

Ordinary Acts, Extraordinary Boy
December 28, 2008

Luke 2:33-40:

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what Simeon was saying about their son. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed: and a sword will pierce your own soul too."

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment, she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.

One: This is the Word of the Lord. **All: Thanks be to God.**

Over two thousand years ago, I imagine that Anna woke up that special day in her small, one room hut on a morning that seemed like any other. As she looks on the dirt floor for her sandals, her knees creak. Anna's eighty-four years are catching up with her. Ouch! As she picks up a bowl to start preparing her breakfast, a sharp pain shoots through her hands. Her arthritis has been getting worse, but taking it easy is not an option. She has to keep going with her daily routine. She does not have anyone else to do her chores for her. Anna picks up her well-used cane and water jar; she heads to the well to get the water she will need for the day.

As she is walking, Anna thinks back over the years since her husband died. Has it really been over fifty years? Her husband died when Anna was in her twenties. Anna experienced the overwhelming pain when the life of a loved is cut tragically short; he was far too young. Parents should not have to bury their children; young brides should not have to attend their husband's funerals. Today Anna tries to picture him, but today the image of his face seems a little fuzzy in her mind. In the twenty-first century, being a widow is certainly lonely and hard, but in Anna's day, it is especially challenging.

Remember that women were considered second-class citizens and viewed as the property of their husbands in the first-century legal system. So when their husbands died, women lost not only their husbands' companionship and love, but also his legal protection. The crisis begins in the book of Ruth, when Naomi, Orpah, and Ruth's husbands all die. There is no male heir in the family left to protect these women and their survival is at risk. Even though Naomi owns property in Israel, she does not have legal access to it since she is a woman. Ruth and Naomi would starve to death without the kindness of Boaz, who lets the women glean the extra crops in his field. Of course, Ruth has a happy ending when Boaz decides to marry her.

Anna is not as fortunate as Ruth was. She does not remarry. If a Jewish man's brother dies, Moses commanded the man to marry his brother's widow.¹ This law was a way of ensuring that their brothers' wife would continue to be cared for after her husband's death. Since Anna remained a widow for over fifty years, either Anna's husband had no brothers or his brothers were unwilling to take responsibility and marry her.

To her credit, Anna never became resentful about her plight. Much of her life has been a bitter pill, but she never loses hope. Eighty-four years have taken much of the strength in her body, but age can do worse. If most of us had been in Anna's shoes and had faced as many disappointments as she had, we probably would have become so cynical and guarded that we would not think anything in our lives could improve. What gives her the strength to keep a positive outlook? Anna depends upon God to be her rock amidst life's storms and finds a home for herself within the Jewish worshipping community. Everyday, she goes to the temple to soak in God's presence as she prays to her Lord.

I imagine on that special day, Anna is breathing a little heavy as she approaches the temple, which towers 450 feet above the valley below. Anna takes a moment to admire its beautiful architecture as she enters the temple gates. Anna walks through the court of the Gentiles and gives a disapproving glance toward the entrepreneurs, who are looking to take advantage of temple-goers and tourists to turn a profit in the midst of God's holy temple. As an adult, Jesus becomes so disgusted with these same moneychangers that he overturns their tables. Then Anna enters the court of women, which is as far as she is allowed to go, and finds a quiet corner where she can pray.

Out of the corner of Anna's eye, she sees a young couple with their baby boy. They have come to do what is required in Jewish law: they are presenting their child in the temple and the mother, who became ritually unclean in childbirth, is being purified. What Joseph and Mary are doing is not remarkable or out of the ordinary: every good Jewish family presented their children in the temple; it is as common as a Christian family choosing to have their child baptized today.

Anna can tell that the parents are poor like she is. Leviticus instructs parents to sacrifice a lamb when they dedicate their children to God. But if the parents cannot afford it, it is okay for them to use two turtledoves or young pigeons. Mary and Joseph cannot afford the lamb. Most people would disregard these poor peasants, but not Anna. She observes Simeon, an elderly man she has seen around the temple before, move toward the young couple. And there is a glimmer in Simeon's eye as he speaks excitedly to them. Anna is curious and approaches them to find out what is going on. She hears Simeon's announcement and is amazed. Can all that Simeon is saying be true? Is this the boy that they have all been hoping for? Is he really the Messiah?

Anna is a remarkable woman. She is the only person in the Gospels who recognizes the Christ child with no divine guidance. Gabriel comes to Mary to announce her holy mission. God comes to Joseph in a dream, telling him to protect his fiancé and

¹ Deuteronomy 25:5 and Matthew 22:24.

her child. The shepherds have the angels to instruct them to go to Bethlehem. The wise men have the star that leads them to the manger. The Holy Spirit leads Simeon to Mary, Joseph, and their extraordinary boy. Anna has no divine guidance, yet her faith allows her to have the perspective to know that there is more going on than meets the eye.

Sometimes we can become blind to what God is doing and what is really happening. Cynthia Thomas has written about when her brother and his new wife arrived at a fancy hotel on their wedding night in the wee hours of the morning. They were exhausted from visiting with all their guests for hours at the wedding reception. They looked around the hotel room and saw the sofa, chairs, and table, but where was their bed? And this was supposed to be a bridal suite?

Then they found that the sofa was a hide-a-bed. That mattress was lumpy and the springs sagged to the floor. The newlyweds spent the entire night tossing and turning; they hardly slept and woke up with sore backs. The next morning, the husband went to the hotel desk and asked to switch rooms. He asked the manager why the hotel had chosen such a terrible room for the bridal suite. "Did you open the door in the room?" was the response.

When he returned to the room, the newlyweds opened the door they thought was the closet. There complete with fruit baskets and chocolates, was a beautiful bedroom.²

Anna has the vision to see beyond appearances to discern the deeper truth. What did Anna discover in this extraordinary child? She sees that this is Emmanuel, God with us. Anna learns that God has taken on human flesh and has dwelt among us, full of grace of truth. Of course, Anna does not fully understand what the incarnation means or how this extraordinary boy can be both fully God and fully man, but, after all, do any of us get to a point where we fully understand? When we receive the bread and the cup in communion, we do not fully understand what the sacrament means, but we still can experience God's grace in the mystery of the holy meal. Faith, for Anna and for us, is more of a mystery for us to experience than it is a problem for us to solve.

In Guidepost magazine, Henry Carter tells of being a minister at a home for emotionally disturbed children. One Christmas Eve, he was working on his sermon when he was called to help. One of the boys, Tommy, had crawled under a bed and would not come out.

Henry went to Tommy's room and tried to coax him out by telling him about what he had to look forward to that night: there was the brightly decorated tree in the sanctuary to enjoy and there were even a couple of presents under the tree with Tommy's name on them. Tommy didn't respond at all. Henry went to his knees and lifted the bedspread so he could now see Tommy. He could have reached in and pulled Tommy out, but Tommy could have crawled back under the bed when Henry left the room. Henry told him about the delicious ham dinner Tommy would be able to eat that evening. Still Tommy said nothing.

Henry finally got on his stomach and crawled under the bed. The springs caught on his suit and his cheek touched the ground. Henry told Tommy about the candles in

² Edward K. Rowell, 1001 Quotes, Illustrations, and Humorous Stories, p. 469.

the windows of the church and the carols they would sing together. Tommy remained uninterested, and Henry had run out of ideas, so they both laid under the bed in silence. After a couple of minutes, Henry said, “You know, Tommy, it’s kind of uncomfortable here. Why don’t we get out and stand up?” And they did.

Then Henry thought back to his Christmas sermon he had just written. Like Henry, God had called us from above. The Lord pleaded us to return to God’s loving arms, and when we would not listen, God leaned a little closer and looked under the bed by sending prophets and priests. But it was not until Christmas that God stooped to earth, slid under the bed so to speak, and came to us face to face.³

In Luke, Simeon and Anna looked at the Christ child and knew that they had seen God face to face. Before we leave the Christmas season behind, we are invited to look into the face of the Christ child and discover the same peace that Anna found. That is the Good News of Christmas and of the incarnation: God loved us so much that the Father sent the Son into the world to offer salvation and hope to lonely widows in the temple and to ordinary people like you and me. Thanks be to God for that extraordinary boy who came to show us God’s mercy and love. Amen.

³ Story is found in Gregory L. Tolle’s book, Lectionary Tales for the Pulpit: Series IV, Cycle B, p. 25-26.