

Message Delivered at Christ Church
December 12th & 13th, 2009
TEXT: Luke 2:25-38...the story of Simeon and Anna
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

In Hebrew, her name would have been Hannah, like the mother of Samuel. But Luke wrote in Greek, so he called her Anna. The name means “grace,” and grace, of course, is a gift. It’s something we receive; it’s something that comes to us. Life is filled with things we have to earn. Grace, by definition, is not one of those things. Its existence and its presence are not dependent on us. When it comes to grace, our role is simply to look for it; to keep our eyes open. Though maybe even that’s overstating it. Maybe, when it comes to grace, our role is simply to pray for eyes that see.

Anna was a prophet. While the John the Baptist is still in diapers, Anna stands vigil in the Temple, sharing the word of God to whoever will receive it. You see, that’s what a prophet does...receive and share the word of God. Her father’s name was Phanuel, and being of the tribe of Asher she was from the north country...far from Jerusalem.

But somehow, in some way, life had brought her to the Temple. There’s a way to interpret what’s said here to imply that she actually lived there; maybe that she found some place in the corners of the courtyard amidst the buyers and sellers of sacrificial animals to make a home for herself. Maybe she lived there, maybe she didn’t. Regardless, the Temple was her home.

Now the Temple was the primal sacred place for the Jewish people. It’s true that God could be found anywhere, but the Lord was especially present in the Temple. The Temple was the avenue through which God and the people were connected. Be close to the Temple, be near the sanctuary, and you were close to the Lord. And she wanted to be close to the Lord; so that’s where she stayed...night and day, praying and fasting; an old woman, so often present that none, probably, would have noticed her anymore, or even listened to her. “That’s just old Anna; she’s been here longer than I can remember.”

But everyone has a story; isn’t that the truth, everyone has a story. The strangers we bump against every day, who we’ll never see again, who jump into our lives and then jump out, they all got their stories, just like we got ours. Be kind to the person sitting next to you today...something they won’t talk with you about—some hidden story they won’t tell you of joy, or maybe heartache has brought them to this place this morning. You know, there are all sorts of things to do on a Sunday morning. But everybody who shows up to worship is here because our stories have somehow brought us here, and they’re incomplete stories; we’re looking for something; looking for some grace, or some hope, or some redemption, or some forgiveness; that there is a some place in our life that is not complete and is not whole.

And maybe, it’s that we’ve tried to fix it; done our best to get over it, get beyond it, put it behind us...whatever “it” is. But sometimes, there are things in our lives we can’t fix on our own. I think older people know that better than younger people. So instead of reading the paper, we show up at the sanctuary; and wait and hope one more time, that maybe today’s the day...

Anna gets three verses in Luke. She jumps into the story, and then out, kind of like a stranger. But here’s what might be behind her presence in the Temple. It’s just a hunch, but go with me here, and do the math...

What we know historically is that Jesus was not born in the year zero. A more accurate dating of his birth is 3 BC. Anna is eighty-four when this story takes place, which is soon after Jesus' birth. That means Anna was born in 87 BC. The story tells us that she was a widow, which means that at one time she had been married. Marrying age for a woman of that time would be mid- to late-teens, which meant she was married sometime around 70 BC. And what the story says is that she was married about seven years, and then her husband died...around 63 BC.

I know that for some of us, our eyes may begin to glaze over when I start talking dates. (Thank you for your good humor...) But this one may matter to Anna's story. You see, something else happened in 63 BC. That was the year the Romans conquered Palestine. A Roman general named Pompey laid siege to Jerusalem for three months. Finally the siege broke, and Pompey stormed his way through the final resistance and burst straight into the holy of holies in the Temple to capture the gold he thought he'd find there. It was a massive desecration, and dark moment in Israel's history. Mostly, he found a scroll of laws. It is said that 12,000 Jews died defending Jerusalem and the Temple. 12,000 young men, some of them married, leaving behind them their widows. There's no story in scripture about how young Anna's beloved died...not even a legend...but my hunch is that it had something to do with 12,000 men defending their Lord and people in 63 BC.

And ever since, for sixty years, Anna's been at the Temple—praying, and fasting, and worshipping; bringing before the Lord her entire life...stubborn; insistent; refusing to leave; with a resolve born of heartbreak and a faith stiffened by hope; mumbling, I imagine, the kind of prayer that would make the psalmist proud and that maybe only one those put in her years would dare to offer: “I love you Lord, but I will not move until you show up. And until you do, I'll wait. In fact, I'll wait 'til kingdom come.”

One more day, dawn arrives at the Temple. Sellers and buyers are in the courtyard, and the sacrifices are made. There are more tourists from the countryside taking pictures of themselves in front of the Temple, and the priests fulfill their duties the way they always have. Sixty times 365 is 21,900. So 21,900 times she has greeted the beginning of the day in the courtyard; 21,900 times she has fasted, and prayed, and worshiped, and waited. She's been waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem, and gone to sleep 21,900 times with “I guess not today, Lord” on her lips.

Well, sometimes 21,901 is a lucky number because this time, there's a song: *Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace; according to thy word; for mine eyes have seen thy salvation; which thou hast prepared before all people; to be a light to lighten the nations; and to be the glory of thy people Israel.*

That's the Song of Simeon. I learned it when I was an eleven year old choirboy, further from my birth than Simeon is from his death.

There are times we think we're alone, when really we aren't; times we think we're the only ones waiting for rightness and wholeness, when really, there are lots of others waiting, too. There are those who will hold our hand, if we'll let them. Anna ain't the only old person to be hanging at the Temple. If Anna's eyes were filled with fire and fierce with passion, Simeon's danced and smiled. You know, it's the eyes that are ageless. Everything else droops. But not the eyes.

Some look backwards. Simeon looked forward...”he looked forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him.” There must have been hundreds in the courtyard that morning when a regular woman, with her husband, carried that baby forward to make their

offering. But only two pairs of old eyes, with everything that was behind them—hopeful and wounded; joyous and yearning; full and incomplete at the same time—and the Lord gives them eyes to see. “Come here, Anna...you gotta see this...”

“At that moment she came, and began to praise God and speak about the child to all...” Because when who you’ve been waiting for your entire life finally arrives—and when your story is finally made complete—you got to do one of two things: tell everybody, or sing a song.

That’s Simeon and Anna, today’s Advent story of waiting and faith. Like them, we’re all just doing the best we can; doing what we know best; waiting around for we don’t know what. We’re just human beings, with our unfinished stories.

That’s who we are, and that’s okay. When we think we’re something more than that may be when we get ourselves in the most trouble.

But just remember that we human beings—we’re the ones the baby loves. Because we are, he comes...into the Temple; into our arms; into our lives; whether we’re ready or not; regardless of how well we see, or how long we’ve been standing there. What they waited for, we’ve already received; which makes today a good day to sing a song, or share with a friend some Good News.

For sixty years Anna held fast, so her story of waiting and Simeon’s are worth telling. She’d seen storms roll across the skies, and lightning strike, and earthquakes shake the foundations. She’d seen it all, and more than once probably believed that this was it.

But it wasn’t. What she needed to see was the baby. And so do we. What she needed was eyes to see. She was given them, and so are we.

It’s that time of year; really, a great time of year. And we’re making our lists. But really...ain’t it true that what we all really want this Christmas is simply for the love and mercy and grace of God to be real in our lives, and more part of our own stories. That’s all we’re really looking for; the rest is all decoration.

Well, that’s enough. And it’s coming. And wait long enough, and like Simeon and Anna we’ll see that it all fits into a package small enough to be held in our arms.