

The Name of Jesus
January 2, 2022
Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church
Lakeland, FL

Psalm 8
Phil 2:5-13
Luke 2:21-40

[1st person narrative of the Gospel from the eyes of Anna]

My name is Anna. While I am an old woman now, it's not always been this way. I was just a very young woman when my husband died. We had no children yet. And my family urged me to remarry. That didn't seem right. Then my father's family urged me to return home and live out my life. Well, that didn't seem right either. I was a grown woman not a child. Where to go and what to do?

Somehow the Temple seemed like the right place and so that's where I spent all of my time. Well, of course, not in the Temple proper – only priests could go there. But in the Temple area there is a Court just for Women. And that's where I lived.

What a fascinating place it was. There were the major feasts that were observed by Jews from all around Israel – year upon year upon year -- Passover, Unleavened Bread, Firstfruits, Pentecost, Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles.

Then there were the ritual things that happened everyday – we had morning and afternoon burnt offerings. One at sunrise and one at mid-afternoon. These were our hours of prayer. The priests from the Tribe of Levi were responsible for these offerings.

They would first have to be purified themselves. Then they would clean the altar and prepare the offering. They would trim the lampstands and prepare the incense for burning. The choirs of Levites would sing well-loved and well-known songs. The priests recited the 10 Commandments, the Great Shema – I can hear it now – Hear O Israel, the Lord your God is One. Thou shalt love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind.

Then the actual burning of the incense offering – oh my. This was so special that a priest did this only ONCE in their lifetime.

Then a priest would recite the blessing that Father Aaron (you remember, the brother of Moses) said to our forefathers who wandered in the wilderness – he said: “May the Lord bless you and keep you; may the Lord make his face smile upon; may the Lord look upon you with favor and grant you peace – shalom.”

And of course, there were all the other ritual things that people came to the Temple for – people came for individual offerings for any number of reasons, they came for personal purifications, dedications, circumcisions, and some, like me, just came to be in the area of holy things to fast and pray.

Well, one day things were just like usual – but then they weren't. Something seemed different somehow. I was a very old woman by that time – I didn't really keep track of years anymore but some say that I was over 100 years old.

There was a young woman with a small baby and her husband. Ah yes, it must be time for their purification in accordance with the laws and customs that have been practiced for generations and generations.

Also, I understood that this child was a boy, her first-born, and would be presented to the LORD that day as God commanded back at the time of the Exodus.

Yes, these are the things that I saw and prayed with every day of my life in the Temple Courts.

As I was watching this young family as they came in, I suddenly saw Simeon – he was another of us old-timers who hung out at the Temple – Simeon came boldly up to them. And something stirred in me as well. I, too, came to this family. He and I gathered around them. Then Simeon took this 6 week old baby in his own arms and burst into a hymn praising God -- I can hear it now!

Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace, according to thy word: For mine eyes have seen thy salvation, Which thou hast prepared before the face of all people; A light to lighten the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel.

And I looked at the mother and father and they were dumbfounded at what he said. And I drew near to this babe and was amazed at what stirred in me and I could not contain myself. I needed to speak of him to all who were around me – who like me, were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem.

And his name was Jesus, because he would save the people.

And then it was time for afternoon prayer

PAUSE, (scarf off.)

So, what can we learn today from Simeon and Anna.

God can do amazing things in us at all stages of our lives. He overshadowed the life of a young teen age girl and only a short time later spoke Gospel truth through the mouths of these two centarians. None of us are too old, too young, too feeble, too poor, or even too successful to be used by God for God's purposes.

Particularly in the case of Anna, living in the ritual of the life of faith shapes us. Each prayer of "Come Lord Jesus be our guest," or "Now I lay me down to sleep" or "Our Father who art in heaven" is part of the Spirit's gentle hand over my heart and mind shaping me into what God would have me be.

Each time that I cross myself or another in private prayer, in leading worship with you week after week, in hospital visits and home visits, imprints upon me again and again the power of God at work in me through my baptism and He does the same thing in you as we hear the words, "In the name of the God the Father and God the Son and God the Holy Spirit."

Each time that we come to this sanctuary – this place of safety – we come to Holy Ground where the very Word of God comes to us in word and sacrament. We come to the Holy Table for the sustaining power of his body and blood that comes to us whether we feel it or not.

The rituals of our lives in faith shape us. Rituals of prayer, worship, song, service. Day after day, year upon year. Like drops of water shaping the rock on to which it falls.

Some say that “seeing is believing.” And sometimes that may be the case. However, as any parent who has looked into the eyes of a child on Christmas morning can attest, more often it may be said that “Believing is seeing.”

Simeon and Anna in their faithfulness and their believing in what God was going to do were able to see the truth of this young infant held in his mother’s arms. This one – Emmanuel, God with us, the Word of God made flesh, this one would be the redemption of humankind.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow!