

Two meditations on Saint Anna the Prophet are offered here following the Scripture verse, Luke 2:22-38, that describes the dramatic encounter of Anna and Simeon with the infant Jesus and his parents. This event is celebrated as the *Meeting of Our Lord in the Temple* (Orthodox) and the *Presentation of Christ in the Temple, the Purification of the Blessed Virgin, and Candlemas* (Roman Catholic/Anglican).

Luke 2:22-38

Jesus Is Presented in the Temple

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord....

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

*'Master, now let your servant depart in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'*

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



The first meditation is an excerpt from *The Optional Presence of the Prophet Anna*, written by [Teresa Berger](#), Professor of Liturgical Studies at Yale, for the blog [Pray, Tell](#). Reprinted with permission.

[The] Feast of the Presentation of the Lord is one of the earliest and ancient feasts in the liturgical year, first attested to by the pilgrim Egeria, who described the feast day as celebrated in Jerusalem. The city... had a particular interest in marking this feast: the faithful in Jerusalem celebrated the day on which the Lord entered their city for the very first time. In time, the feast spread beyond Jerusalem, changing not only dates, focus, and names (*Hypapante*, “purification,” “presentation of the Lord”) but also adding key liturgical elements (e.g., a candlelight procession, probably in the fifth century, the basis of the later name “Candlemas”).

What remained throughout all these changes was the Gospel reading for the feast day, namely Luke 2:21-40. “Remained throughout,” that is, unless one attends Mass today in a Roman Catholic community that chooses to follow a shorter option of this Gospel text, provided in the current Lectionary. This shorter form simply drops the Lukan account of the prophet Anna (Luke 2:36-38), thus rendering her presence at the presentation of Jesus in the temple “optional”. Without Anna, however, Luke’s careful pairing of men and women in the infancy narratives – Zechariah and Elizabeth, Mary and Joseph, Simeon and Anna – is lost. Lost also is the emphatic presence of Spirit-inspired women in the infancy narratives: Elizabeth, Mary, and Anna are all depicted as giving prophetic voice to what God is doing. Yet here is a woman who not only embodied her own basics of faithful witness, namely praise and proclamation, but who also witnessed to the Lord long before any of the apostles knew to embrace that task



The following meditation on Saint Anna the Prophet takes each line of the biblical account and provides insight into the meaning of this seemingly routine event, for Anna must have been present for many babies and their mothers who came to the temple for purification after the birth. In this encounter, her heart recognized that her prayers and longing were fulfilled, and she proclaimed her discovery to all who would listen. This meditation is excerpted from the Rule of the [Society of Saint Anna the Prophet](#), a ministry of Episcopal women. Reprinted with permission.

HOLY WITNESS

Luke 2:22-38

The writer of Luke/Acts created a narrative in which Mary and Joseph journey with their newborn from Bethlehem to Jerusalem to offer a sacrifice in the temple. As they arrive, they are met by Simeon, an old man who has been blessed with a unique promise that before he dies he will see the Messiah. Now, nearing the end of his life, he has been inspired by the Spirit to go up to the temple just as the young family approaches. Meeting them, he takes the child and blesses him, revealing to the parents in prayer and in poetic prophecy the child’s identity as the Messiah. Simeon gives voice to several themes in Luke/Acts, including Mary’s importance and the universal scope of God’s salvation in Jesus.

As the writer of Luke/Acts often did, he then balanced the narrative with a second encounter and with a woman. While Anna's part in the story is brief and often forgotten, it is by Anna that what was hidden and private becomes proclaimed in public.

Anna is called a prophet. Her meeting with Jesus arises not from a divine promise but rather from the daily exercise of her ministry and the spiritual disciplines which undergird that ministry. Hers is a public, prophetic ministry recognized by the community of faith. Her prophetic insight is not privately communicated to Mary and Joseph but announced to all the faithful.

Simeon's encounter with the Christ is the culminating event in a lifetime of longing, after which he welcomes and even prays for his death. Anna, in her extreme old age, does not focus on her death, but rather she is simply and faithfully following her calling to be open to the presence and power of the living God, even in the most unlikely of circumstances. Further, she is committed to the proclamation in public of what she is given by God to know.

GRACED AGING

"There was a prophet Anna..."

St. Anna, or Hannah (Hebrew: grace), shares her name with two other old women in the Jewish and early Christian traditions: Hannah, long childless and considered barren, whose tearful and trusting prayers moved the heart of God and resulted in the miraculous birth of Samuel; and Anna, mother of Mary and grandmother of Jesus.

CLAIMING KIN

"...the daughter of Phanuel of the tribe of Asher..."

Anna's identity is defined initially by the patriarchy. She is her father's daughter and a member of a tribe descended from one of the twelve sons of Jacob (Israel). The patriarch, Asher, was a son of Zilpah, Leah's maid. Anna lives within a culture which defines the roles of women in terms of their relationships with men. She lives and worships within a religious structure created and led by men. Anna, however, has faith in the God who is doing new things in the hearts of women and men. Anna's faith is such that in old age she is empowered to move beyond the limits of her culture and her religion into the freedom of a larger identity: *prophet*.

It is an identity which is lived out in the context of temple worship and the religious establishment and yet is not bound by them. Her authority as a prophet is from God. Her concerns are no longer limited to the traditional concerns of women but expanded to what God is saying and doing in the world. Her kinship is no longer limited to her own tribe. She is related to everybody, even to strangers. She is grandmother to young ones, mother to those who seek God, sister to the aging.

ORCHARD OF OLD AGE

“...she was of great age...she was eighty-four...”

Anna is old, even by modern standards. She has lived fourteen years beyond the Biblical threescore and ten. Her age, cited with respect and awe, reveals the Lord's favor and lends credibility to her words as a prophet. It is her old age which silences the deep suspicion in the patriarchy of her feminine spirituality and allows her voice to be heard. Anna's age is a gift, to her and to her community. Old age is fraught with challenges and tends in our time to be defined by diminishment and loss, not only of physical and mental abilities, but also of much which has sustained life and given life meaning: family, friends, health, work. In a culture which worships youth, aging is not just considered an unfortunate eventuality but an obscene prelude to death. Many believe that the signs of aging must be avoided or hidden for as long as possible and then endured in private, even in secret, until death's release.

For many Christians, the only theological meaning of frail old age is found in the passion and crucifixion of Jesus. The experiences of body-betrayal, stripping and exposure, medical assaults, humiliations and physical pain, loss of relationships, experiences of abandonment and isolation, all leading inexorably to death, offer the consolation of participation in the suffering of Christ. Anna's old age, however, is not understood by her or by her community primarily in terms of suffering. Whatever challenges her age presents, she openly embraces them and lives them as a witness to God's goodness. In Anna can be seen not a prelude to death but Godliness in old Age. In Anna, old age in the created order of human life is a season of ripening spiritual fruits....

ALONE BEFORE GOD

“..having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow...”

The outline of Anna's relational life reveals that by the time she was twenty, the life she had expected to live was over. Three quarters of her days she has now lived alone before God. For sixty-four years, she has been discovering that human relationships, while important and life giving, can never obscure the truth that we are all ultimately alone before God. Living into old age is inevitably the experience of being emotionally widowed. The loneliness of Anna the young widow was transformed over time into a spacious solitude in which Anna's relationship with God could deepen and grow.

Anna became practiced in prayer and in other spiritual disciplines. Her relational life became firmly centered in the religious community where she makes herself available to others as a person of care and insight. Over long years, she has come to trust herself as she has submitted the obscure corners of her life to divine light. She has experienced herself as cherished by God and so she is quick to cherish those she encounters in the course of her days, even the crying child of strangers intruding on pilgrims' prayers in the temple.

HIDDEN IN PUBLIC

“...she never left the temple ...”

The temple in Jerusalem was the religious, economic, cultural, legal, political, intellectual, and aesthetic center of life for the Jews. The temple was the dwelling place of God and the place where human longing for God found expression. With the daily and seasonal rounds of prayer, worship, and sacrifice, with its priests and teachers, worshippers and pilgrims, the temple was always teeming with the faithful. It was the most public of places.

The temple was constructed in a series of ascending courts which mirrored the patriarchal hierarchy. At the center and summit, God's Presence in the Holy of Holies could be approached only once a year by the high priest. Priests and ritually clean Jewish males enjoyed access to other areas, but women could pass only as far as the court of women. For Anna never to depart from the temple suggests that she discovers there all the opportunity and support she needs to fulfill her calling.

Anna's faith is in a God who is as fully present in the lower courts as in the Holy of Holies. At some remove from the heart of power and ritual activity, Anna dwells very close to the heart of God. She chooses to be constant in her availability to God. She gives up privacy, possessions, and home, including the traditional ritual role of women, in order to embrace her ministry as elder and Prophet. Anna reveals that the hidden spiritual lives of elders can be a source of grace and wisdom and unexpected revelation for the whole community.

PARTICULAR PRACTICE

“...but worshipped there with fasting and prayer...”

The ministry of Anna grows out of spiritual disciplines which form her and nourish her as a servant of God. She does not follow a daily rule devised by others; rather, in coming to know herself over many years, she herself identifies the experiences and the practices she needs. Fasting and prayer, traditional practices within her community of faith, are named as part of her discipline. As a worshipper in the temple, she participates in the festivals and observes the seasons. She says her prayers in community, and she prays in solitude. Anna also practices individual spiritual disciplines known only to her, disciplines not so obvious. These no doubt have changed as she has changed. She is willing to nurture the “pleasant planting” of her old age as a gardener, over time assessing and providing for particular needs in different seasons. In order to do this, it became necessary for Anna to be keenly self-observant and deeply respectful of her unique physical, mental, and emotional self.

SEEING IN THE DARK

“...night and day...”

Newborn babes and the very old hardly know any difference between night and day. Anna in her old age is not in the least deterred by the passing of the light. She continues living fully her life of prayer and service. This is not to say that she made no accommodation for the challenges of darkness. She must have adjusted and discovered that the night offers rich communion with the divine mystery, with those who are suffering around the world, and even with joyous revelers.

Reflection and holy rest in the hours of silence are gifts the faithful enjoy over most of their lifetime, gifts which balance the activity and pace of daylight hours. Becoming old shifts human experience more and more into the dark. Eyesight grows dim. The mind can become veiled, its logical processes and memory slipping into a kind of twilight or even into the forbidding depths of dementia. Sleep can be elusive and unpredictable, arriving suddenly and just as deeply in the day as it once did at night. Wakefulness and the urgent need for movement and activity sometimes come in the lonely night watches when others are sleeping. The way of faithfulness for the aging leads inexorably into the dark, and it is on that way that Anna is a seer and a guide.

RISK OF THE MOMENT

“At that very moment she came...”

Anna’s encounter with Jesus happens because he is brought and she is present. Jesus is brought into the temple by his faithful parents who arrive carrying him in their arms for the observance of a religious ritual. Anna, in a season of waning energy and limited physical activity, is present because she has learned what is worth making the effort to do. Anna in the temple is undoubtedly dependent on others daily for food, for help, for support. She suffers the aches and pains of old age. Her mobility is limited, her energy is low, yet just at the moment Jesus arrives, she finds her way to him. There is no waste of effort. Her energy is devoted and directed toward what God is doing just at that time. It is a moment full of risk. The parents are making available this new life, so very precious to them. They acknowledge the divine gift of Jesus’ life by literally placing that flesh and blood gift in the hands of strangers. Anna is not prevented by feelings of doubt, inadequacy, or fear of rejection from approaching and receiving the Holy One with her whole heart.

REACHING GRATITUDE

“...she gave thanks to God...”

Perceiving the Christ, Anna’s first response is to give thanks. Steeped in faith over a lifetime, she perhaps offers not a brief but a great thanksgiving, gathering up the stories of God’s saving acts across time and history to this act of redemption in the person of Jesus. As she stands before him with her hands uplifted, she reaches to God with the community’s memory and with her own personal memory of God’s saving grace in her life. God has delivered her, transformed her, and sustained her to this glorious day. Now Anna is standing before the gift of God’s self in human life and the wonder of human participation in the divine life. Anna does not understand how this infant can be the long awaited salvation of God or how his life will unfold, a life she will not live to see.

She simply apprehends that she is standing where past and future meet as never before. She will soon join the ancient ones, and the future will be lived by others. Anna somehow knows that she is standing in the presence of the Holy One who gathers every human life, including those who have gone before and those who are coming, into the embrace of divine love.

Anna prays from the perspective of old age. From where she stands, she can glimpse the whole of her life in the light of God's redemption. In that light, the reach of her thanksgiving extends far beyond her own life to include all of life, the whole of creation.

OLD STORIES

"...and spoke of him..."

As many old people are, Anna is a teller of stories. After her encounter with the Christ, the story of that encounter becomes a constantly repeated story. She tells it with urgency, not because of her own importance in it, but because of the story's revelation. It is a story of God's coming, of God's presence, of God's redemption, in a baby she happened upon one morning in the temple. It is a story of a common experience, and yet Anna persists in telling it in the hope that the significance of what she experienced can be communicated to others.

TENDING TO HOPE

"...to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem."

Anna lives in a conquered city. The people of the land understand themselves to be under divine judgment. They are looking to their God for redeeming intervention. They hope for reconciliation and the renewal of a right relationship with God. Central to this hope is the long expected Messiah who, like his ancestor David, will reign as king, bringing *shalom*. Anna tells of Jesus as a confirmation of the hope held by those who are coming to pray in the temple. It is a vulnerable hope in need of nurture, growing in the hostile soil of defeat and alienation.

Anna and her people are sustained by the stories and rituals which remind them of God's saving acts in history. Their hope is stirred by the words of the prophets and by their own teachers who call for repentance and who point to the future God is surely bringing.

It was Anna's creative gift to perceive the Christ.

Every generation needs creative eyes. Patterns and symbols, ways of seeing that were fresh and full of meaning for one generation can become stale. The gospel of God's love needs to be communicated in new ways to speak to different people. This challenge calls for the creative eyes of Anna within each of us.