

“Anna and Simeon”
a sermon by Kyndall Rae Rothaus
concerning Luke 2:22-40
for Lake Shore Baptist Church, Waco
on December 31, 2017

There is a lot we can learn about Jesus before the little guy ever even learns how to talk. We’ve learned a lot already through the prophetic words of his mother and his aunt when they swapped convictions over swelling bellies about what God was up to.

We learn about this God-baby not only in the words spoken about him and over him, but we also learn something about him based on *who* the spokespeople are. Always, always the words come from unlikely sources. In the biblical account it is the paupers and the widows and the women who know things about God. It is the great king Herod who can’t even figure out how to find him. It is the shepherds out watching their flock who become recipients of the great announcement. It is the wise men from a foreign land who weirdly discover a map in the stars. In today’s story it is Simeon and it is Anna.

Simeon was a man whom we know virtually nothing about—not his lineage, not his status, not his occupation. All we know was that he was a devout man, and God had revealed it to him that he would not die until he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Can you imagine? How exactly did God reveal such a thing to Simeon and how did Simeon know to believe it? You get the impression he’s been waiting on this revelation to come true for quite some time. Did Simeon tell anyone about the revelation he’d experienced, and if so, did anyone believe him, or was he considered the town’s religious nut? According to the text, he wasn’t necessarily supposed to be in the temple that day, but the Holy Spirit guided him there.

This is speculation on my part, but I’ve been wondering if the temple was really all that friendly to Simeon? I mean, he sounds like a nobody from nowhere and he’s convinced he’s heard from God in this special way, and I don’t know, maybe they tried to keep him away. Maybe he got on people’s nerves, made them uncomfortable. Maybe when the temple folk saw Simeon coming, they said amongst themselves, “Oh no, here we go again. Brace yourself.” I imagine Simeon pestering the temple year after year after godless year—“Is he here yet? Where’s the Messiah? Has he come?” I imagine Simeon with the awkward persistence of a starry-eyed lover who cannot accept his love is unrequited. I imagine the years dragging on, and Simeon somehow never losing hope.

Then again, maybe he did lose hope. Maybe year after year the Messiah didn’t show, year after year the conditions in his neighborhood got worse, the government got more oppressive, and the temple got less friendly to the likes of him. Maybe every year the hypocrisy of the religious folk got more pronounced and the sincerity of his own faith felt more like a joke, even to him. Maybe he wondered why he even held on to this revelation he used to be so sure was true. Why not let it go and get on with life?

But somehow he held on to that promise from God . . . or else the promise held on to him . . . until one day, after a very long time of waiting, he developed an undeniable urge to head to the temple, and once he arrived no one had to tell him that so had the Messiah. He just knew.

He also just knew this child would grow up to be a light to the Gentiles, and you have to wonder how he knew *that*. We've been told that Simeon's been waiting for the consolation of Israel, but when he opened his mouth to speak, there was this unexpected inclusion of the Gentiles. Did some movement of the Spirit overcome him? Was it like being in a trance, and he scarcely knew what he was saying? Was this a brand-new revelation to him, unfolding in real time, that salvation was for the Gentiles too? Or did he know exactly what he was saying? Is it possible it had been growing in him for quite some time, this notion about the Gentiles being part of God's mission? After all, he'd had a very long to think about it. If so, where did the notion come from? Had it developed out of thin air, or perhaps did it start when he met and spoke to an actual Gentile, got to know one as a real person and was thus convinced by his experience that God must equally love the Gentile too?

Then there was Anna. Her lineage and occupation were more obvious than that of Simeon. She was daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, and she was a prophet. But she was also a woman, which sometimes has this way of discrediting everything else about you. She was in the temple night and day, and the text treats neither her presence there nor her work as a prophet as anything unusual or out of the ordinary. It is hard to know whether the people in the temple revered her words or whether they merely tolerated her company. If I had to guess, it was some of both.

Anna too recognized in Jesus something very special and she did not hesitate to tell the people about him. The text says she "began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem," making her the very first person in the Gospel accounts to become a witness and preach the good news to others, which is no surprise really, since she'd been a prophet already for so many years. She predated even John the Baptist, who, at this time, was still a baby himself.

When Anna met Jesus, she was well advanced in years but this did not slow her down or stop her from talking about it. In all her decades spent at the temple, she must have encountered thousands of infants brought by their parents to the temple for consecration. How did she *know* that this child was different? Was it the life-long practice of listening for the Spirit that primed her for this very moment, a moment special beyond compare? And where had she learned to work up the guts to speak out loud what the Spirit stirred within her? She must have known that not many people would listen or believe her if she went around talking about an infant as the Messiah. How many years of practice did it take to be able to keep talking anyway, despite the blank stares and disapproving glances? Maybe it required a woman of her age to the job, because to preach the good news when the news was so . . . strange . . . maybe that required a preacher with some experience being rejected, someone with thick skin, who could somehow share her joy and not flinch when it was met with resistance.

This encounter in the temple between Jesus, his parents, and Simeon and Anna is an easy one to pass over. From a distance it looks like two elderly people oohing and aahing over the newest

baby at the temple and congratulating the parents . . . a rather common sight in church, as you know. But if we zoom in and take a closer look and ask a few questions, Simeon and Anna come alive to us, and as they come alive, we learn that they are not just peripheral characters but the earliest harbingers of the Gospel, awake and alert before just about anyone else on the planet that God is up to something big. Leave it to the old people to wake up early, long before the young people have opened their eyes. They see something the more official, so-called “important” people entirely miss, something most of the official people will keep missing all the way up to his crucifixion.

The others eventually notice him too. But they will not see Messiah. They will see Threat to the Status Quo, they will see Young Man Who Keeps Carrying On About the Poor. They will see a Law Breaker and a Disrupter of the Peace. They will see *hints* of a People’s King, God’s Chosen, a Powerful Healer—they will see just enough to freak them out and make them want to shut him down. It’s like they will see the poor and downtrodden rising up from their lowly places, but they cannot see this as good news, because they are afraid of what it means they will lose.

As Simeon said to the Mother Mary, “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel.” He told Mary that Jesus will “be a sign that will be opposed,” which must be the understatement of prophetic speech that year. Simeon also said the opposition to Jesus would reveal the inner thoughts of many—which reminds me of a political climate not so far from home today in which opposition to the Jesus-way is strong and the inner thoughts of those who claim to be God-followers are revealed for all to see—thoughts that are harsh, unloving, and full of greed.

Meanwhile Simeon kept his eyes fixed on Mary, the bearer of God’s light and God’s love, and he added, rather ominously, almost like an afterthought, “And a sword will pierce your own soul too.” Rarely do you give birth to something beautiful and simply get to watch it frolic through the world carefree. To engage this harsh climate of a world with love and hope and joy and truth usually sets you up for disappointments and losses, even crucifixions. But the thing Simeon did not say—perhaps because he didn’t know or perhaps because it wasn’t the time—was that Mary had also set herself up to experience resurrection, victory, and miracle.

Friends, whatever it is God is up to with you . . . may it grow and may it become strong. May it be filled with wisdom and rewarded with God’s favor. The way isn’t always going to be easy, but it is going to be good. May the Christ-child inspire us as the child once inspired Simeon and Anna and so many others who were in search of a word of hope. Amen.