

The Faces of Our Faith: Anna

Luke 2:38



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In the scripture lesson we read this morning, Luke tells us the story of when Mary and Joseph brought their infant Jesus to the temple. Much like Jennifer and Joe, Sarah and Matthew, Jaclyn and Frank who this morning have brought their children to church to be presented for baptism, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple to be presented to God. Following Jewish practice and in accordance with Jewish law, they dedicated their first-born son to the service of the Lord. There, to witness Jesus's dedication were Simeon and Anna, both religiously devout and lifelong servants of God. Luke tells us that Simeon, in his old age, had been waiting to see the Lord's Messiah before the end of his life, and now that he encountered Jesus, he was ready to die. Anna too was advanced in years. Ever since she was widowed 84 years ago, she has lived in the temple, continually praying and fasting. It is clear from the way Luke tells the story that the encounter of Anna and Simeon with Jesus was Spirit-led and Spirit-filled. The Holy Spirit led them to be present at this particular time and place so that they could witness and testify to the significance of Jesus.

Never having met Jesus before, they somehow recognized upon meeting him what the angels had told the shepherds: that Jesus was good news. "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11). Those were the angel's words to the shepherds. Unlike angels who were celestial and shepherds who were nomadic, however, Simeon and Anna were moored to Israel's religious life. Anna was practically part of the temple, having lived there so long. As representatives of Israel's religious institutional life, they were lifelong bearers of tradition, and it was of no small significance to Luke that these lifelong bearers of tradition received Jesus into the temple with open arms.

Let's listen again to how they received him:

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying, "Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel (2:27-32).

In a similar way, Anna, Luke tells us, "began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (2:38). It was of no small significance to Luke that Anna and Simeon, as old and established as they were, as devout and Spirit-filled as they were, saw in Jesus Israel's hope being fulfilled.

It is a moving story, and, to the extent that the birth of each new generation engenders the hope and affection of older generations, we can all relate to it. We can relate to the oldest members of a community wanting the best for the youngest members, and therefore drawing on the customs, traditions, and teachings that made up the best that they received perhaps from their own upbringings. We can understand the aspiration of parents who want their children to grow into something greater than they themselves are. What could be more expressive of their hopes and aspirations than to present and dedicate their children as children of God? We can easily relate to the aspiration with which Mary and Joseph brought baby Jesus to the temple for this purpose, as well as the wonder with which they pondered their son's future.

So extraordinary, however, were the things that Joseph and Mary were told about Jesus's future that they were amazed. From the beginning, even before his conception, they were told that Jesus would be good

news for all people. Then the testimonies of Simeon and Anna spell out what this means: Jesus will be good news not just for Israel, but also for Gentiles. The Gentiles are included: "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." Here, for the first time, the significance of Jesus for the Gentiles is revealed to his parents.

Sometimes an ideal or vision is stated as though it were universal, as though its promise would extend to all people. We know, however, that in practice it often does not work out this way. Due to their blind spots, those who have constructed such an ideal have usually had a limited group of people in mind. But when unintended audiences hear the promise of such an ideal or vision, they wonder if the promise could extend to them as well. This is what happened in our own country when in 1776 the authors of the Declaration of Independence declared that all men are created equal. It took almost ninety years for this ideal of inherent equality to apply to black men, women, and children so that their enslavement would be outlawed. It took seven more years after the Emancipation Proclamation for the law to guarantee African American men the right to vote. Fifty years after that women were given the right to vote in America. It has taken us and continues to take us a long time to extend the promise of democratic ideals to all Americans.

No matter how long it takes, however, because of the universal promise of its ideals, older generations of Americans continue to pass this dream down to younger generations with hope and affection. It was with much hope and affection for the promise of America that my parents passed down to me and my sister the ideals of our democracy, ideals worthy of sacrifice and certainly not to be taken for granted. To my dismay, however, I am not confident that the hopes and affection for the promise of America that my parents passed down to me is being fully transmitted to my daughter. Though I try to hand it to her with reverence for the gift that it is, even though I tie a big bow on top, I am not sure that she even notices.

It makes me think of a story that social entrepreneur and interfaith leader Eboo Patel tells in his book *Sacred Ground*. In this book about pluralism, prejudice, and the promise of America, he tells this story.

There were two young fish taking a morning swim. They pass by an older fish, who stops and says, "Morning, boys. How's the water?" The young fish swim on for a bit, and after a while one turns to the other and says, "What the hell is water?" (153)

I like the way this story illustrates how easy it is to take for granted the values that make up our environment, the very values that make it possible for us to feel like fish in the sea rather than fish in a tree.

As a parent, I wonder how to pass along to my daughter the values that my parents so cherished and that I too have come to cherish. I wonder how to cultivate such continuity of values from one generation to the next.

The New Testament writers, I think, have something to teach us about this. All the major writers of the New Testament dealt with the issue of continuity and discontinuity. Paul, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, each in his own way, tried to show lines of continuity between Israel and the church, the old and the new law, prophecy and fulfillment. None of them, however, set Jesus and the church so thoroughly within Judaism as Luke did. Though Jesus's break from Judaism would certainly come, more than any other New Testament writer, Luke was concerned to draw out the continuity between Jesus and the religious life of Israel for as long as he could. Drawing on the poetry, hymns, prayers, and scripture of Judaism, Luke told new stories about Jesus that harkened old stories. Setting the beginning and end of his Gospel in the temple, showing that Jesus grew up in a family that meticulously observed the law of Moses, showing that it was Jesus's custom to go to the synagogue on the Sabbath, reporting Paul as having identified himself a Pharisee and as going first to the synagogue in every city along his missionary route, Luke took pains to show the continuity between Judaism and Jesus, the synagogue and the church.

Luke even took pains to show the continuity between the salvation of Israel and God's intention for salvation to be universal. Simeon's prophecy harkened that of the much earlier prophet Isaiah when Isaiah wrote, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the

survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6).

That Jesus will bring salvation not just to Israel, but also to Gentiles was cause for rejoicing. And that is why Simeon and Anna rejoiced. It is also, however, why Simeon spoke to Mary of pain that would be felt. He knew that the salvation of Gentiles would not be without great cost. Not everyone would accept Jesus’ inclusive interpretation of law. Some, feeling threatened by it, would reject him. “This child is destined,” Simeon said to Mary, “for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed - and a sword will pierce your own soul too.”

Unfortunately, sometimes there is a cost to continuity. Sometimes attempts to be inclusive, to extend God’s grace to more and more people, can be met with such resistance that divisions are drawn.

Good news, however, is meant to travel. It is meant to have universal reach. The gospel is like this. It is truly and radically good news because it is good news to everyone.

Let’s return to the story about the two fish swimming in the sea. Eboo Patel elaborates on the story, saying,

Imagine those young fish swimming back to the older fish to pose the question, “Since you know so much, tell us about this thing called water.” The older fish begins by explaining the chemical equation - water is H₂O. When that doesn’t gain traction, he tries to describe the key properties of water. “It’s, well, wet,” he tells them. No response. They’ve never known anything but wet. So he begins to explain by way of comparison. He tells tales of the sky and the land, the fabulous creatures that fill both. He speaks of legs for running, wings for flying, points out the fins the young fish have and says that is their version of legs and wings. He continues, but the young fish are elsewhere now, in their own heads. They have gone from “What the hell is water?” to “What does running feel like? Or flying?” and then to “Have those other places, those other creatures, always existed? Why did it take the old fish so long to tell us about them?” (paraphrase of p. 153-154).

As a parent concerned to pass down the values that my parents cherished and that I have come to cherish - values about the promise of America and the ideals of democracy, I need to tell my daughter what constitutes democracy, what makes it up. I cannot assume that she will notice it, or appreciate it, otherwise.

The same intentionality applies to the church. However, as a church concerned to pass along the gospel of Jesus Christ to future generations and commissioned by Christ to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth, we have good news that is meant to travel, good news that far surpasses the sea. God, who is Lord of heaven and earth, sky and sea, has intended salvation to have universal reach. Jesus Christ is light to all nations, good news for all peoples.

