

2024 11 24 The Remembrance of Anna
Eternity Sunday, TUMC

[Psalm 145](#) - the greatness and goodness of God

[Luke 2:25-38](#) - Simeon and Anna

The way Luke remembers it, Anna spent all her time in the temple, day after day. As the years went by, nothing changed except she got older, busy with fasting and prayer. The way Luke remembers, Anna was widowed a long time ago. Luke doesn't remember much about her relatives - any children or grandchildren, how long her parents lived or whether she had siblings, and we don't know about the family of the man she married. The way Luke remembers it she appears, alone, completely free to worship God, and listen, and wait. But she had a life before and after this moment.

As Luke remembers it, the story invites us to imagine. I invite you to imagine, or to remember. I will read the verses about Anna, and ask: what do you wonder about Anna and her life?

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. Luke 2:36-38

[pause for responses]

I wonder whether Anna carried grief in her heart all of those decades after her husband died. I wonder how her husband died - illness or accident? Perhaps he was significantly older than her. Perhaps he died in warfare or violence.

I wonder why she was so devoted to her religious practice, and I wonder how the people around her felt about her. Was she a beloved and respected member of the congregation, someone who could be relied upon to fuss over new parents and bless whatever babies came by? Or was she odd, considered erratic, an anomaly in the Temple, by all accounts a highly gendered and ritually organised space?

Luke calls Anna a prophet. He does not call Simeon a prophet, he calls Simeon a righteous and devout man, but Anna is a prophet. Prophets are erratic at the best of times, but at the worst of times, prophets are essential and irreplaceable. They can go places where others are afraid. They can say things that others cannot.

There is another elder woman who serves as a prophet, centuries before. Her name was Huldah (2 Kings 22). In the time of the monarchy, Huldah was summoned by the king. They had rediscovered the book of the law in the archives of the temple. This book, perhaps what we call Deuteronomy, contained the promises that the people had made to God, and that God had made to the people. The law had been lost through disaster and corruption, and so when they found it they brought it to Huldah and asked her opinion. In that moment, an old woman was the highest authority possible. She was being asked to sign off on God's word. And she authorised the scripture.

When you need to know something that has been forgotten, the Bible says that you should probably trust the word of a wise older woman with an active prayer life.

The way Luke remembers it, the story of the baby Jesus and his parents visiting the temple is bittersweet. I imagine the faces of Simeon and Anna as they glimpse the glory of God in this ordinary-looking child and his stressed-out parents. They sense something new and something infinitely old - God at work, hope stirring. And they also have a sense of the pain that it will bring about for this new mother, for the upheaval that will follow. I think it might take a long life and experience of the intermingled nature of life and loss to be able to hold the truth of that revelation of God. I think that is why Anna and Simeon are there.

This is the last Sunday of the church calendar. Many churches around the world choose to celebrate this as 'Christ the King' Sunday. It is the culmination of the cycle of stories that begins before this baby is born - the hope and expectation and anxiety and concern that leads to the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. 'Christ the King' Sunday is meant to point to the future promise of a world reconciled and made new, of justice and righteousness, of universal peace and harmony, of God's plan for the world. This tradition was instituted 99 years ago in Europe. It was a time when ultra-nationalism was surging and threatening again to destabilise international peace. The rich were isolated and the poor were afflicted. The lessons of the Great War were forgotten, and governments put their trust in weapons, warfare, and empire.

'Christ the King' feels triumphalist and far away from the life of Jesus that the gospels tell. Yet in a time when so many men are trying to have themselves declared king, Jesus points us to true power - vulnerability, community, solidarity, and trust in God. This is a power that rich and well armed people are unable to understand. When Jesus is your idea of a king, you sing freedom songs instead of chanting slogans. When you follow Jesus, you don't build walls, you host meals. When someone is in need, you don't lock them out, you help them out. In as much as we manage to do this in our small and fragile ways, we are following the path of the king who chose peace and vulnerability over power and violence.

The way I tell it, the world we share in this moment is short on hope. It is fixated on power - buying power, people power, fire power, nuclear power, horsepower. It is a world where men feel justified in trying to take power over women. In this moment the worst abuses of Christianity are praised as if they were the work of God. It is a time of isolation and anxiety. Lies are told and truth is forgotten. Different generations talk past each other, and old tensions and injustices pain the present.

In this church, we choose this Sunday to remember those who have died. They have left this world and gone into eternity, into a type of life that we can only glimpse, and partly understand. There is a sadness today. We admit that for all of our technological

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skill, for all of our cleverness and goodheartedness and hard work, death remains. We struggle with it, however old we are, however outwardly secure. We fear death and we endure it and we try to be honest about that.

Today, someone is dying, and someone has died. Today, someone is being born, and someone is living. The story that Luke remembers is our story too.

I believe we can face death with trust and truthfulness because of this story. It begins with God meeting the great need of our world by taking on the form of an insignificant baby. This baby does not say anything wise. He does not issue laws or enforce power. But he has power to help us remember that we can care and love, just as God loves and cares for us.

This baby grows up, and becomes a child, and then a young man. This young man knows how to listen to older women. He knows what God has called him to do, but he does his first miracle because his mother tells him to.

This young man points people towards a God who is gentle and loving and fierce and righteous. He describes a God like a widow searching for a lost coin, like a father desperate to be reunited with a lost child, like a weedy tree that shelters birds.

And he shows us that God takes part in our sorrows and our losses. God is present when we are afraid about the future of the world or our place within it. And God is with us when we mourn the dead and struggle for the living.

What I am describing is connection and love. That is the power of God that we remember in Eternity Sunday, the ongoing connection and love that we share with those who have died. We are commanded to remember. It is by remembering that good things are birthed into the world. In every moment we have one foot in the past, one in the future. The psalm promises that we will tell of God's works and mighty deeds from generation to generation. These works are not the punishment of the wicked, but the rescue of the oppressed and overthrown. The works of God are to

feed the hungry, to shelter and nurture, to visit the imprisoned, to mourn the dead, and to shepherd the whole. This is how we practice resurrection life.

The way Luke tells the story, in the most difficult times you will find unlikely people listening for God at work in the world. These are the people whose loss has become wisdom and whose life is a sign of God's love. They are the stitches that pull together the generations. They are the faithful ones who are not afraid to dream, or to make a mess of tears, or to offer a quiet stabilising word. The way Luke remembers it, they are ready to pray, turning their hearts to God and giving thanks in trust and expectation.

The work of remembrance that we do today helps us to know the presence of God with us, the grieving Spirit who brings new life in its season. May it bring us the comfort of shared memory, and the knowledge of the love that is God, uniting us in our need, the truest power we know. Amen.