

"A Widow's Witness"

Based on Luke 2:36-38 & Luke 21:1-4 – The Prophetess Anna
An Advent Message from Toby Jones to FCUCC Gaylord, 12/17/17

Today we continue celebrating the contributions of our elders, and, more particularly, the contributions they made to the Christmas story – contributions we've tended to miss. Last week we met Simeon, that hopeful, temple priest, who took Jesus in his arms and praised God for finally bringing salvation to Israel. He expressed his undying hope, and, in so doing, planted that hope in Mary and Joseph. This morning, I am excited to introduce you to another unsung elder hero, one who is even less known than Simeon. I am speaking of Anna the prophetess.

Anna's cameo in the Christmas narrative is only three verses long, so we shouldn't feel too badly for missing her all these years. We've been concentrating on Mary, Joseph, angels, shepherds, and the wise guys. But Luke writes that, "There was also a prophetess...There was also a prophetess," so I propose that, starting today and henceforth, we shall always remember to notice this faithful widow and to celebrate her unique contribution to the Christmas story.

We don't know a ton about Anna, but we do know that she had been a widow for a long, long time. Some biblical numerologists suggest that Anna was a widow for more than 70 years. In fact, she only enjoyed 7 years of marriage before losing her husband. I don't need to tell most of you that widowhood is hard; it's a hard, hard road, whether you are a widow or a widower. When my dad lost our mom, he completely cashed in his chips and pretty much shut out the outside world. He stopped extending himself. He stopped using his many gifts. He stopped making any sort of contribution to the planet.

Research tells us that my dad was not alone in his response to widowhood. Mary Elizabeth Baxter puts it this way:

Sorrow hardens those who live a selfish life. They give themselves up to self-pity, bemoaning their lot, looking upon their God as hard, and jealously envying what seems the happier lot of others. But a widow who has accepted the Lord her God as her strength and her portion is perhaps one of the happiest, one of the most useful, one of the most gracious of God's creatures. Anna's vocation was that of prayer: 'She served God with fasting and prayers night and day.'"

It's pretty amazing for a widow back in first century Israel to manage to keep her focus outward, on serving others, rather than on her own pain and difficult lot in life. How did Anna do it? Mary Elizabeth Baxter speculates as follows:

Living continually in the presence of God, Anna would perpetually drink in the thoughts that God would impart to her. In so doing,"
Baxter concludes, *"she would lose the narrowness of self-interest and get absorbed, instead, in the continually widening interests of God..."*

Isn't that a great phrase – "the continually widening interests of God." When I stop and think of the hundreds of widows and widowers I've known in over 30 years of ministry, it's pretty clear to me that the ones that I admire most, that I would hope to be like if I ever become a widower, are those whose interests continue to widen, even late in life. That's what my grandmother – Doris – did. I've told you quite a bit about her before. She lost two husbands – one to suicide and another to Alzheimer's. She stayed tapped into God through prayer, meditation, and worship, and she kept her interests widening like you wouldn't believe! The last person my grandmother was ever interested in was...my grandmother! I think that is something Doris shared with Anna.

A number of commentaries I consulted in my research on Anna made the observation that Anna may, in fact, be the biblical model for how to age gracefully and faithfully. She clearly had a lot of change and challenge thrust upon her over the course of her life. Robin Gallaher Branch from the Biblical Archeology Society writes,

"Anna shows us a model for aging in the Biblical text. Luke presents her positively, as a woman without the bitterness that so often comes with age and as one full of faith. As she moves throughout the Temple, she seeks to do good to those whom she encounters. Luke's description shows her as well adjusted, engaged in Israel's life and useful to the Lord. She may well have become the model for the righteous church widows Paul describes in 1 Timothy 5:5."

It's no accident that Luke has placed Anna's story directly after Simeon's in his account of Mary and Joseph bringing Jesus into the temple for his circumcision. Anna is a great deal like Simeon, and her contribution to the peace of mind, hope, and faith of Mary and Joseph is very much like Simeon's as well. For as a prophetess, Anna was able to see this baby Jesus

in the much larger prophetic context of Israel. She knew how Jesus fit into God's overarching plan, and for her to articulate that to Mary and Joseph and others at the temple was huge in helping Mary and Joseph to keep going on their long, strange trip as the parents of Jesus.

Now one final thing I want to point out about Anna is that she's a woman, a prophetess rather than a prophet. Anna is, in fact, the only prophetess mentioned in the entire New Testament. As a woman and as a widow in 1st century Israel, for Anna to have achieved prophetess status and for her to be serving *in the temple* on a regular basis is remarkable! Women weren't even allowed in the temple back then! But clearly some sort of exception was made for this faithful prophetess. Mary Elizabeth Baxter imagines Anna's place and role in the temple in the following way:

During the temple services, Anna would have had no pre-eminent place, but would have been in some quiet corner. When the praises of the priests and Levites were going up to heaven, this still woman would be praying, and lifting up every worshipper upon her heart. Whenever children were brought into the temple to be presented to the Lord, the parents would have, no doubt, been buoyed up by the prayers of the prophetess Anna.

Can't you just picture it - an elder woman with a weathered face and clasped hands, over in a shadowy corner, praying fervently for the peace of all Jerusalem. Anna lifted up name after name, village after village, and town after town. And, whenever God gave her the chance - as he did with Mary and Joseph - Anna would also speak out. She would bear witness to what God was up to in the world. A widow's witness...A widow's witness... Does anyone remember another widow's witness that Jesus called our attention to in the New Testament? It was at the temple too, if I'm not mistaken, as people lined up to put their offerings in the temple treasury. Remember? Jesus stopped what he was doing and called all his disciples over, so they wouldn't miss it.

"You see that widow, there," Jesus said, "the one who just put those two copper pennies in the temple treasury? Truly I tell you that she put more in than all the others combined. For they gave out of their plenty; but she gave out of her poverty... everything she had."

It seems like we may have a habit of overlooking widows and the critical contributions they make to the unfolding of God's plan. We mustn't miss

them anymore, whether it's the widow in the pew beside us, the widow in line at the temple treasury, or the widow praying for us all in the temple courtyard, day after day after day. A widow's witness is a powerful thing. We light the candle of faith in their honor this day and this Advent. We honor the women, the faithful women, who have gone before us, paving the way. We honor the praying women, who have lifted us up before God and held us faithfully in their hearts.

Whenever Christmas rolls around, may we always remember that Mary was not the only woman who helped bring Jesus into the world. Anna the prophetess did her part too, as did so many other elders. And if any of you – men or women – have reached the age when you aren't sure if you're useful anymore, you're wondering if you have a role to play in God's still unfolding plan...wonder no more. You better believe God has a role for you! Look at Anna...Look at Simeon. Scripture is full of elders making a difference well into their 80s and 90s. If Christmas is about anything, it's about God flowing into human lives and making a difference through us. Amen.