

Every Single One
Luke 2:25-40
December 31, 2023
Pastor Sarah Wiles

Now there lived in Jerusalem a man named Simeon. He was devout and just, anticipating the consolation of Israel, and he was filled with the Holy Spirit who had revealed to Simeon that he wouldn't see death until he had seen the Messiah of God. Prompted by the Spirit, Simeon came to the Temple; and when the parents brought in the child to perform the customary rituals of the Law, he took the child in his arms and praised God, saying,

“Now, O God, you can dismiss your servant in peace,
just as you promised;
because my eyes have seen the salvation
which you have prepared for all the peoples to see—
a light of revelation to the Gentiles
and the glory of your people Israel.”

As the child's mother and father stood there marveling at the things that were being said, Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, the mother, “This child is destined to be the downfall and the rise of many in Israel, and to be a sign that is rejected, so that the secret thoughts of many may be laid bare. And a sword will pierce your heart as well.”

There was a woman named Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher, who was also a prophet. She had lived a long life, seven years with her husband, and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the Temple, worshiping day and night, fasting and praying. Coming up at that moment, she gave thanks to God and talked about the child to all who anticipated the deliverance of Jerusalem.

When the couple had fulfilled all the prescriptions of the Law of God, they returned to Galilee and their own town of Nazareth. The child grew in size and strength. He was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was with him.

...

Anna was 84. She was old, but she'd been young once—she'd worn her hair long, her skirts short, and she'd met the love of her life. But that was a long time ago. Now her hair was silver and she wore it in a no-nonsense pixie. The man she loved had been dead for more than 50 years. Since his death, she's lived at the temple worshipping and longing for a sign of hope for this weary world.

Worshipping all the time sounds really, really boring. But what if she was actually a lot of fun? When I think about the most spiritual people I've known, they all radiate joy. Think of Desmond Tutu and how he was always grinning. I got to meet the Dalai Lama once. He couldn't stop giggling. Seriously. Think of the elders in your life who most inspire you: my guess is there's a quality of joy. I bet Anna was like that.

So when a couple arrives with a baby. Anna runs over and says, “Oh! Look at this baby! He's the future! He's going to save the world!” She runs to tell everyone, “Look! Look at this little chunk. Can you believe?!”

The official interpretation is that Anna, the prophet, through divine inspiration saw that Jesus was God's chosen one, sent to redeem God's people. That's probably what Luke meant when he told this story.

But I've been wondering... what if Anna did this with all the babies? What if she ran up to every single baby that came in and said, "Look! Can you believe it?! This baby is the future!" And then the next one, "Oh my goodness. Look at this one's cheeks! This one's going to save the world! I just know it."

What I mean is, what if Anna saw every child as a sign of hope?

That's not the official interpretation. If every baby is a sign of hope, then what makes Jesus special? Sometimes it seems like for Jesus to be special, everyone around him has to be less special.

What is it that makes us feel like worth, value, specialness are a matter of comparison? That in order for a person to be special, they have to be *more* special.

You may have seen the Mr. Rogers documentary several years ago. One of the things that has stuck with me was that Fred Rogers really believed that each child had value and worth—just by virtue of existing.

One of the critiques leveled against him in the later years of his work was exactly that. He dared to tell children they were all special. The critics declared that if all these kids believed they were special, just because of who they were, without having to earn it, well, all of society was going to come crashing down.

We project that fear onto Jesus: for Jesus to be holy, everybody else has to be less holy. But that is not the revelation of the incarnation. The Word becoming flesh revealed the holiness of all flesh—*all*. And I believe when God says all, God means all.

Jesus didn't walk around saying, "I am the most important ever. I'm so special—and you're not." Most of his ministry was about finding people who did not seem special to others, and reminding them, and us, of their profound worth, and ours.

Maybe it is true that Anna only said this about Jesus, that she saw something in him she'd never seen in anyone else.

But you know, if she did welcome every single baby this way, I think Jesus would've loved it. I think he would have been right there with her saying, "Hey! Don't hog that baby! Give me a turn! Let the little children come to me!" "When you welcome a little one in my name, you welcome me," he said.

So, imagine Anna cradling Jesus in her arms, just like she'd cradled countless babies before. Imagine her counting his perfect toes, marveling at those tiny toenails, gazing into his newborn eyes—eyes that mostly just saw light—and she saw beauty and blessedness there. She couldn't help herself. She called everyone over to look at this brand-new child, not because his eyes were different, but because she saw God in every single child.

Imagine what that would have felt like to Mary and Joseph. They'd been kicked out of their homes because of this child, because of this shameful, scandalous pregnancy that brought

him into the world. They knew their child was divine, but that doesn't mean anyone else got the memo.

And here comes Anna. She doesn't care. Suspicious parentage, whiff of scandal—she *does not* care. She knows beauty and worth when she sees it. When she and Simeon, elders in the faith, accept Jesus, they wipe away some of that scandal and make him part of the community.

If they hadn't welcomed him, Jesus might not have been accepted as a student when he was 12, or a teacher when he was grown. He might never have gathered a following, lived out his destiny. Anna helped make all of that happen, just by welcoming babies.

It's such a little thing, and yet I think it is a powerful practice of hope. Each baby, for Anna, was a sign of God's love.

It's not just babies who are signs of hope.

There was a man at my last church who started violin lessons on his 80th birthday. How's that for hope? And holy?

I've known so many beautiful people who've dared to admit their powerlessness, over whatever it is that controls them, and that their lives had become unmanageable. Truly seeing that everything's fallen apart is a hard-won hope.

I've watched children and teens come out to their parents, middle-aged folks, old folks, acknowledge who they've always been. How's that for hope?

There are people who call our church just asking for firewood. They trust if they ask for warmth, it'll come. The act of asking for help is an act of hope.

So many of you—in your professional lives or your daily lives—teach, or advise, or mentor, or are caregivers for all kinds for folks young and old—could there be greater acts of hope?

And even now, right now, as the cold wind blows, the pines and oaks, dandelions and coneflowers are slowly, slowly sending their roots deep into the soil so that in just a few months' time, they can put out brilliantly green new growth.

How's that for hope? How's that for holy?

This is what Anna saw when she looked at the world. And Jesus—he saw it all—and showed us in word and deed that all of it is holy.

I wonder if some of Anna's hope rubbed off on Jesus as she held him and whispered in those little ears, "You, little one, are a gift, a gift to us, a gift to this whole weary world."

He was, and is, and ever shall be, world without end.

How's that for hope?

- Sarah W. Wiles 2023