

Anna and Her Children

Luke 2: 21-38

On this first Sunday of Christmastide we focus on Anna, prophetess, saint and teller of the good news of Jesus' birth. On Anna and her children

I

On the eighth day after his birth Mary and Joseph partook in the ceremony of Jesus' circumcision and naming. His name was given by the angel: Jesus, which means Yahweh Saves. God comes to save.

Now they were at the Temple in Jerusalem for the Jewish ritual of purification. For their sacrifice they brought two turtledoves, which was what the poor of Israel brought since they could not afford a lamb.

What can I give him, poor as I am

If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb.

They brought the best offering they could, two turtle doves.

Scholars suggest that Mary and Joseph belonged to a smaller circle in Israel named the Arawen, the Poor. They were poor in purse, but more importantly there were those Jesus called, "The poor in Spirit", those who knew their

absolute need of God. They prayed for the “consolation of Israel”, the deliverance of Israel from the boot of the oppressor. They looked for the long-awaited Messiah of Israel. Only God could get it done. Elizabeth and Zechariah were also part of that circle—and two more whom we meet today, Simeon and Anna.

II

The ceremony of purification was in progress when an older man named Simeon entered the Temple. All his life he had prayed for the “consolation of Israel” and the coming of the Messiah. The Holy Spirit had spoken to him and said that before he died, he would see the long-awaited One. So, moved by the Spirit he entered the Temple that day and saw the child held by Mary. He took the child in his arms, blessed God in a loud voice of praise then said, or canted these words

Now let your servant depart in peace
for my eyes have seen the salvation
which you have prepared for all people
a light of revelation to the Gentiles
for the glory of your people Israel.

He is quoting scripture, he is improvising, he is full of joy, he is seeing everything fulfilled.

Then he blessed Mary and Joseph and the child. That is what the elders in the community do for us: They bless our children and help them on their way.

III

Now comes Anna. She is called a prophetess, a title of great and unusual distinction. To be a prophet is to be a “see-er” and a see-er she was.

She had been married early in her life, for seven years when her husband died and was now 84. She had spent her whole life near the Temple going in and out to pray, to worship, to intercede for Israel.

Now at this same moment as Simeon she came into the Temple, saw the child and knew who he was. She broke into praise. Then she left the Temple and began to speak to everyone she knew about the child. The verb tense said she kept speaking. Over and over she told the news.

IV

These two faithful elders of the faith cause us to reflect upon and celebrate the lives of the elder followers of Jesus—in this church and every church I have known.

They have been given what I call “long sight”, a way of seeing more deeply, more truly. When we get around 50 years old our eyes begin to change. We suffer

what the ophthalmologists called *presbyopia*. No, not *presbyterian* eyes, but elder eyes.

I'm talking about another kind of elder-eyes. Their long-sight comes from their long experience. They give us so much and we are thankful. Paul, writing to young Timothy said, "Let no one despise your youth.

And we say today, "Let no one despise your age." Your age is your gift to us. Keep helping us to see!

But the long sight comes not only from their own years, it comes from being a part of a faith tradition of reading scripture when we can see the long arc of God's redemption, how God has acted and continues to act. WE have learned the stories of those young and old who have joined God's story of redemption and who kept faith in all circumstances and season of life.

Anna's story was not just 84 years long, but 1,800 years long going back to Abraham and Sarah. And so is ours.

V

But our elder saints not only give us long sight they also display for us the fruits of the Spirit which have become more and more a part of them. Qualities, as Paul named them, like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. They almost shine with them. Have you

observed that the skin of our elders begins to become thin, almost translucent? This happens to their spirits too—the inner gifts, of the Spirit beginning to shine through.

Not automatically of course. Age can accentuate our lesser qualities. The mean can get meaner, the hard-headed can get harder heads. But this is when the Spirit comes in, and our elder saints show us what living long years with the Spirit, with the life of Jesus, with life in the community of faith can do. More love, more joy, more peace, more patience, more kindness and good, faithfulness and gentleness.

I've known women who for their whole adult life have kept the nursery or taught children in Sunday School, our children learning the love of Jesus in their arms. And women who have become our most trusted leaders—now that the church finally let women be deacons and hold other places of leadership, who bring to every discussion wisdom and grace.

VI

And now Anna's children, not her own but the children brought into the circle of God's love through her.

She left the temple and began telling people about the Christ child, the messiah-child she had seen. And they began to tell their children and their children's children throughout 2,000 years. We are here because of Anna.

One of our favorite hymns to sing following Christmas Day is "Go, tell it on the mountain." It is the gift of the black church to us.

Go tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere;
Go, tell it on the mountain
That Jesus Christ is born.

It's hard to sing without moving your body a little!

It tells of the shepherd's who ran to see the baby then ran to tell the news.

There could have been a verse about Anna too:

There was an older woman,
And Anna was her name;
She saw the Child of Christmas
And went and spread his fame
Go, tell it on the mountain,
Over the hills and everywhere,

Go tell it one the mountain

That Jesus Christ is born!

How many children do you think Anna had? Can you begin to count from that day to our own? You may be one!

Who are those in your lives who have been so filled with the love of God that they have caused you to love God all the more? I can name some. I bet you can too.

VIII

The famous Native American writer Scott Momaday has written powerfully about his Kiowa people.¹ He tells about his Kiowa grandmother Aho. Her life was full of reverence for God, for her people and for the sacred earth.

He remembers her in several familiar postures: standing at the wood stove on winter mornings turning the meat in a great iron skillet; sitting in the south window of her house bent over her beadwork; most often remembering her at prayer, standing by her bed, her long, rambling, fervent prayers, for her people, for the world, prayers in her Kiowa tongue, almost an incantation.

One day as a boy he bounded into the house, then looking for her opened her bedroom door. She was at prayer. He could not understand her words

because he hadn't learned Kiowa. But he felt her reverence in her love of god and intercession for her people and for all the earth.

It was so holy a moment he felt he was on holy ground and could not stay. So he quietly backed out of the room saying "I do not belong here, I do not belong here."

That's close to how I feel today as I think of Anna, of Anna and all the Anna's I have known. I am one of her children.

1. Momaday's two most famous books are: House mad of Dawn and The Way to Rainey Mountain.