

Anna: A Tale of Liberation and Witness

Luke 2:21-40
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

Rev. Todd B. Freeman
December 28, 2014

In the aftermath of any much-anticipated event or situation (and Christmas certainly qualifies), the body and mind naturally go through a period of time that can most simply be described as a “let-down.” Or at least a mental and emotional break. That let-down extends to the church as well – as reflected by the fact that for most churches the Sunday after Christmas is among the lowest attendance Sundays of the year. That’s why I often refer to this Sunday, and the one following Easter, simply as “**the Sunday after.**”

You’ll notice, however, that according to the liturgical church calendar, Christmas is more than just a one-day event. In fact, it is an entire liturgical season that lasts for 12 days, from Christmas Day until the beginning of the season of Epiphany, which is always on January 6. One biblical commentator puts it all in perspective this way. “It is still Christmastide. It is still time to sing the carols and rejoice, though it gets harder as the days wear on. People who had church enough and more in the last weeks of Advent and the first days of Christmas think it’s a good time to rest up a bit or clean up a bit.”

That biblical commentator went on, however, to make a very valid point, “Yet our biblical texts for this Sunday make clear it is not really Let Down Sunday; it is **Move Ahead Sunday.**” Or as I like to simply phrase it, life goes on. This is reflected in the gospel passage we just heard from Luke 2. It is a story that shows how life moves ahead – goes on – even after a momentous event.

The gospel story moves forward from the manger in Bethlehem to the temple in Jerusalem. **We are indebted to the gospel writer for a text that speaks to us after the shepherds, angels, and heavenly hosts are gone.** Mary and Joseph now have a son to raise, religious obligations to keep, and an arduous trip back to Nazareth. Modern day parallels make this text sound remarkably current and relevant. For **each one of us will now move ahead in our lives into a new year, as will we as a congregation. And the good news of the story of Christmas, the story of Emmanuel, is that God is with us as we journey forward.**

Before we move ahead too quickly, however, I want to spend a bit of time to look at one fairly obscure biblical character this morning. Her name is **Anna.** Anna is mentioned only in the gospel of Luke, and only this one time. All we have to go on is three verses of scripture. We are introduced to Anna at the presentation of the baby Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem the week after his birth.

All Luke tells us about her is that she is a prophet, she is very old, and she has been a widow most of her life. We also learn that Anna was a devoutly spiritual woman

who worshiped, fasted, and prayed night and day. Upon seeing the infant Jesus she gives thanks to God and is said to have continually spread abroad the word about the child.

That's it. That's all we have to go on in trying to understand who this Anna was, and why she was important enough for Luke to include her in his gospel. Remarkably, however, there is a wealth of theological information packed into these three short verses. For when seen through the lens of the society and culture in which she lived in ancient Palestine, we know that **Anna had a lot working against her: she was a woman, a widow, and elderly.**

The cultural values of her time basically associated honor with men, and women with shame. In like manner, old age was associated with weakness, and female widowhood was associated with being needy. And while men were easily recognized as spiritual leaders, women's spirituality was more often than not viewed as contingent upon and even secondary to men's. As a biblical character, then, **Anna would have been associated with shame, weakness, need, and being second-class.** Luke's original readers would have been aware of all these things, much more so than we are today.

The Rev. Glauca Vasconcelos Wilkey, a former staff member in the national office of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in Louisville, Kentucky, and before that a seminary professor in Brazil and a missionary to Portuguese-speaking people in Canada, reflected on this passage from Luke in a sermon this way:

The Gospel story for this first Sunday after Christmas continues the surprising revelation of the fullness of God's grace manifested by Jesus' birth. In the birth of the Christ Child, a new era begins, and all creation is called to break forth in wonder...

By Anna's actions, the old oppressive patterns of gender, age, and marital status begin to crumble. Anna has encountered the liberating God in Jesus. Anna foreshadows a phenomenon that decades later the Apostle Paul writes about when he describes the kingdom of God with the words, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female."

Anna, and all other people to whom society throughout time pays little or no honor - children, women, slaves, the elderly, the differently-abled, [those of different heritage] - **all in Jesus Christ are equal before God.**

That includes you and me. We learn in this passage that after witnessing the Christ child Anna went out and spoke to "all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38). So perhaps most remarkably, then, in Luke's Gospel Anna becomes the very first evangelist, which simply means a person who tells others the good news - others who were not present at the Temple, others who were considered to be outsiders, others who were hoping for salvation.

So that is the gospel, the good news, for us on this Sunday after Christmas: In Jesus Christ no one is separated from God by distinctions or limitations of any kind. Rather, each one of us is equally a child of God!

One more brief comment about Anna. Anna provides to us **a model for our ministry!** Like Anna, we too should be compelled to go out into the world and share the good news (gospel) of God's inclusive grace. Following in the steps of the elderly,

widowed woman named Anna, who out of oppression's grip was silent no longer, we can go out from this sanctuary today to **become instruments of God's reconciliation, hope, peace, joy, and love**. Or, as brilliantly stated in a poem by the influential American author, theologian, educator, and civil rights leader, **Howard Thurman**:

*When the song of the angels is silent,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are again tending their sheep,
When the manger is darkened and still,
The work of Christmas begins –*

*To find the lost
To heal the broken
To feed the hungry
To rebuild the nations
To bring peace among people
To befriend the lonely
To release the prisoner
To make music in the heart.*

That sounds like a great mission statement and motivation as we all move ahead in our own ministry efforts into a new year. It is now time that we take what we have learned and experienced over these past weeks and move ahead. For life does indeed go on.

Amen.