

Being Anna
September 24, 2023
Stone Church of the Brethren

Luke 2: 21-38

When the eighth day came, it was time to circumcise the child, and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord"), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, "a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons."

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple, and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

"Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word,

for my eyes have seen your salvation,

which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too."

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Anna: a prophet at the temple who was of a great age, someone who was always present in the temple.

When we read this scripture, so much of the focus is on the presentation of Jesus to the Lord, eight days after he was born. Maybe we think about the sacrifice of "two turtledoves or a pair of pigeons" that his parents were going to make. We think of the excitement of his birth, the life of service he is preparing to do, and the anticipation of his life. Maybe we think of Simeon, praising God with his flamboyant speech, but we don't often think of Anna. I'm going to read her part again. "There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her

husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.”

Anna. Anna, the old widow. Anna, the person who was always at the church. She was someone who society might have just dismissed. She lived at the temple and devoted her time to fasting and praying, worshiping all day and night. Her whole life that we see in this story was service to God.

Life could not have been easy for her. She only had 7 years with her husband, and then all the rest of her time she was alone. This was in a society in which widows were sort of the lower rungs of the social ranks. This could have been 60 years or more since Anna was 84 at the time of this story. Maybe she lived at the temple because she was poor and homeless, or maybe she lived at the temple because that was where she needed to continually be with her particular duties as a prophet. Either way she devoted her whole life to waiting and preparation, to be ready for when she was able to tell the whole community about Jesus.

As Jesus was brought into the temple for this ceremony, Simeon is the one who jumped up right away and made his presence known. He was flamboyant and took the baby in his arms to praise God. This is all part of his celebration of Jesus, which is good, but then we see Anna. She waited until the *right* moment to share her praise. She waited to capture that best moment to speak about the child who was brought to the temple and people listened - “all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” listened and heard when she spoke. She was patient and always there so she was able to find the way to share the news so that everyone could celebrate.

Who do you think of when you think of someone who is always at church, ready to see you, and ready to share? Someone who is the very fabric of the church? I have a few stories from around the Middle PA District of people I have met during the last two years as I served as moderator designate and now as moderator.

Saturday, 8 days ago, we had Heritage Fair at Camp Blue Diamond. That day is filled with good fellowship with people from all across the District. Many, many people help get ready for that day. Everything from cooking a batch of soup at their home churches to setting up the booths, to buying food and crafts or bidding on auction items. Every year, many of the same volunteers come to help make that day a success. One of those people that I’m going to share about is George Etzweiler. He is over 103 years old, and every year he comes to help direct traffic. Many years ago, he was the treasurer and worked in the bank at Heritage Fair, and then he passed that mantle to Sue Bruebaker. He continues to help out with the day and always takes a 2 hour shift to direct cars. Even at his “great age” he can continue to help with the ministries of the church. Many people are greeted as they come by George on their way to the Fair. He is a faithful servant, just like Anna.

Last year I had the privilege of celebrating a 150 year anniversary with Bethel. That was a day of remembering and joyous festivities. Bethel is one of the smaller churches in the District, but that day, the church was packed. Children, grandchildren, and people who grew up in that congregation and then moved away came home to celebrate. The faithful servants who are always there week in and week out for worship put together a wonderful day of celebration of their history and of service and witness to our Lord. One person that was remembered that day was Vernon Ritchey. He was another one of the faithful

servants, just like Anna. Vernon was a Sunday School teacher and deacon for many years. Every Sunday he included a poem from James J. Metcalfe. I have one to share with you.

My lips could call good luck to you
or whisper happy landing
And I could promise you the depth
of faithful understanding

But I am sure no other thought
or message would impress you
as lovingly or lastingly
as asking God to bless you.

And so I say God bless you, friend
in every good endeavor
And may his guiding grace be yours
forever and forever.

Although he is no longer with us, I could see that his teachings and messages of good news live on in the congregation.

Let's go back to Anna's world. The scripture says "at that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem." Who was she talking to? (all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem) This probably meant most of the Jews. They were an oppressed group of people who were looking for and expecting the coming of the Messiah.

What would our world look like if we went out in the street today and started to speak about the birth of Jesus? Would our community be receptive? If I went out and stood in the intersection of 17th and Moore with a megaphone to share this story, I'd probably receive a lot of funny looks and maybe a call to the police. Anna knew her audience. She had been patiently waiting to share this good news at the right time.

We must find ways to serve our community with the right message at the right time. This means paying attention to our community and seeing what the needs are and then sharing the right kind of help and support in a way that shares the good news. This might not need spoken words about Jesus. Our actions that show kindness and caring can share the good news for us. I have several more examples from around the District of how congregations are meeting the needs of their communities.

UBBC in State College recognized that prisoners in one of the prisons in that area are not currently receiving their allotted time outside. This is because the prison doesn't *have* an area in which the prisoners can go outside. They are currently working with some other organizations to facilitate the creation of an outdoor secure area so that the prisoners can have access to fresh air. ADD MORE?

Parkview partnered with a local women's shelter and turned their parsonage into a thrift shop. The thrift shop is run on volunteer labor and all the items are donated, so the money earned from that goes to support the shelter. They saw a need in the community and found a way to help to address that need. Anna's people needed the message of the good news, at the right time and she waited until that right time to share it.

Bedford provides the space for an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting every week. 40 to 50 people come to share in that meeting. Bedford is sharing in the ministry of accepting and caring for people as they are. AA isn't a religious service, and the words about Jesus's ministry to others aren't being shared at the meeting, but providing the space and acceptance for people where they are in their life is caring for others like Jesus showed us how to.

Another faithful servant lives on in Clover Creek's John's Way medical equipment ministry. John Scott Baird was someone who was part of that congregation and was unable to walk due to a genetic disorder. They have this ministry of collecting, cleaning, and then distributing medical equipment such as wheelchairs or walkers that are no longer needed by one person and sharing them with others who do. They have a whole building set aside for storage and distribution of medical equipment, all free of charge. This is in memory of John, and his faith lives on in their service to the community. Service and witness in the name of Jesus can take many forms, none of which are too small or unimportant. Let's take another step back in that story. Just before Anna's part, we hear Simeon's praise. "And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them" and they were (as I imagine) thrilled that someone else was excited about their new baby.

But then, Simeon "said to Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul, too.'" A sword will pierce your own soul. I wonder what was going through their thoughts. How does that fit with the joyful celebration of a new baby? From the very beginning Mary and Joseph had to deal with the foreshadowing of his death.

But then Anna came into the story. She had really been there all along, and was ready and waiting. I imagine that she could step in and share with those new parents that, yes, your new baby is our hope for a better world. Maybe she comforted them and reassured them. I don't really know, but I know that she had taken the time to reflect and was present in that moment.

I imagine that her grief from only getting to spend 7 years with her husband helped to prepare her. She held onto the hope of the Messiah coming. Maybe some days it was only a tiny glimmer of hope, but she kept that hope. Then, she shared that with the world. Anna didn't miss that one important moment she had been waiting for. She was prepared, and always there. She used the gifts that she had - her voice and years of reflection.

You can serve in any way - it doesn't need to be your voice. Middle PA Disaster Ministries has a ramp ministry. The people who serve as part of that group are really good at building ramps to modify homes to make them accessible to people who can no longer do stairs. They will go to the home of someone who needs a ramp to measure and make plans. Then they often build the ramp in pieces at one of the homes of the people in this group. They will take the pieces and install them at the home, often in one day. This makes a huge difference in the lives of people who are having mobility struggles. Disaster Ministries has turned sawing and nailing boards into the work of Jesus.

We all can serve, just like Anna. Anna, the old widow who lived at the temple, waiting for just the right moment when God did something new is an example to all of us. Be like Anna.