



## Women Prophets of Scripture IV: Anna, Prophet of Redemption

Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
September 29, 2024  
Revelation 12:7-12; Luke 2:36-38

Today we conclude our series on women prophets of scripture. Why have we been doing this? Not as a diversion.

Not “just because.” And definitely not because the assigned readings are not interesting enough – the contrary, in fact, as we witness today the monumental victory of St. Michael and his angels, who Revelation tells us cast the Devil out of heaven – that great deceiver of the whole world. And what was the effect, Revelation goes on to say? Not to banish Satan forever, but to send him careening down to earth with his cohort of dark and exceedingly dangerous angels, who continue today to prowl around us, craving any opportunity to tempt and then devour us.

Rather, this series is motivated by the invitation to delve deeply into what we can learn from these four women – Miriam, Deborah, Huldah, and Anna – who the canon of scripture has pushed into the shadows. And as I hope you’ll agree if you’ve been with us since September 1, each of these remarkable figures is a magnificent exemplar for our own lives of faith and how we can live out God’s call.

Today we meet Anna, who at first glance appears in Luke 2 as little more than a punctuation mark. In our lectionary we encounter her only on the Presentation of our Lord, which we celebrate whenever February 2 falls on a Sunday, as it will in 2025.

Luke’s Chapter 2 is mainly known for its wonderful story of Jesus’ birth in which the sky erupts in light and angelic song as the shepherd are the first to hear the great news. Later in that chapter Mary and Joseph arrive at the temple to have Jesus presented following Mary’s 40-day period of purification after giving birth.

As they enter with the prescribed sacrificial doves in hand, they are approached by the elderly Simeon, who has been told by the Holy Spirit that he will not die until he has seen the messiah. Simeon takes Jesus in his arms and praises the child as a light for revelation to the Gentiles.”

Having seen the messiah, Simeon is now prepared to die. The so-called Song of Simeon is cherished among Lutherans for its appearance at the end of the lovely service of Compline, or Night Prayer, a distinctively Lutheran addition to the traditional Catholic mass:

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Now, Lord, you let your servant go in peace: your word has been ful-filled.

My own eyes have seen the sal - va - tion which you have prepared

in the sight of ev - 'ry peo - ple: a light to reveal you to the

na - tions and the glory of your peo - ple Is - ra - el.

Luke then adds, almost as an afterthought:

*And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, with fasting and prayer worshipping night and day. And coming up to them at that very moment, she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:36-38)*

All eyes are still focused on Simeon, but if we look closely we can uncover Anna's hidden significance at this crucial turning point in Jesus' young life. Rembrandt painted her with great empathy. At first glance she is only a female counterpart to Simeon -- both are elderly, pious, and guided by the Holy Spirit. Simeon recognizes who the child is, and is content to die, now having seen the Messiah.

But Anna looks to the future. She too recognizes Jesus as Messiah but has a very different take on this revelation. She speaks not to Mary, as Simeon did, but prophetically in a way that bursts the boundaries of time. She addresses "all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem," in other words, all who long for the coming of the Messiah.

That includes not only people then, but all of us now. Are we not longing for the coming of the Messiah? Is that not what Advent, and Christmas, and all our liturgical seasons are really about? Longing for the one who will free us from the endless cycle of guilt, judgment and recrimination so that we can lay our burdens on Christ and live as free people blessed by God's grace?

Furthermore, Anna does not want to die, as Simeon is prepared to do. She wants to continue to live, to prophesy, to tell what she knows from God about who Jesus is and how his birth signals the redemption of the earth and all its creatures. Anna sees all the way to eternity. Putting Mary and Anna side by side, then, we can say that Mary was the first to receive the news about who Jesus was, but do you recall her reaction? She was perplexed and wondered what it all meant. Anna, on the other hand, was the first to truly understand Jesus' identity and was fearless in proclaiming this truth.

There are hundreds of miniatures depicting Anna in the annals of early Christian art. A few key details are consistent: the presence of a halo; her scroll, which articulates her vocation as a prophet; her interaction with presentation/purification implements, including the doves and candles; and, foremost of all, a distinctive speaking gesture, as in this miniature from the 11<sup>th</sup> century *Mont-Saint-Michel Sacramentary*, in which Anna's hands are shown outstretched in a wide statement of praise. A finger is sometimes raised to the heavens to indicate where her prophecy came from.

But what exactly did Anna say? Her words have been withheld from us. In some depictions her scroll is blank or indecipherable. Other artists tried to fill in these blanks: "Blessed is the womb that bore thee." Or "This child created Heaven and Earth." Or, in one 13<sup>th</sup> century psalter, Anna's scroll reads "My heart hath rejoiced"—clever, given that this is what Hannah sang to her son Samuel when she presented him to the priest Eli in 1 Samuel 2.

We have many words for Simeon but none from Anna's mouth. So I suggest that we fill in these blanks with our own prophetic words. Anna longed for the redemption of Israel. For what do we long? Of course, we long to know the living Christ. But where do we find him? Not in the privacy of our cubicles, but in the world -- and especially in the person of those who are suffering.

If we accept that we are all created in the image of God, how can we fathom the assault on the sanctity of life that continues to grow more vicious in the Mideast? We long for that madness to end. We long also for rights guaranteed to us as Americans to be enjoyed by all, but how can we abide the continual rejection of well-conceived proposals for affordable housing by those who shout "Not in my back yard" -- forcing

people to exist in impossibly crowded conditions or even on the street? For what else do we long?  
You fill in the blanks.

Wherever we see hope being denied by acts of fear, the world needs to hear our prophetic voices. There in the temple, 40 days after Jesus' birth, Anna could have observed silently as women were expected to do. But she spoke for God in proclaiming what she knew to be true.

Let us in our lives, in our world, do the same.