

Mary & Anna (Joseph & Simeon): Faith in Community

One of my favorite photos is of a young woman presenting her son to a woman sitting in a wheelchair. In fact, it's a mother presenting her two-week old son to her grandmother; an elderly woman meeting her great-grandson for the first time. I treasure this picture because the woman in the wheelchair is my mother, the young woman is my niece, and the baby is my great-nephew.

There's something uniquely beautiful about a picture of a great-grandparent holding a baby. In that picture we see new life and with it a hope for the future. In it we also see a gentle revelation of how the older person lived.

When I look at this picture, I can recall my mother holding my niece, her first grandchild when she was a baby. And I can imagine my mother holding me.

The event captured in this photo has some similarity to the story we read in Luke 2. Our worship this season has focused on women who prepared the way for Jesus. Today's featured character is Anna, who Mary (and Joseph) encounter in the temple. And, of course, we find Simeon there as well. This closing story of Jesus' birth demonstrates the value of faith lived out in community. The story plays out in three parts.¹

First, Mary and Joseph fulfill their religious obligations.

*Eight days after His birth, the baby was circumcised in keeping with Jewish religious requirements, and He was named Jesus, the name the messenger had given Him before His conception in Mary's womb. After Mary had observed the ceremonial days of postpartum purification required by Mosaic law, she and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple in Jerusalem to present Him to the Lord. They were fulfilling the Lord's requirement that "every firstborn Israelite male will be dedicated to the Eternal One as holy." They also offered the sacrifice required by the law of the Lord, "two turtledoves or two young pigeons."*²

Luke notes several times in the birth story that the Jewish law is fulfilled. Jesus is circumcised at eight days old as required. Mary observes the purification rules. Joseph fulfills the law of the redemption of the firstborn male

According to Jewish law, a mother was considered ritually unclean for forty days after the birth of a male child (eighty days for a female).³ She had to stay home. She couldn't touch anything that was considered holy or enter the temple. After the forty days she had to observe a ritual of purification in the temple, offering a lamb and a turtledove as sacrifices. If she was poor, a pair of pigeons would be enough.

Also, according to law, the firstborn male child belongs to God and must be presented to God by the father at the temple. The child could be redeemed –or taken home – by means of an

¹ This sermon draws from Joanna Harader, *Expecting Emmanuel: Eight Women Who Prepared the Way*, Herald Press, 2022, pp. 110-112, 129-134, 161-162; Douglas E. Wingeier, *Keeping Holy Time: Year B*, Abingdon Press, 2002, pp. 47-48; Fred B. Craddock, *Luke, Interpretation*, John Knox Press, 1990, p. 38; and Craddock, Hayes, Holladay, Tucker, *Preaching Through the Christian Year B*, Trinity Press International, 1993, pp. 45, 48-49.

² Luke 2:21-24, *The Voice*.

³ Leviticus 12.

offering.⁴ Luke blends these traditions referring both to Joseph's redemption act and Mary's purification sacrifice. Jesus grows up in a family that meticulously observes their sacred obligations

When writing about Mary's first visit to the temple after the birth of Jesus, Joanna Harader notes that Mary likely had to deal with sideways looks and outright insults from those who were critical of her unusual pregnancy.

"Fortunately, Mary does not equate the actions of God's people with the actions of God," Harader writes. "She does not use the misguided comments of other Jewish people as a reason to abandon her faith or an excuse to neglect the actions that are part of her religious observance. Mary continues on, not just in her personal relationship with God – which is arguably the most intimate and intense relationship any human has ever had with God – but also with her participation in the faith community."⁵

When we participate in a church, we come into contact with other people. This often is a pleasure, but it can also be a pain. If Mary had avoided the temple because she wanted to avoid critical looks and remarks, she wouldn't have encountered Simeon and Anna. She would have missed their words of blessing for her child and for her.

I wonder what religious rituals are most meaningful to you. We are not liturgical, but there are some elements that are part of our worship each week. We are not sacramental, but we practice child dedication, baptism, and communion. We are individuals with different personalities and spiritualities. We bring our preferred ways of doing things – the songs, the rituals, the style – and try to worship together. And it doesn't always fit together well. What is worshipful for one person might inhibit worship for another. Which worship elements and practices enhance your personal relationship with God and your participation in this faith community?

In the second part of today's scripture, Simeon responds to Jesus.

While fulfilling these sacred obligations at the temple, they encountered a man in Jerusalem named Simeon. He was a just and pious man, anticipating the liberation of Israel from her troubles. He was a man in touch with the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Anointed One. The Spirit had led him to the temple that day, and there he saw the child Jesus in the arms of His parents, who were fulfilling their sacred obligations. Simeon took Jesus into his arms and blessed God.

Simeon said: "Now, Lord and King, You can let me, Your humble servant, die in peace.

You promised me that I would see with my own eyes

what I'm seeing now: Your freedom,

Raised up in the presence of all peoples.

He is the light who reveals Your message to the other nations,

and He is the shining glory of Your covenant people, Israel."

His father and mother were stunned to hear Simeon say these things.

Simeon went on to bless them both, and to Mary in particular he gave predictions.

Simeon said: "Listen, this child will make many in Israel rise and fall. He will be a significant person whom many will oppose. In the end, He will lay bare the secret thoughts of many hearts. And a sword will pierce even your own soul, Mary."⁶

⁴ Exodus 13.

⁵ Harader, pp. 110-111.

⁶ Luke 2:25-35, *The Voice*.

Simeon is a devout man. He has been assured by the Spirit that he won't die until he sees the Messiah, God's anointed one. When Simeon sees Jesus, he praises God for allowing him to see God's "salvation" before he dies.

The centerpiece of this passage is the hymn Simeon recites in verses 29-32. This hymn consists of phrases and lines from the Hebrew Scriptures, mostly Isaiah 49 and 52. The song speaks of the fading of the old before the new, the writings of the prophets being fulfilled, and the realization of hope. God's promise of salvation is being fulfilled. In his praise, Simeon emphasizes the expanded version of this salvation. God's final embrace includes all peoples, Jews and Gentiles. It must have been a relief for Mary to hear another person confirm what God had promised her about her son.

Simeon's caution to Mary is that the great work of Jesus will not be without great cost. Her child will cause many people in Israel to fall and others to stand. The child will be like a warning sign. He will bring truth to light. In doing that he will throw all who encounter him into a crisis of decision. Jesus will face the conflict between God's saving purpose and people's opposition. Many will resist God's saving actions. Jesus will be rejected, and Mary will share in his pain. These aren't the words any mother wants to hear. Yet somehow, they are part of Simeon's blessing.

Listen again to a reflection by Joanna Harader, "As difficult as these words must have been for Mary to hear, I wonder whether she thought back to them through the years, pulled them out and wrapped them around her when things got difficult – when she didn't understand her son, when she was so terribly afraid of what they would do to him. Does knowing a sword will pierce your soul make it any easier when the blow actually comes?"⁷

I wonder who in the church has spoken words that were a blessing to you, that helped you see your place in God's salvation story. I wonder what words you've heard that helped prepare you for future difficulties. I hope you aren't carrying pain or shame from a harmful faith community, but I know this is far too often the case. I hope that this church is a healthy, nurturing space for you.

Anna appears in the third part of our biblical passage. Like Simeon, she praises God and speaks about Jesus.

*At that very moment, an elderly woman named Anna stepped forward. Anna was a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She had been married for seven years before her husband died and a widow to her current age of 84 years. She was deeply devoted to the Lord, constantly in the temple, fasting and praying. When she approached Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, she began speaking out thanks to God, and she continued spreading the word about Jesus to all those who shared her hope for the rescue of Jerusalem.*⁸

It's interesting to note that while Simeon is described as a just and pious man, Anna is introduced as a prophet. Anna is given an authority beyond what Simeon holds. Also, while Simeon is led to the temple that day by the Spirit, Anna is described as being in the temple constantly. Of course, simply being inside a church building doesn't automatically transform someone into a faithful, righteous person.

Harader writes, "To be sure, there are plenty of unpleasant people who spend a lot of time at church yet still act in ungodly, harmful ways; plenty of people who cultivate a religious veneer for their own selfish purposes. Being in a religious building and doing 'churchy' things is obviously no guarantee of a righteous life. But for some, like Anna, their presence with the

⁷ Harader, p. 112.

⁸ Luke 2:36-38, *The Voice*.

religious community is sincere, their prayer is a true connection to the divine, and the spiritual disciplines they practice are for God and for themselves rather than for the appearance of it all. Anna inhabits the sacred space of the temple not for show, not to gain prestige, not even because it's what she is *supposed* to do; she inhabits the temple as a means of being in a relationship with God and with God's people."⁹

Luke doesn't record what Anna says to Mary and Joseph, but he does mention the timing of her words. She steps forward immediately after Simeon's heartbreaking prediction of a sword piercing Mary's heart because of what will happen to her son. Anna's words of praise at that moment must have been a gift to Mary. The reality of Jesus' life – and therefore the lives of his parents – will be difficult and painful. At the same time, the reality of God-with-us in the form of Jesus is worthy of praise and celebration.

While true prophets might speak hard truths, they also radiate hope and joy. It's because of Anna's constant presence at the temple, because of her prayer and fasting, that she is able to be present for Mary at that moment and offer praise and hope to her.

I wonder what Anna said to Mary. I wonder what hard truths you are facing about your own life. What swords are piercing your soul? At this moment, what words of life and hope does God have for you?

Receive now Anna's blessing as imagined by Joanna Harader:

I hold the grief of my widowhood lightly and tenderly within myself.

It is a sorrow and also a joy. It is part of me. It is what it is.

I wear the mantle of prophet carefully and with trepidation.

It is a burden and also a privilege. It is part of me. It is what it is.

My life is worship in prayer,

not always on my knees, not always looking toward heaven,

but always connecting somehow to God who, somehow, wants to abide with me.

Through my grief, with my prophetic power,

in the temple that is wherever you are now,

I pray this blessing with hands outstretched:

May your worship bring joy.

May your fasting bring clarity.

May your prayers be powerful.

May your praise ease the world's fear.

May your words be true.

*May you be named and respected in the roles that God has given you.*¹⁰

⁹ Harader, p. 130.

¹⁰ Harader, pp. 133-134.