

Sermon Text: Luke 2:21-38

Sermon: Anna's Voice

Three short verses. What do they tell us? A family name and lineage. An approximate age. Social demographics: Woman. Daughter. Widowed. Homeless.... To know this much about a woman in the Bible is a lot of information, because in line with the patriarchal world that existed in Biblical times, women were in the background, not often seen, rarely heard. To even know her name, Anna, puts a spotlight on her – in the Bible, to be named lifts up that person as someone to take note of. So why do we get so much information on this woman, Anna, whose specific words weren't recorded, who stands behind Simeon whose words of praise were recorded centuries ago?

Before we can really see, and hear, Anna, let's look at the backdrop of today's Scripture, and where we are in the life of Jesus of Nazareth as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. We don't read in Luke about: the wisemen and Herod's slaughter of the

innocents; the terrifying escape to safety in the foreign land of Egypt; the family's return after Herod's death to their hometown of Nazareth. Instead, in Luke we learn about several different events in the childhood of Jesus.

The first event was Mary and Joseph having their baby boy circumcised on the 8th day of his life, and in this naming ceremony gave him the name the angel shared with Mary – a 1st century variation on “Joshua”, that today we pronounce as “Jesus.” This is making a clear statement – Mary and Joseph were devout Jews, and practiced the religious rituals of that faith practice. In line with that, we then read there are two other rituals that Mary and Joseph participated in, that came from the Levitical laws outlined by Moses and the priests in the wilderness of Sinai. The first was the ritual of purification required of women who have given birth. As much as the birth of a child, and especially the birth of a son, was considered a blessing, the bodily processes by which this happens through women were considered unclean. Mary did what all devout Jewish women did after giving birth, and she went through the

purification rite. That probably happened back in the village of Nazareth. She wouldn't have been allowed to travel before that occurred.

The second ritual was going to Jerusalem to present a sacrifice of thanksgiving for the birth of a first born child, and for a first born son, still a huge deal in this patriarchal society. And so Mary, now that she had completed the purification rite, and Joseph made the more than 3 day journey to Jerusalem from Nazareth. The laws of sacrifice were written to include all Jewish families. Not everyone would be able to afford the preferred sacrifice of a goat or a lamb. So smaller animals were allowed for the poorest of devout Jews, and Joseph and Mary would purchase the minimum acceptable sacrifice they could afford – two birds, either a couple of turtle doves or pigeons, once they got to the Temple. This tells us their socioeconomic status – they were poor.

Being poor, this may have been the first visit by Mary to the holy city of Jerusalem. Now, this city wasn't the center of government and commerce anymore. It wasn't like visiting

Washington DC or New York. Herod moved the seat of government closer to the Mediterranean Sea. But even so, Jerusalem was a busy place – its sole reason for being now was the Temple. Its economic driver was religious practice, and its customers were the religious pilgrims who came to visit within the Temple walls for routine ritual sacrifices, or to celebrate the high holy days.

This poor country family that walked into the center of Jewish religious power would have entered into its huge wooden gates and walked toward the Jewish Temple whose limestone gleamed in the sunlight. I picture Mary looking up at this huge building; its rebuilding was completed by Herod the Great only 30-40 years prior. She would have looked up in awe just as her son's disciples would 30 years later. There were a lot of people inside its walls on a daily basis. Mary and Joseph would have walked toward the Temple among the crowds of people, with bleating and braying and cooing animals adding to the noise. They would have had to weave among the vendor booths that sold food and wares and sacrificial animals to the

Jewish religious pilgrims visiting the Temple. Mary was probably overwhelmed from the sights, smells, sounds washing over her after her quiet life in Nazareth.

And so the couple came into the outer courtyard of the temple, preparing to purchase the two small birds for their thanksgiving offering. We're told an old man came up to them, asking them to stop for a moment. This stranger had the audacity to take their toddler out of their arms, and looked deeply into the child's eyes. He told Mary and Joseph he had long felt that God had let him live to this ripe old age so that he might see the long-hoped for Messiah – and the Spirit of the Lord nudged him to come to the Temple that very day, at that very time of day, to see something special. He just knew, when he saw Mary and Joseph's son, that this was who he had been kept alive to see. And so he burst into a fit of poetry that has been repeated through the ages: "My God, my master, now I can go to Shoah in peace. Because you fulfilled your promise – I've seen the salvation of Israel with my own eyes. You sent

this to all people, to reveal your power and glory to the Gentiles. And, this child will bring glory to the people of Israel.”

I’m sure Mary and Joseph were a little confused at what this complete stranger was saying to them. But Scripture says they were “amazed,” even though they had already talked to angels themselves and had shepherds sent to seek them out at the directions of angels. However this old man, Simeon, after blessing them, has an aside that he shared with Mary alone: her baby son has a destiny, good for some, the downfall for others. But it will come at a cost – it will cause her deep pain, as if a sword had pierced into her, a pain that will sear down to her very soul. In the middle of the noise and the crowds came these disturbing, disconcerting words. I picture Mary’s face, scared and overwhelmed.

How do we know this story of Jesus’ early life? How do we know about Gabriel’s visit, the first words Elizabeth said to Mary when she walked through the door, the inner workings in Mary’s mind that made her “ponder these things in her heart”? How do we know what Simeon said to Mary – words said only

to Mary? Luke the author said at the very beginning of his gospel rendering of the life and teachings of Jesus that these accounts of the events were handed down by people who were eyewitnesses to these moments. It had to have been either Mary herself directly, or someone close to her that heard her retelling of these stories. These early infant stories aren't just the story of Jesus – these early years are Mary's story, through her eyes, shared after the fact when Jesus' ministry on earth ended and his resurrection created new hope and a new faith in God's promises, and the newly church was piecing together the events of his life that should its purpose from the beginning.

But back to the story itself. For we now come to another woman, and we are introduced to Anna. "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.” How do we get this information about this woman? Again, most likely through Mary. And so let’s listen in a new way to this encounter, with our hearts, with the gift of our imaginations, as Mary has another conversation with a stranger that she later pondered over in her heart, shared with close friends, maybe even her son Jesus many years later. Let’s pause, and really see the Anna she may have encountered. Let’s listen now to Anna’s voice....

“Excuse me young lady, can I also see your son? I just heard what Simeon said, and I feel it deep inside of me also. This beautiful child was born to be something special.”

“You look a little stunned, pale. Let’s sit over here in this bit of shade while your husband tends to your business. What is your name? Mary of the tribe of Benjamin? Let me introduce myself: I’m Anna, daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher. You’ve never met an Asherite? Well, there aren’t many of us left! Do I live in Jerusalem? Well, you could say yes, because I

actually live here. Yes, in the courtyard of the Temple. Don't look so shocked Mary. What better home to have than outside the door to the Lord's house? How did I come to live here, outside the Temple, where no women serve and live? That's a little longer story – while your husband finishes buying the birds I'll tell you my story”

“Do you remember the final words of the first book of the Torah, the book of Genesis, when our ancestor Jacob, or Israel, blessed each of his twelve sons? Here is the blessing of my tribe: “Asher's food shall be rich, and he shall provide royal delicacies.” (49:20) When Joshua divided up Canaan's territory and allotted each of the 12 tribes its own land, the tribe of Asher was given wonderfully rich land in the northwest part of Canaan. It was perfect for growing olive trees and grape vineyards – the olive oil and wine that was produced there was coveted by kings from far away. And Asherites were wealthy from this resource. Or so I was told by my poor father Phaniel – it's been hundreds of years since any of my family lived on that land.”

“You see, if you remember history, the tribe of Asher became part of the Northern Kingdom when David’s great nation split in two, and the evil Assyrians came, took us over by violent force, stripping our inherited land from us. Those that lived through this horrific time survived in two ways: staying and becoming Assyrian, or escaping to the Southern Kingdom of the Jews, Judea. That’s where my ancestors headed. But within another generation, the Babylonians swept down and conquered the last of David’s kingdom. My people were left behind to work as enslaved labor for the Babylonians on what used to be Jewish land, because they knew how to grow things. But when exiled Jews returned from Babylon, my ancestors were often shunned and treated as hired hands, rather than their Jewish brothers and sisters.”

“My family was poor, and my father Phaniel the poorer because my mother gave him no sons, only daughters. My father only had me to tell these family stories to, and read from the Torah secretly to me – that’s how I learned to talk to God through the example of the Psalms. But being poor, I was

married off early to an older man who had lost his first wife in childbirth. My husband was very kind to me. But, I didn't give him any children. When he died 7 years later, my father had also died – and I was getting too old at age 22 to be engaged again. My male relatives didn't find any takers – after all, I hadn't shown I was able to do the one thing women are expected to do, produce children. No one wanted a barren woman.”

“Since a woman doesn't have much means of making money in this world, my life was spent living in others' houses: first my sister and brother-in-law's home, where I helped with their children, the cooking and cleaning, occasionally taking in some sewing to contribute to the household. But when they died, being older than I, my nieces and nephews weren't as happy with the arrangement, and their exasperated looks and harsh words made it so uncomfortable that I moved from house to house, on to the next relative's floor. I was a burden, able to do less and less, another mouth to feed on top of their own growing families.”

“Then one year, many years ago, I joined the village to go up to Jerusalem for Passover. Stepping into this courtyard just as you did a little while ago, I felt the presence of the God my father Phaniel taught me to love. A deep feeling of belonging washed over me, a feeling I hadn’t felt for almost 50 years. So ... I stayed. Yes, Mary, here in the courtyard – I stayed.... It isn’t any more lonely a life than what I was living before. I’ve made friends with a couple of the vendors, and they will occasionally give me a coin or two when they do well selling their animals and wares. I have found corners to tuck away in, to get out of the heat of the sun and the bitter cold of the winter months. People occasionally share some of the Temple sacrificial meal with me, although what some call hunger I choose to call fasting. And, people have started calling me a “prophet”. I guess I probably labeled people that way also in my past if I saw someone walking around talking to themselves!”

“So I spend my days talking to God, having conversation with God day and night. And you might not believe this, but – God communicates back with me. Wait ... what did you say? You

understand this? Has God talked to you also? I KNEW there was something special about you when I saw you talking to Simeon!”

“Oh ... I see your husband coming back – I know you need to leave now to offer the sacrifice of thanksgiving. Listen, Mary – I heard Simeon tell you that this child’s destiny will cause you great pain. I saw the look on your face. But know this – keep listening to God. Keep being open to why you, of all women, have been given the gift of this task, to raise this child, and to be part of what he’ll do for the people of Israel, for the world. Shalom, Mary – I now know why God called me to live the life I’ve lived. I was privileged to be one of the people to lay my eyes on the redemption of Jerusalem. Shalom.”

Anna may have been looking for redemption, a purpose, in the eyes of her society when she made the unconventional choice as a woman to stay at the Temple “day and night”, when she began a daily conversation with God. But most likely – she

wasn't even seen by the people around her, rushing around to do their daily business, focusing on making their religious sacrifices before starting the long walk back to their towns and villages. She was probably like many in our own day, dismissed with labels, as we look the other way because their life isn't what we would expect, what we think is normal.

How do we know that Anna was there in the courtyard of the Temple, another person that recognized and said words of praise early in the life of Immanuel, God-with-Us? Mary remembered the encounter, and shared it. Maybe Mary shared her encounter with Anna with the young Jesus as she and Joseph raised him in Nazareth. Along with the stories of his own mother's experience and his cousin John's mother, Elizabeth, Anna was a woman that encountered the young Jesus and whose faith allowed her to see him for what he was. A promise of old fulfilled. A redeemer. A savior.

And maybe this short story, of a homeless, old widow, living on the margins of 1st century Palestine society, made such an impact on the young Jesus that it stayed with him the

rest of his life, deeply informing his ministry of healing and compassion. Throughout the gospels, but especially in the account given to us in the record that Luke gave us, we see Jesus caring for and being cared by women. We see his huge heart in lifting them up from the circumstances of their limited lives. We don't see him judging them, we see him forgiving them, and validating them, and sometimes bringing them into his circle of disciples. Mary Magdalene. Joanna. Susanna. And maybe, during his suffering on the cross, looking down at his widowed mother, the story of Anna came back to him. Maybe this is why, even though he had brothers and sisters, his last act of compassion to his mother was to say the words to her and his closest friend, "Woman, behold your son." This mother he loved would always have a home.

Why did Luke include the side story of Anna? He wanted us to have another example of God's inclusion of men and women in the redemptive work Jesus was sent to bring to this world. Luke wanted us to see that Jesus Christ came for all people, including dirty shepherds, including widows hiding

away in the corners of society. Luke wanted us to hear, see and feel the love Jesus demonstrates by modeling compassion. If you believe God inspired the writers of Scripture, then Anna has a deep purpose in the story of Jesus Christ and his message. And it starts with seeing Anna, really seeing who she probably was, and then taking those new eyes and seeing the Anna's of our world. So, who is Wisdom asking you to see today? Who is Wisdom asking you to hear? And, in that recognition, what is your response? How will you "praise God and speak about the child, Jesus Christ, to all who are looking for redemption?"

To hear Anna's voice, we must first see her. And once we see and hear her, we need to also go out and share. With Anna's voice in our ears, let us continue to share the Christmas stories, the Christ story, with those that need its compassion, its comfort, its hope. Amen.

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