

Anna: A Wise Elderly Woman – Luke 2:21-40

The Three Wise Women of Christmas – Week 3

Scripture Reading:

Introduction

A cancelled flight caused a long line at the ticket counter as travelers waited to get ticketed on another flight

Of course, the longer it took the more impatient the crowd got as people fretted about missing connections and whether they would even get on a plane at all that day

Finally, one angry passenger pushed his way to the front of the line, slammed his first class ticket down and said, “I must be put on the next available flight and I demand a seat in first class!”

The ticket agent, trying to be polite, told him they would get to him as soon as possible but that he needed to return to his place in line and wait like everyone else

To which he retorted, “Do you have any idea who I am?”

Without blinking an eye, the ticket agent smiled kindly at him and picked up her microphone and announced:

“We have a passenger here at the desk who does not know who he is. Please make your way to the counter if you know this gentleman and can help with identifying him.”

How are you with waiting? Personally, I’m terrible at it.

If the wait is expected – like waiting for an appointment – I’m not too bad but I tend to get antsy when forced to wait not knowing how long the wait might be because I find it very difficult, if not impossible, to get busy doing something else to fill the time because I just know I’ll get started and then immediately have to stop

Unfortunately for people like me, waiting is often a part of the Christian life because God doesn’t work according to our timetable and he only acts when his schedule says it’s time

And when forced to wait too long, one of two things is likely to happen for those of us who have a hard time waiting We either become disgruntled with God due to our impatience or we simply stop waiting at all and move on to other things

This morning we come to the last message in our series concerning the Three Wise Women of Christmas as we look at a lady who waited a very long time for the first Christmas

Her name is Anna and, as we are going to see, she was a wise elderly woman

Your Bible should already be open to Luke 2 and, if it’s not, you will want to join us there as we begin by looking at a bit of background before we see just what Anna possessed that revealed her wisdom

I. The Background

According to Luke’s account, Joseph and Mary brought Jesus – who had been ritually circumcised after 8 days as required by the Law – to the temple to observe two other ceremonies of the Hebrew faith that concerned childbirth

The first purpose was for special ceremonial purification of the mother and we see in verse 24 [**Luke 2:24**] that Joseph and Mary made an offering of two birds, one of which was a sin offering and the other for a burnt offering

And the fact that they offered the birds indicates that they were very poor as that was the provision for the poorest of the poor

It also indicates that Mary realized that she was a sinner in need of cleansing just like every other human being

It’s sort of ironic that she paid the price for her purification while holding in her arms the Son of God who would one day pay the ultimate price so that she and all who would receive him would receive the ultimate cleansing brought by his blood from his ultimate sacrifice

The second purpose in presenting the baby at the temple was called the redemption of the firstborn

In **Exodus 34:19-20** God says: *All that open the womb are mine, all your male livestock, the firstborn of cow and sheep. The firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem. And none shall appear before me empty-handed.*

In other words, every firstborn son belong to God and this ceremony was the acknowledgement of that fact

And during this ceremony parents bought back or “redeemed” their son from God for the price of five shekels

Jesus was born under the Law as we see in **Galatians 4:4** and Joseph and Mary were careful to do everything that was required by the Law

It was while they were at the temple that they met Anna

The first thing Luke reveals to us about Anna is that she was a “prophetess” [**Luke 2:36**]

I believe this refers to the fact that Anna proclaimed God’s Word to others not that she was a source of future revelation

Although Jewish women enjoyed more respect in that day than women in general, they still faced a fair amount of discrimination

Girls were not given the same religious instruction as boys because the rabbis thought their minds were not suited for such things and women were restricted to their own area of the temple and were not even allowed to testify in court

And yet God includes Anna’s name and testimony concerning his Son in his Holy Word showing that he is pleased with the devotion of any person, male or female

The next notable thing we see is that Anna was no spring chicken when Joseph, Mary, and Jesus arrived at the temple

We see Anna described in verse 36 [**Luke 2:36**] as “*advanced in years*”

When I checked on other occurrences of the Greek word used here for Anna I saw the only other usage was in describing Elizabeth where it was also translated “advanced in years” which made me chuckle as her husband, Zechariah, described himself as an “old man” but Elizabeth as “advanced in years”

I suppose Luke was too much of a gentleman to refer to an elderly female as an “old woman”

But the fact is that Anna had lived for a long time as scholars estimate that she was at least 84 and possibly over 100 when she met Jesus

That seems like a pretty big range but that’s because the Greek used in verse 37 is unclear as to its precise meaning

In our ESV Bible the translators make the decision to interpret it to mean that she was a widow **of** 84 years

But it could also mean that she was a widow **for** 84 years

And if you choose the second interpretation and if Anna had been married at the customary age of 13 or 14, been married for seven years, and then widowed for 84 years, then that adds up to her being 104 or 105 years old at this time

Whether you choose to apply the 84 years to her whole life or to her widowhood, Anna was indeed advanced in years in a culture where someone who was 50 years old was considered to have reached ripe old age

As we just touched on, Anna was also a widow and she had been a widow for a long time in a culture where widowhood was particularly difficult as being a widow virtually guaranteed a life of poverty

But, for some reason we aren’t told, Anna made the unusual choice to not remarry

Of course, the more romantic among us like to think her husband was the love of her life and she just couldn’t bring herself to marry anyone else

But I think it’s more likely that Anna chose not to remarry because she believed God had an eternally significant purpose for her widowhood and Anna accepted it as part of God’s plan and devoted her life to his service in the temple

I believe she understood the principle that the apostle Paul referred to in **1Corinthians 7:34** where he said –

...the unmarried or betrothed woman is anxious about the things of the Lord, how to be holy in body and spirit. But the married woman is anxious about worldly things, how to please her husband.

Anna was undoubtedly a woman devoted to worship, prayer, and service to the Lord and her close walk with God was evident in her love for the coming Messiah and her desire to tell everyone who were waiting for redemption about Jesus

But Anna likely lived a very frugal life as she eked out a living by relying on the charity of others which is likely the meaning of the last part of verse 37 [**Luke 2:37b**] – *She did not depart from the temple, worshipping with fasting and prayer night and day*

There were living quarters or apartments in the outer courts of the temple where the priests like Zechariah lived while performing their annual two-week term of service

They were very simply, modest rooms and it appears that Anna was given one of those small chambers perhaps in recognition of her condition and as a reward for her decades of faithful service to the Lord

That would seem to be the literal meaning of verse 37 although there are some scholars who believe that Anna simply was present in the temple whenever it was open

Either way, Anna's dedication to temple life shows us that, like Elizabeth who we looked at two weeks ago, she didn't run from God when she ran into the unfairness of life

Apparently childless when she was widowed at a very young age Anna didn't let her circumstance make her bitter she allowed it to make her better as she devoted herself to loving, worshipping, serving, and communing with God

Anna was elderly but she wasn't obsolete

Anna was advanced in years but she remained vital because she possessed three very important things

II. Anna Possessed:

The first thing we want to notice is that Anna possessed a watchful spirit

A. A watchful spirit

Literally thousands of priests and temple officials were continually bustling about the temple doing God's business

And yet only Simeon and Anna – two elderly folks who most people probably looked at as a couple of temple fixtures who were just a little bit odd – saw the Messiah of God when he arrived

Why? Why did these two old people see what everyone else missed?

Actually, there were a couple of reasons

First, as we saw last week, many had stopped looking for the Messiah to actually arrive

While they knew the Messiah would one day come, many if not most were not looking for him expecting him to come

They were busy with day-to-day life and religion had become mostly a ritual entered into rather passively

In that, the people of Anna's day were not unlike many if not most believers today when it comes to looking for Christ's return – we know intellectually that he is coming again and we know the time is growing ever closer but we don't expect him to return *today*

So the first reason Anna noticed Jesus when others missed him is that

Anna kept her eyes open for the Messiah when most others had stopped expecting him

The second reason is that most people who were looking for the Messiah were looking for the wrong kind of Messiah

The vaunted Pharisees were looking for a great celestial champion

They expected another in the line of King David who would revive all the glories of the past and remove them from Roman bondage restoring the people of Israel to their rightful position as the true masters of the world

Others wanted a religiously oriented Messiah from the tribe of Levi who would come to teach and enforce the Law
 But there was a remnant that had no dreams of power and armies with banners flying or of some great lawgiver
 They knew that Isaiah had prophesied the Messiah would be a suffering servant who would bear our griefs and carry our sorrows and be pierced for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities

This remnant devoted their lives to the study of the Scriptures, constant prayer, and quiet watchfulness until the Messiah would come

Simeon and Anna were members of this small group of godly people and they put their trust in the kind of Messiah foretold in Scripture – not a ruler of the people of Israel but the Redeemer of all mankind

We can fall prey to the myopia of the day and miss what God is doing

But when we have a close relationship to God that is matured through prayer and the study and application of the Bible we will be prepared to see what God is doing in the world and be prepared to join him in it

I encourage you to consider your spiritual vision in order to be looking for the right things so that you don't miss out on the joy of making an eternal difference in the world

Anna had a watchful spirit that continually looked for the Messiah and, in spite of her age she also had a can-do attitude

B. A can-do attitude

I can still remember when I first came to grips with the fact that I wasn't going to be the exception and that the miles on the odometer were having an effect on the performance of the machine

I had undertaken the task of putting a new roof on my garage and had stripped the old shingles when the time came to carry the bundles of new shingles up the ladder and onto the roof

I confidently walked to where the shingles had been delivered and as I picked up a bundle I remember thinking that they were heavier than I recalled from my prior roofing jobs

I got the bundle up on my shoulder and walked to the ladder and somehow made my way onto the roof, staggered over to where I wanted the shingles and dropped the bundle down and I remember thinking getting all the shingles up there was going to take some doing

The second bundle was worse and I didn't make it all the way up onto the roof but slid the shingles onto the roof from the top of the ladder

After that, a young friend took pity on me and I watched him race up and down the ladder with the rest of the shingles

There are many here who know what I'm talking about and the rest of you will be there before you know it

The fact of the matter is, we all slow down physically, we can't stop that, but our hearts and our attitudes don't have to

A youthful spirit is really an attitude of the heart – not a condition of the body and we don't have to stop living just because our bodies begin to decline

General Douglas MacArthur is quoted as saying:

“Nobody grows old by merely living a number of years. People grow old by deserting their ideals. Years may wrinkle the skin, but to give up wrinkles the soul.”

I think General MacArthur was onto something there as I've personally known people who were “old” while in their 50's and those who were youthful in their 80's – and I'll bet you have too

I have no doubt that Anna suffered the occasional aches and pains of old age and that she had slowed a step or two

But God defines what it means to be “in the prime of life” differently than the world does

The world tells us that the prime of life is that season when we're at the peak of our physical strength and mental acuity

But God sees it as that season when we're most spiritually strong and attuned to him

Anna remained sensitive to the leading of God's Spirit and was ready to do her part during one of the most pivotal times in history

She and Simeon had both lived and waited and kept themselves spiritually prepared for a long time so that they would be ready to pass on a blessing that, in a sense, kicked off Jesus' earthly mission

Time marches on and time takes a toll on all of us but that doesn't mean we have to grow old where it counts

It's far more likely that people will remember how someone finished the race of life far more than how they ran it

Paul used that analogy in **2 Timothy 4:7** as he described running all the way through the finish line as it were

And we are able to finish strongly because we don't have to rely on our strength to do so

Isaiah 40:30-31 has this to say about spiritual vitality even in old age:

Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.

Anna relied on God's strength to continue to do what he directed her to do

It's all too easy for us to begin to list all the things we can't do any more as we get older

I figure I've put on my last roof unless some miracle occurs or some dire need forces me to do it

Physical strength fails with age but there is nothing that says our spiritual strength cannot remain vital and growing as long as we live

We can keep our hearts young and keep moving forward with a can-do attitude as long as, like Anna, we wait on the Lord and rely on his strength and direction

And that leads us to the third thing that Anna possessed that kept her vital in spite of her old age – a ministry to fulfill

C. A ministry to fulfill

Simeon's job was apparently to prophesy over Jesus and pronounce a blessing upon him because as we read about Simeon we are told that God had promised him that he wouldn't die before he had seen the Lord's Christ

And in his blessing of Jesus, Simeon says that God is letting him depart in peace having seen Jesus

But not Anna; her ministry in a sense had only just begun when she cast her eyes upon Jesus as we see recorded in verse 38 [**Luke 2:38**] the fact that she immediately after she had thanked God she began telling others about Jesus

I imagine Anna had a group of like-minded individuals who were also waiting and watching for the true Messiah

And it's easy to picture her running off to tell them that the Messiah had arrived just as soon as she was finished with Simeon, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus

But she didn't stop with those who were her kindred spirits as we see "*she began to speak of him*" which indicates continuous action

I wouldn't be at all surprised to find out that Anna spent her time in the temple from then on talking to everyone she could pin down about what she'd seen

Anna had earned a hearing by her example of a long life devoted to God and her testimony would have been very much like that of the psalmist in Psalm 71 who said [**Psalm 71:17-18**]:

O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come.

There's a sense of urgency and purpose in those words and I believe Anna, knowing the number of her days on this earth were growing short, was in a hurry to tell as many people as she could about the Messiah before her time was up

By and large, people today tend to focus on retirement and it's unfortunate that retirement for many means living for self

Even in the church it's common for folks who reach a certain age to say they've done their duty and it's time to let the younger members take over ministry functions

I understand the attraction of focusing on self after spending one's adult life working for someone else – I really do

But whereas Anna saw her widowhood as giving her the time and opportunity to serve God, people today see their empty nest and retirement years as finally giving them time for self-indulgence and that's rather sad

Instead of winding down in our later years we should view them as having greater potential for the kingdom

Because, while our years may have slowed our step, they have also given us the knowledge and wisdom and the spiritual maturity and the time needed to serve more effectively

God has never intended for his people to retire from his service – he expects us all to run all the way through the tape at the finish line

Anna knew God's retirement plan for his servants is out of this world and she determined to fulfill her ministry in spite of her advanced years

Conclusion

Anna was probably overlooked by most of the people around her for most of her long life

And it would be easy to overlook her contribution today and just read right past the three verses that tell us all we know about her

But Anna was and is a treasure and she is a great example for Christ-followers today – especially as we progress toward and reach our senior years

Like Anna, the aging Christian should grow old with God in mind and with all the enthusiasm he or she can muster

Let me ask you –

Is Christ the focal point, the governing principle, and priority of your life?

How eager are you to see the Messiah face-to-face whether that is at his second coming or at your death?

I can say with certainty that everyone here is growing older

Those of you who are young might think Anna has nothing to say to you

But even you will one day, barring some tragic circumstance or the return of Jesus, will one day be old so look at Anna and determine now to progress toward your old age properly

Ecclesiastes 12:1 says – *Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them"*

Perhaps you've already reached that stage of life referred to as "advanced in years"

Let me encourage you not to give in to the temptations of old age and give up on your spiritual efforts and just coast into eternity

Don't give up one second of serving God

In **Revelation 2:10** Jesus encourages his followers – *Be faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life.*

I believe that Anna fulfilled that admonition and gained that reward as her record reveals that it's possible to continue to mature in the Lord until the end and not just grow older

Let's pray