

Emmanuel—God With Us
Anna: Grace to See the Face of God (Luke 2:25-40)
December 27, 2009 by Shirley Rayburn



Anna

Luke 2:25-40 (New International Version)

²⁵Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. ²⁷Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts. When the parents [*Mary and Joseph*] brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, ²⁸Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

²⁹"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you now dismiss^[a] your servant in peace.

³⁰For my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹which you have prepared in the sight of all people,

³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel."

³³The child's father and mother marveled at what was said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: "This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, ³⁵so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too."

³⁶There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, ³⁷and then was a widow until she was eighty-four.^[b] She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.³⁸Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Anna: Grace to see the Face of God...

Read text:

I just read the story where we meet Anna the prophetess. Mary and Joseph

following the Laws of their faith brought Jesus to the Temple. And our story unfolds

There are two verses about this woman. What can we learn about her? What can we learn from her? What do these verses tell us?

Quick review of the facts about Anna:

- She was called a prophetess. A high calling.
- Her name is Anna.
- Her father's name was Phanuel.
- She was old.
- She had been married 7 years.
- She was now widowed and 84
- She spent all her time in the temple. Worshipping, fasting praying.
- She met Jesus.

But what are the deeper things we can take from these two short verses:

1. Anna was familiar with sorrow and suffering. How do we know this? Besides the fact that it is part of the human experience. She had been married 7 years and then was widowed, her husband had died. There is no mention of children...

So we ponder what was her life like? What kind of heart ache did she bear? The loss of husband? Death of dreams? Had she wanted children, we can presume so...It's possible even probable that her life hadn't unfolded in the way she had hoped....

I think it's interesting to ponder Anna's life during the Christmas season. The image we most frequently think of that first Christmas is the gathering at the stable. The star shining brightly above; the loving mother filled with awe; the protective adoptive father standing near; angels singing; shepherds staring.

But in sharp contrast - that very same night, at the Temple there was this elderly woman. Alone. Unaware at that moment of the miracle unfolding in Bethlehem.

In our society it is often considered a horrible fate to be alone.

Our family has a tradition each year at Christmas of watching the movie

“It’s a Wonderful Life”. I really enjoy the movie, but one of the scenes always makes me grin... If you don’t know, the story is of a man named George Bailey who has spent his whole life making sacrifices for others. He has relinquished dreams in order to help others realize theirs. But things had turned bad and he was in trouble, he was contemplating ending his life. Then enters the angel Clarence who is his answer to prayer. Clarence gives George Bailey the gift of seeing what the world would have been like if he had never been born. The scene that makes me grin is when George sees the fate of his wife if he hadn’t been born. She was a spinster, a librarian... Clearly this is considered to be a horrible fate.

This makes me grin because though I am married now, I was single for longer than I might have expected. I may even have been considered a spinster if that term was one that was used these days. And though there were times it was extremely challenging to consider facing a lifetime of singleness, I never thought of it as a fate worse than death. And there are times when each one of us is in that place of being alone. What grace can be found in that place?

When we are alone or when we think of someone alone we often think of loneliness. But the grace-view of alone is Solitude.

Loneliness is depressing. Solitude is uplifting.

Loneliness is life-draining. Solitude is life-giving.

Loneliness is closed off. Solitude is expansive.

Loneliness is distant. Solitude is intimate

Loneliness is bored. Solitude is awe-struck.

Loneliness is self-absorbed. Solitude is God absorbed.

I’ve had the gamut of Christmas experiences. I’ve had Christmases when I felt so lonely, so aware that my life was not as I had hoped. I withdrew into a circle of self-pity. And I’ve also had Christmases when I enjoyed the solitude. Released from the cultural trappings that have been added to the celebration, where I was able to contemplate the delight that God became a baby. I’ve had Christmases when I was surrounded by tangible expressions of God’s grace in my life through people he has surrounded me with.

I think that Anna was not lonely on that night as the gathering took place at the stable; I think that she was enjoying solitude.

2. Anna waited... and waited... and waited. She was 84.

What was she waiting for? A hint of what she was waiting for comes at the end of the two verses about her. "looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."

What did she do as she waited? She was at the Temple. She was worshipping, fasting and praying. Digging deep and drawing near to God. Cultivating solitude. And what was she praying for? I would suggest that she wasn't praying for herself. I believe she was a gifted intercessor. One who carried the concerns of her community, her people, to the throne room of God. She longed to see His Kingdom Come.

We've all had to wait for something we longed for. As I mentioned earlier, I waited longer than expected to find a quality man to marry... Then after Matthew and I were married we waited together, hoping for a child.

In both of those seasons of waiting, there were definitely moments of distress and struggle, but in the waiting there was a gift.

Funny enough... even during the pregnancy with Adia there was waiting. She was late. I wanted to do things 'naturally'... although I had read of the trend to book the c-section I wanted to experience her arrival without intervention. The due date came and went... and then the next day... and the next... as we got to a week past, people were commenting on the baby not coming yet I experienced a longing so deep to see her face. I just wanted to meet her. We finally met her face to face, eleven days after she was due... such a dramatic entry. In all of these things in the waiting I know my gratitude for the gifts now is far greater than if they had come quickly or easily.

As we wait for what we hope for to be accomplished we engage in the daily mundane activities of life.

The story is recorded of this triumphant moment in Anna's life... and it is easy to focus on the BIG days... but what of the thousands of normal days that took place in Anna's life before she glimpsed the Face of God? What kept her going? Again she spent them digging deep, worshipping, fasting and praying. This is how she kept her hope alive.

There are many things that we are waiting for... for jobs, for diseases to leave, for kids to come back, for things to change.

We wait, but not in vain... we wait for the promises of God to be fulfilled... We dig deep to know what his promises are and then we hold tight to

those promises. We hope... for our hope is in Him. We know that He loves us and nothing that happens is outside of his reach.

3. Anna recognized ... in Jesus she saw the Face of God. She knew what she was looking for...

It was another day at the Temple for Anna. When she woke that day she had no idea what was in store for her. To me it makes what happened even more amazing. We don't know what she was doing prior to her entering the scene... but it says "at the very moment" she saw Simeon with the Baby, she knew that in this Infant's Face there was so much more.

It is interesting that her Father's name is mentioned in these verses. ... I learned as I was preparing for today that the name Phenuel means Face of God.

I think this gives us further hints of what was occupying her thoughts, her worship and prayers as she lived in the Temple. For her to recognize the Face of God in this Infant, she must have known what she was looking for.

In the quiet place, in the solitude, she tuned her heart-eyes and ears to her God, so when his Son was presented in front of her she knew exactly who he was!

I think it's also very important to ponder the meaning of Anna's name. Her very name means Grace.... I think this is critical... All of these circumstances in her life didn't 'earn' her the right to have the opportunity to see the face of God... it was an act of grace. A gift she received...

4. Finally... we have Anna's response: praise! And irresistible urge to tell others.

This response was what was common in the Christmas story. When Mary recognized and understood what was happening to her she praised, the angels praised, the shepherds praised... and Anna joined in the chorus.

And this continues to be the case... When we recognize in Jesus the Face of God, we Praise... I consider this the Psalmists style of sharing our faith... Talking about the work of God in our lives to those who understand and those who don't...

We praise God here at New City. Some would suggest that to praise God in front of people who haven't recognized the face of God in Jesus is

something we should tone down, but we believe that when we praise, we are giving people a glimpse into what they were designed for... to worship God and enjoy him forever!

5. In Anna's story I am reminded of another older woman from the Old Testament. Anna would be about the same age Sarah was when she met her infant.

Both stories are about babies in the lives of older women. Babies who brought redemption.

It's interesting that in Sarah's story the promise fulfilled meant that she held an infant she birthed. In Anna's story the promise fulfilled meant that she beheld an infant birthed of another – expanding our perspective on God's freedom to fulfill his promises in his way, not always as we expect.

6. So to review: We can find in Anna's story places of identification

Like Anna, we have sorrow and suffering...

In Anna it deepened her hunger to see the Saviour... We can allow our sorrow and suffering to increase our own hunger to see and know the Saviour. To cultivate solitude. And for those of us who have met the Savior and still experience suffering... we know we have been redeemed, but we recognize that all of creation still groans for the complete redemption... when all things will be made new... when we are in the New City described in Revelation.

This is Faith ...

We wait – Like Anna, we can choose to accept the gift of grace available to us in the many days of the mundane... as we wait ...

This is Hope...

And like Anna, we can recognize the glimpse of Grace we see in our lives everyday... and celebrate ... like Anna recognized the face of God in the Infant who was presented at the temple that day. Her intimate solitude in drawing near to her God helped her recognize the One he sent

This is Love...

Faith, hope and love... and the greatest of these is love.

7. Response

When Anna saw the Baby, she didn't necessarily know how exactly he would redeem Jerusalem... but we know now. And we reflect on it here at New City every week when we celebrate communion. This very same Baby that Anna had the grace to see is the one that chose to experience sorrow and suffering, to endure the cross, so he could bear our sins. He redeemed not only Jerusalem, but the entire world for all generations. We simply need to accept his gift of grace.

When you come today and pick up the bread, consider the baby Anna recognized to be the one who came to redeem... This baby grew to be a man, who chose to have his body broken so our brokenness can be restored. When you come and pick up the cup, consider the baby grew up to be a man who chose to have his bloodshed so that we can be cleansed.

We have a taste of the kingdom of heaven but it hasn't fully come. We experience redemption... but all of creation is still longing for complete redemption.

We long to see him Face to Face. May his Kingdom come.