sad I was at the thought of him never returning. I remember walking the acres of orange groves behind house calling out his name with tears streaming down my face. I was nothing short of devastated.

Have you ever felt like that? Have you lost something that was invaluable to you? Have you lost a marriage? A home? A job? Have you lost a loved one? Have you lost hope? Everyone has lost something – some loss has been small and some loss has been great – most likely all of us have experienced loss in our lives at some point. My dog, Meathead, eventually came back later that day. I remember being so relieved when I heard the rattle of his heavy breathing approach the house. But for many of you, the things you have lost have never come back. What have you lost in your life? How has that loss impacted you? How has it impacted your celebration of Christmas and the New Year? Today would have been the 74 birthday for Diane's dad; the loss of him definitely impacts our celebration of these holy days. For some of you though, the losses in your life have stolen your joy – stolen your passion – stolen your hope. And every person in this room is at risk of the very same thing.

That's why our text this morning is so important. We're going to learn about a remarkable woman. Her loss was great, her hope was at risk – but when that first Christmas came – she was ready. There was something different about her, and I pray that today we will catch on to it. Please open your bibles to Luke 2.

Luke 2: 22-24, 36-40

²² When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord ²³ (as it is written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male is to be consecrated to the Lord"), ²⁴ and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: "a pair of doves or two young pigeons."

³⁶ There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. ³⁸ Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

³⁹ When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.

There are a couple of different traditions coming together in this passage that Luke, the Gospel writer, wants the reader to see Jesus' parents attending to. The first had to do with purification. Look back at verse 22, "When the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord." So, who needed purification? Mary. Jewish mothers who gave birth to boys were considered unclean for the first 40 days after the birth. At the end of that time, the parents were to bring a sacrifice of a lamb and pigeon to be offered up to God by the priest. If a lamb was too expensive for the family, they could bring two birds instead of one. So, Luke wants us to know that Joseph and Mary brought their two birds for their sacrifice.

But they decided to kill two birds with one stone, so to speak; they were also there to present Jesus, their firstborn son, to the Lord. A good Jewish family would be intentional to dedicate their firstborn son to God as a reminder that only the Lord can give life. These two traditions were the reason that Joseph and Mary came to the Temple that day. It sets the stage for what seems to be the most important part of this section of Luke's Gospel which is the manifestation of Jesus as Messiah by the two saintly prophets—Simeon and Anna. But Luke also wants us to notice that Joseph and Mary were being faithful to the Law as they raised Jesus.

In the midst of their faithfulness, God arranges for two old prophets to interact with the child and his young parents. We skipped the story of Simeon today, for the sake of time, but I hope that you will spend some time today reflecting on Simeon's words about Jesus and their significance. In a marvelous scene, Simeon took Jesus into his arms and praised God because in this child he saw the salvation of God. He went on to bless the family and prophesy about the impact that Jesus would have on Israel and the world.

Then, “coming up to them at that very moment” —while Jesus was still in Simeon’s arms—was a very special woman. Her name was Anna. We know very little about Anna. This is the only place we read about her in the scriptures. Look back at verse 36. She was a prophet from Asher’s tribe; God used her to speak truth about God and His work in the world. But along with this remarkable role we also learn that Anna had experienced tremendous loss in her life. After being married for seven short years, her husband had died.

This week, Diane and I will celebrate our 15th anniversary. My marriage to Diane has been an incredible gift from the Lord to me. She inspires me; she makes me better; she helps me live for Jesus. These 15 years have gone by in a hurry; I can hardly imagine losing her after 7—the dreams lost, the partnership lost, the hope lost—devastating. Yet, that’s what happened in Anna’s life. It wasn’t fair; it wasn’t anticipated, but she only had her husband for seven years. Most likely, before she was even 25, she became a widow. I know that many of you are widows and widowers. I can only imagine how hard that must be to experience. But, let’s all try to imagine what it might be like to be a widow for some 60 years. Anna never remarried – she never again experienced that intimacy, companionship, and security of marriage. Anna lost a lot. Not only did she lose her husband, but in her culture she lost financial security; she lost cultural significance. She lost her dreams of the future. And, maybe, because it’s not clear from the scripture, she lost the opportunity to be a mother. Her loss was huge.

How have you experienced loss in your life? I know that many of you have lost loved ones – husbands, wives, sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, friends. Human death affects us all, but it’s not the only way we experience loss in life. Have you lost your job? When you lost your job did you also lose your sense of purpose or your passion for life or your faith in God? Have you lost your marriage? When you lost your marriage did you also lose your ability to trust? Have you lost your business? When you lost your business did you also lose your courage?

What have you lost in your life? And how has that loss impacted you? Are you stronger? Are you harder? Are you closer to God? Do you still believe that God cares about you? Do you still have hope? Or has your hope died?

As we finish our Christmas sermon series this week about the things that creep into our lives and steal Christmas we must deal with the creep of loss. Loss impacts all of us. And it seems to me that what loss puts most at risk is our hope. When we lose something, it’s hard to have a great outlook on the future – it’s hard to have confident expectation that God is going to pull through. But hope is part of the good news of Christmas; it’s a HUGE part. The fact that God the Son took on flesh and made his dwelling among us reminds us that no matter what we experience in life—losses included—God loves us. As we celebrate Christmas, and even today as we begin the new year, we’re reminded that God is in the business

of making all things new through Christ. As followers of Jesus, we have hope – a confident expectation for the future—because of the saving work of Jesus in us and His promise to return.

But for some of us, the losses we've experienced in life have stolen our hope. They've crept in and swiped away our joy; they've crept in and crushed our spirit. How have your losses impacted you?

Anna had every reason to dwell in her losses. Yet, something was different about her. Look back at verse 37. "She never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying." Anna dedicated her life to worshipping God. We don't know if Luke meant that she literally never left the temple, but we do know that for some sixty years she had made worship her first priority. Even in the midst of her loss, she worshipped. Even on days that she didn't feel like it, she worshipped anyway. Do you think that had any impact on her? How do you think her worship mixed with her loss? Did it bring her husband back? No. But it nurtured her hope. Because of her worship, she kept hope. Worship keeps hope alive in the midst of loss.

Anna was old; she was a long-time widow, but she still had hope because every day she worshipped her God. Worship kept her heart and mind focused on the Lord rather than her own circumstances. Worship kept her tapped in to the reality that God is. Worship helped her to be close to the Lord so that she recognized when God was at work. Worship reminded her that God had not forgotten His people. Worship keeps hope alive in the midst of loss. So, in that moment, when she overheard Simeon prophesying about this baby boy named Jesus, she knew in her heart what was happening. She knew that Simeon's words were true! She knew that this little boy was God's salvation! So what did she do? Verse 38, "Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."

So often, in the midst of our loss, we curse God. We shake our fist at Him for not intervening. We question Him. "How could you have let this happen to me?" we ask. "Where were you God?" "Why aren't you doing something about this?" God's not afraid of your questions, but Anna—even if she had questions for God—kept worshipping Him. Even when her circumstances seemingly didn't change, she kept worshipping God day and night. So, when the moment came, and she heard Simeon's words and saw this baby boy, her response was thanksgiving to God – and that thanksgiving, that worship bubbled over to evangelism.

How was 2011 for you? Did all your dreams come true? Did you experience any losses? I can almost guarantee that you'll experience some kind of loss in 2012. The question is, how will you respond? Will you allow the creep of loss to steal away your hope? Will you allow loss to steal away your faith that God is still at work in you? Anna reminds us that worship keeps hope alive in the midst of loss.

She reminds us that God is at work, even in the midst of our loss, to make all things new.

Today is the first day of the new year. There's no way any of us can predict all that will happen this year, but we can choose what we'll make central in our lives. What if you nurtured a heart of thanksgiving to God this year? How would that impact your perspective on the things – good and bad – that you will experience? Anna's first words after hearing Simeon and seeing Jesus were words of thanksgiving and praise to God. What if you started every day of 2012 – all 366 of them (it's a leap year, you know) – with words of thanksgiving to God? Every single one of you, no matter how bad things might be, has something to be thankful for. If you started each day with thanksgiving, no matter how you slept, no matter what hurts in your aging body, no matter what hard thing you're facing that day, no matter what loss you're experiencing, it will nurture hope in your life. Thanksgiving nurtures hope. Worship keeps hope alive in the midst of loss.

Beloved, if you are struggling with loss today, spend time giving thanks to God for whatever you can think of—for the clothes that are keeping you warm, for the church with whom you worship, for the people that are sitting around you, for the Scriptures, and most importantly for God's salvation we celebrate this Christmas. Don't let your loss creep in and steal your hope. God is not done with you. If Anna would have stewed in her loss for all those years she would never have noticed God's incredible work that was happening in her midst. God is at work in you... and around you. So give him praise! Worship Him with thanksgiving that you may abound with hope through Jesus the Christ.

[Prayer time – a time of thanksgiving.]

- **REFLECT & APPLY TOGETHER:** Share your thoughts. Don't teach! Listen and reflect on God's word together; grapple with what God is calling us to do and be through this passage.

- **PRAY TOGETHER:** Tell the Lord one thing you are thankful for, and lay one concern before the Lord.

- **DIG DEEPER**

1. What do you think was the most important point in the sermon? Why is it important?
2. What other reflections do you have about the sermon by Pastor Jeremy?
3. How do you think the sermon applies to us as a congregation?
4. What is it that God wants you to do as a result of hearing this sermon?