29 December 2024 St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Christmas 1 Vienna, VA

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"Thomas, Simeon, and a God with Hands"
Text: Luke 2:22-40; Colossians 3:12-17

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Have you ever said something like: *I can't wait to get my hands on* . . . It could be that gift you saw under the tree, or that gift you really wanted. I can't wait to get my hands on that, make it mine, use it. But you can also use that phrase in a negative way, a vengeful way. I can't wait to get my hands on . . . that person who did that to me! Our hands possess things. Our hands can also exercise power. We can lend a hand, give someone a hand, raise my hand, shake hands, and hold hands. Hands can slap and hit and cause damage, but also soothe, comfort, and console. I don't know if you've ever really thought about them much, but your hands are pretty important. Amazing creations of our loving God.

Well, hands play an important part in the Christmas story. Of course, Joseph's and Mary's hands are important as they held the baby Jesus after His birth. But there's more. For this year, four days *before* Christmas and today, four days *after* Christmas we get important hand stories.

First, four days **before** Christmas, December 21st, is the day the Church commemorates St. Thomas the Apostle. You know him as doubting Thomas - the one who said, essentially: **I can't wait to get my hands on Jesus!** Because he said *unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe* (John 20:25). I always thought it interesting that his day falls right before Christmas, but it makes sense if you know that the flesh he insisted on touching was the flesh that was born on Christmas and laid in the manger. So with Thomas, right before Christmas, we get a foreshadowing of why Jesus will be born - for life and faith. And once Thomas' hands touched that flesh, that's what he got! Life and faith, and so confessed ***My Lord and my God!***

And then **second**, today, four days **after** Christmas, we heard the story of Simeon, who also **couldn't wait to get his hands on Jesus**. For he had been promised (as we heard) that ***he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ***. So that day, when Joseph and Mary brought Jesus into the Temple, Simeon gets the gift he had been waiting for, takes Jesus in his hands, and basically makes the same

confession as Thomas. He used different words, but essentially says, ***My Lord and my God!*** I can die now. You have kept Your promise. You have sent my Saviour.

And that Saviour *had hands*.

Well duh Pastor! Of course He had hands! What kind of mutant baby would He be without hands!

Of course. *But think about it*. Why was Jesus promised? Why did Jesus come? Why did Jesus do what He did? It is as if after Adam and Eve sinned, God said: **I can't wait to get my hands on them!** But not in anger, not for revenge, but to rescue them, lift them up, and bless them. So God promised a Saviour. He would come with hands. Hands of love and mercy. One of the criticisms of false gods we read in the Old Testament is that they have *mouths but do not speak, eyes but do not see, ears but do not hear, and* **hands but do not feel** (Psalm 115:5-7). But we have a God with hands. Hands that touch and feel and save.

First, they were tiny hands. Newborn hands. Christmas hands! Hands that weren't even big enough to wrap themselves around Joseph's little finger!

But **then** they grew, just like our hands grow. And as we heard at the end of the Holy Gospel today, they ***grew and become strong***, probably lifting wood and helping Joseph with his work.

And **then** when Jesus began *His* work, His public ministry, He's touching everybody! **He can't wait to get His hands on them!** He touches the ears of the deaf and they hear. He touches the eyes of the blind and they see again. He touches lepers and they are cleansed. He touches the sick and they are healed, and the dead and they are raised to life again. Parents bring their children to Jesus and beg Him to . . . touch them. He is a God with hands.

And then there are all those who touched Jesus - who **couldn't wait to get their hands on Him!** And He *wanted* to be touched by them. The woman who washed His feet with her tears. The woman who had been bleeding for twelve years. And so many more stories, because that's what you get with a God who comes in the flesh, a God with hands to touch and be touched. To save.

But there were others, too, who **couldn't wait to get their hands on Jesus**. Yesterday, December 28th, is the day the Church remembers when King Herod couldn't wait to get His hands on Jesus and so killed all the baby boys in Bethlehem two years old and under. And the Jewish Sanhedrin plotted and planned and laid traps for Jesus until they finally were able to lay their hands on Jesus and get Him

put on the cross. Which is where you **die a death where your hands are nailed down**. So He could no longer touch. They wanted to *stop* those healing, blessing, saving hands.

But, of course, they couldn't. Which is what the story of Thomas teaches us. Yes, Jesus was crucified and His hands were attached to the cross. But now He holds those same hands out to Thomas and says, *Touch me. Put your fingers into the holes in my hands*. And that touch brings life and faith to Thomas. And if Simeon made Thomas' confession, ***My Lord and my God***, just with different words, I think Thomas also made Simeon's confession, just with different words. ***Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace***, for not only my eyes have seen Your salvation, my hands have touched my salvation, my Saviour.

And even more important, **He has touched me**. My Saviour, my God, with *His* hands.

And He has touched you. No, His physical hands are no longer here to touch as they once did. He is touching now in a different way - but a no less blessing and saving way. For still Your gracious and loving God **can't wait to get His hands on you!** And so in the same way He touched through the prophets of the Old Testament and the Apostles of the New, so now through His Pastors He is using their hands to touch - to wash and forgive and feed. And with His touch, *we* now are the next in the long line of believers to confess with them and in their words. *My Lord and My God* we confess with Thomas in the Creed, and *Lord, lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace*, we will sing with Simeon after being touched by and having Jesus' Body and Blood placed into our mouths. And like them, through this touch, this gift, we have new life, and joy, and peace.

But then the question becomes: *What do we do with our hands?*

Well, surely, lots of things. But if we use Thomas' and Simeon's *words*, how can we not just *speak* and *confess* like them but also *be* like them; that **we can't wait to get our hands on Jesus?** But how *can* we, with a Jesus who is no longer here with us as He was with them?

Well, Jesus has told us how, before He ascended the cross. He said, *as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me* (Matthew 25:40). So you get your hands on Jesus by getting your hands on your neighbor - your spouse, your children, your parents, your friends, all those people God has give you in your life. When **you get your hands on them** and touch and serve and love and care for them, so you are to Jesus. And when **you get your hands on them** and touch to hurt or harm or persecute them, so you are to Jesus.

St. Paul put it this way, as we heard today: ***Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved,*** - or, we could add, *as those touched by God* - put on ***compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another . . . forgiving each other . . . And above all these put on love***. And we can have hands like that *when*, as Paul goes on to say, ***the word of Christ dwells in you richly***. For when Jesus and His Word dwell in you, and His Spirit dwells in you, your hands become His hands, His loving and forgiving hands.

So how are you using your hands? Who **can't you wait to get your hands on?** And why? Maybe we need to think about that a little more before we do the things we do . . . And then keep coming back here in repentance for the loving, restoring, forgiving touch of Jesus. To be refilled with His Word, that it dwell in us not a little, but richly. So that when the time comes for *us* to depart this world, it will be like Simeon, *in peace*. And it will be like Thomas, confessing *my Lord and my God*!

So think again now: Who **can't you wait to get your hands on?** Who has God given you as a gift to love and serve and care for? Who has He given you as a gift to do those things *for you*? And if your hands seem too small and too weak to do much, just remember that Jesus' were once, too. But as those hands were God's hands, so will yours be, and God will do great things through them. To judge how great is not for us to say. But as Jesus told us, those things we consider little and of no account, cups of cold water, words of encouragement, visits, compassion, and things like that, He considers those things great.

So be bold! Bold to love and serve, to help and forgive! Bold like Simeon and Thomas were, who took Jesus up in their hands in joy and peace. And know that Jesus first has, and will continue to do, the same for you. And when the Last Day comes, it will be the same: **Jesus can't wait to get His hands on you!** For the baby in the manger will be your God on the throne. You'll see the nail marks in His hands, and know: *my Lord and my God!* And those hands will take hold of you, and that day will be *better* than Christmas. For it will be a Christmas, a new birth **for you** into eternity, with a joy and peace that will never end.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Now the peace of God which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.