

Great Expectations Part II: Anna's Story and Ours

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**A Sermon Preached by
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The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness-- on them light has shined. You have multiplied the nation, you have increased its joy; they rejoice before you as with joy at the harvest, as people exult when dividing plunder. For the yoke of their burden, and the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor, you have broken as on the day of Midian. For all the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood shall be burned as fuel for the fire. For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:2-6

Everybody needs an Anna. And a Simeon, too. Even Jesus did.

You may remember how the story goes. Jesus was born in Bethlehem and days afterward Mary and Joseph brought their baby boy to the Temple in Jerusalem. It was there that they ran into two special people – strangers to *them* – but not strangers to God.

The first is Simeon. Simeon is old and deeply faithful, uniquely faithful in all of Israel. He's getting worried that he might not live to see the coming of the Savior that Isaiah had promised – that Prince of Peace, that Wonderful Counselor, that Everlasting Father, that Mighty God -- before he died. But one day the Holy Spirit leads him to the Temple and, among all the thousands of people worshipping there, to one special family: Mary, Joseph and their newborn son. When Simeon sees the baby he takes Jesus in

his arms and bursts into song, saying, “Yippee! The waiting is over! I can die a happy man! *This* is the One who’s going to save Israel! This is the One who’s going to save *everybody!*” (Luke 2:21-35)

Stunned by Simeon’s serenade, Mary and Joseph run into one more surprising senior citizen. Her story is our second lesson for the day:

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a 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.

Luke 2:36-38

In these few words Luke tells us a lot about Anna.

She’s a prophet, one of the few female prophets in the Bible. She’s read the Bible – gotten all the way through it – and, more importantly, it’s gotten all the way through her. She’s attended the Thursday Morning Bible Study for years. She’s led a Seekers group. She’s done Bethel, Alpha, Kerygma, and everything in between. Slowly, over time, God’s Word has become her world; she sees what God promised in black and white being fulfilled all around her in living color.

She’s also the daughter of Phanuel, a man about whom we know -- nothing. Why would Luke take the time to tell us who Anna’s father is but then not tell us anything more about him? Phanuel must have been so well known among the early Christians that Luke didn’t think he had to say anything more about him. It would be a little like me saying to you, Anna was the daughter of Phil and Betty Lockhart. Many of you recognize the Lockhart name. You know it’s a good name. Without me saying another word, you know that any child of theirs has got good faith genes. Think of Anna as a Lockhart.

Her pedigree goes all the way back to the tribe of Asher. A thousand years earlier Israel was made up of twelve tribes, all named after sons of Jacob. Asher was one of the ten northern tribes, one of the tribes that was crushed by the Assyrians about seven hundred years earlier. Anna’s family

must have fled to Jerusalem, in the south, for safety. And seven hundred years later, that is *seven hundred* years later, she was still known as an outsider, a refugee, a loser. No wonder modern Palestinians and Israelis can't just get over recent wrongs; they have loooooong memories. Belonging to the tribe of Asher tells us she's no insider.

But sometimes being an outsider gives you a better perspective on things. She's not the prom queen. She's not afraid to step on toes. She's got little to lose.

Perhaps that's one of the blessings of being 84 years old. The other day I spoke with some Senior Christians, mainly men and women in their 70s and 80s, people in our own Second Family, about the *advantages* of aging. You heard me right. The *advantages* of aging. We all know the downside, but what are the *graces* of growing old? Here's some of what they said:

- You know your limitations
- You no longer feel the need to compete with others
- I'm less prejudiced
- More free time – but things take longer to do
- I feel more respected
- I'm not afraid to ask questions
- Senior discounts!
- Stronger faith
- Less stress about acquiring things
- I enjoy my friends more
- Better perspective on life

Looked at *this* way we can see why, in the Bible, aging is a *good* thing. The more wrinkles, the more wisdom. We still use the term "Elder" in our church to designate those people whom we think are wise enough and experienced enough in the ways of God to lead us into the future. Anna was an *elder* by every definition of the term.

You don't reach 84 without a few scars. And I'm sure that Anna had her fair share. She had been a widow from an early age, perhaps her early twenties, after just seven years of marriage, and she never re-married. It's hard enough these days to make it as a single person, much less a single

parent, but in those days widows were seen as just as helpless and vulnerable as *orphans*. Anna had lived most her life that way, eking out a living, just getting by, always needing help from others. She knows what it's like to feel alone, to wonder where your next meal or mortgage payment is coming from. She's lived long enough to see the illusions of her own self-sufficiency and self-righteousness shattered, and long enough to see God rebuild the pieces of her life through his grace. She knows what it's like to overcome adversity and to live totally dependent on God.

No wonder she lived at the Temple. It's the one place where she felt completely at home. I don't think she actually *slept* there, but that's where you could always find her. Kind of like we might say, in speaking of Vivian Leidy, "She practically *lived* at Second Pres for over fifty years."

We've got more than a few Annas and Simeons around here, don't we? I'm so glad. Some people might look at our congregation and think -- "we're getting a little grey." And they're right. But that's not a weakness -- that's a strength -- especially as more and more young families join the church.

Youngsters need elders. Think how Mary and Joseph must have felt as they were making their way from little Bethlehem to larger-than-life Jerusalem. They were new parents, caring for a crying, hungry, struggling infant. The Temple must have been overwhelming to them. So many people. All rushing around. So many rituals and traditions that were new to them. So many sights and sounds and smells. They must have been wondering if they'd be welcome there, if anyone would guide them, if they'd fit in with the other new parents, if they were doing the right things for their baby.

I suspect they felt a lot like new parents do when they come *here* for the first time. Second Pres on a Sunday morning can be a little overwhelming. Lots of people rushing around. Lots of traditions to be learned. And lots of wondering if this is the place for them, if this is the right place for them, if they *belong* here.

But imagine that one of *our* Annas sees that couple struggling with the infant carrier and the diaper bag, trying to make their way across the lobby. Anna sees them and makes a point of slowly, steadily, working her way toward them through the crowd. Once she arrives she introduces herself and

says, “I’m so glad you’re here. Let me help you. What’s your baby’s name?” That couple’s blood pressure is going to go down a few points. They’ll start breathing again. They might actually believe they’ve found a Second Family.

I bet that’s how Mary and Joseph felt when Simeon and Anna caught up with them: relieved. But that’s not all that these two elderly strangers did for the Holy Couple. Each of them, in their own way, said something important about what they saw in the baby Jesus: Savior, Redeemer, Light of the World. This stuff wasn’t written like a tattoo on the child’s forehead: “I’m the one you’ve been waiting for.” It was revealed to Simeon and Anna by the Holy Spirit. In Jesus they *saw* *someone* special because they had spent a lifetime *listening* to *something* special: God’s Spirit. All their life – their study, their prayer – was preparation for this divinely appointed encounter.

Like I said, everyone needs an Anna, and a Simeon, too. Someone who sees the good in you long before it’s apparent. Someone who believes in you not based on anything you’ve already done but based on what God is doing in you. Someone who is just crazy enough to think that you are gifted and part of God’s grand plan of good for the world.

I thank God for the Annas and Simeons in my life – those Senior Christians who, even without knowing me well, took a moment to say they saw something special in me and told me that I might just have what it takes to be a pastor. These folks give us the confidence to believe that God really is with us. Younger people can’t always see this for themselves. Sometimes people with bifocals or trifocals have the best vision of all.

We can find these people all around us if we position ourselves properly. And eventually, when we aren’t even looking, they will find us. It’ll probably happen at church. They’ll probably look like they’ve lived a full life. They’ll probably have spent a good deal of time praying and studying the Bible. And, yes, they’ll probably be older than you. Pray that a Simeon or Anna would come into your life. And thank them when they arrive.

And if you are at an age where you can’t imagine anyone older than you, then stop looking around. *You’re Anna. You’re Simeon.* You’re the one that someone’s been waiting for. Perhaps God is calling you – today –

to reach out to someone – it might be a child or the neighbor’s kid – it might be someone you’ve been watching grow up here over the years. Connect with that person and share a good word. A word of hope. A word of promise. A word of affirmation. Say, “This is what I think God is doing in you... And I’m so glad to see it for myself.” Tell them Christ is on his way and working his way into their lives.

It’s easy to think that Christmas is for kids. But Simeon and Anna’s story reminds us that it’s not just children who are longing for Christ to come. Christmas is for everyone. When children and seniors come together to worship the baby they trade enthusiasm and wisdom, questions and answers, despair and hope, war stories and childhood dreams. And in the midst of all this, more often than not, we find the spirit of the One who is soon coming again to take us to Himself. Amen.

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