



WESTLAKE HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

"Anna"

A Sermon Series on the Women of Advent

Luke 2:21-24, 36-40

Rev. Dr. Peter Barnes

Saturday, December 24, 2011 – Christmas Eve

Introduction.

Christmas is one of the most magical times of the year. It's a season filled with joy and laughter, good food and warm hugs, and going home to see family and friends. Some of my best memories are of Christmases past. I think of a Christmas many years ago when our kids were young and Santa brought bicycles for all three of our boys. The look of surprise and joy on their faces was absolutely priceless when they ran into the family room and discovered their gifts. Lorie and I took great delight in their joy and happiness that year.

And yet, Christmas can also be a difficult time of the year for many people, and the holidays are often a struggle. If your family has its fair share of dysfunction, the relational tensions that surround Christmas can be very painful. If we struggle with loneliness or if we're experiencing financial problems, the holidays magnify our difficulties, and sometimes we spiral down into depression. For any of us who have suffered loss during this season of the year in the past, Christmas intensifies the pain and hurt, and we feel the absence of that loved one all the more this time of the year. The hole in the heart seems to widen at Christmas.

For many years, Christmas has been a bittersweet for me. It's a season I love for all the reasons you do, but it's also a season when I think of the losses in my life. Earlier this month, I marked the 36th anniversary of my father's death. I'll never forget when my brothers and I met our mother at the airport in Atlanta after she hurriedly flew back from Mississippi when she learned of my father's death. After she got off the plane and saw the three of us, she burst into tears and cried, "What are we going to do? What are we going to do?"

Being a widow at Christmas can be hard. Just ask my mother. Or just ask Anna, the woman in the passage before us this evening. She knew what it was like to be lonely. She knew what it was like to lose your dreams at a young age. Yet Anna was a woman who refused to be defined by the tragedy of her circumstances. Rather, she was defined by her relationship with God and by her resilience to carry on. Let's learn from her story tonight. She is one of the women of Advent.

I. God's Hand in the Timing of Things.

In our passage we read that eight days after Jesus was born He was circumcised in accordance with the OT law. It was at the time of the circumcision that He was given the name Jesus, the name the angel told Mary and Joseph to give Him before the baby was born.

Then the passage also says that when the time of purification had been accomplished, Mary and Joseph went to the temple in Jerusalem and presented Jesus to the Lord. According to Leviticus 12, after a birth the mother was considered ceremonially unclean for 7 days until the circumcision, and then she had to remain at home for another 33 days.

So on the 40th day after the birth of a son, the mother and her husband were to offer a sacrifice as an act of cleansing and purification at the Nicanor Gate of the temple on the east side of the Court of Women.

Normally the sacrifice of a lamb and a pigeon were offered in this purification rite, but if the family was poor, like Mary and Joseph, two pigeons could be substituted for the sacrifice to accommodate their financial hardship. This was what Mary and Joseph presented to the priest that day.

The passage also mentions in verse 23 a ceremony that was called the Redemption of the Firstborn. According to Exodus 13, the first male offspring, both of humans and of animals, was especially considered sacred to God. Numbers 18 established a ritual in which parents would "buy back" their firstborn from God for a sum of 5 shekels of silver, about \$10, and the money was paid to the priest. Mary and Joseph consecrated Jesus to the Lord in this way, and they did everything the OT law required.

While Mary, Joseph and the baby were in the temple presenting their sacrifice and performing this ritual for their firstborn, they met up with two remarkable people. The first was an old man named Simeon, and the other was a widow named Anna. They were there that first Christmas.

I'm struck by the sovereignty of God in the timing of all these things. Mary and Joseph went to the temple on this particular day, 40 days after the birth of Jesus. They headed over to the Court of Women at this particular time to present the sacrifice for Mary, and they just "happened" to run into Simeon and Anna. What a strange coincidence.

But I don't think it was coincidence at all. I believe that the hand of God led these people to each other. I believe it is the pleasure of God to create divine appointments which affect eternity, and I see the fingerprints of God all over what happened that day. I read somewhere that a coincidence is a small miracle when God prefers to remain anonymous.

Several years ago, I was flying from Boston to Dallas, and the seat next to me was open. An answer to prayer, I thought! Then at the last minute, as the plane was about to close its door and pull away from the gate, a woman with many packages boarded the plane and headed right for the seat next to me. With a sigh of resignation I prepared for her to get settled in.

She sat down, we took off, and after some small talk, we ended up having one of the most profound spiritual conversations I have ever had with anyone who was searching for God. As she related to me the events of the day, it was a strange series of "coincidences" that landed her on that plane and in that seat right next to me.

I didn't get much reading done that night, and the interruption was not what I had planned, but it was what God had planned – for me and for this woman flying through Dallas to Ontario, CA. Toward the end of our trip, she said, "I guess I was supposed to be on this flight so that I could talk to you." She was right.

The Bible says that in the fullness of time God sent His Son to the earth for our salvation. When the time was ripe, God invaded human history to accomplish the redemption of us all. And Anna got to have a front row seat. She was in the temple at just the right time, God's appointed time, to see the One who would bring salvation to the world.

Are you anxious about something tonight? Are you worried about a deadline? Are you fearful about the future? Look to Jesus and trust that He will give you everything you need at just the right time, and look for the fingerprints of God in your life so that you don't miss the special surprise He has for you this Christmas. The miracle you need might be right beneath your nose.

II. God's Plan for a Faithful Widow.

As I read through this passage on the life of Anna, I'm touched by her story. We're told that after she married, her husband died 7 years after their wedding and she remained a widow for the rest of her life. Most Jewish girls at the time of Christ got married in their middle teens, so she was probably 15-years-old when she married. That would mean her husband died when she was about 22, and then for 62 years she remained a widow, now being 84-years-old.

Think about it. All the dreams that died with her husband. The long years of loneliness she endured. The ache in her heart. The empty bed at night. There is no mention of children in our text. For 62 years she was alone.

Yet Anna refused to be defined by her tragic circumstances. Her first identity was not as the wife of a husband, even when she was married. Rather, her first identity was as a child of God. And as a result, when her husband passed away, she reinvested her life in other things for the Lord.

Our passage says that Anna spent most of her time in the temple, worshipping God day and night, praying and fasting in devotion to the Lord. The text also says she was a prophetess, and she proclaimed the word of God. And the passage adds that after her encounter with the holy family, Anna told everyone who was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem about the baby. She was one of the first evangelists to tell people about the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Anna's devotion to God is a model to follow. Her prophetic ministry was evidence of God's gifting and calling, and her evangelistic zeal reflected her passion to tell others about the love of God in Christ. All this in the life of a woman who had every reason to be hardened by the blows life had dealt her. Tragedy can either make us bitter, or it can make us better and take us deeper. It all depends on our relationship with God and our willingness to reinvest in the new thing to which the Lord calls us.

There's a book I read several years ago which I think is the most profound book on loss I've ever come across. It's a book by Jerry Sittser entitled *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows Through Loss*, and I referred to it a couple of weeks ago in my sermon on Elizabeth, another woman of Advent. In that book Sittser says that the experience of loss does not have to be the defining moment of our lives, as it often is for many people.

Instead, the defining moment can be our response to the loss. It is not what happens *to* us that matters as much as what happens *in* us. We do not become less through loss, unless we allow the loss to make us less, grinding down our souls. Loss can also make us more. In the darkness we can see the light. In death we can find life. It all depends on the choices we make and how we respond.

In his book Jerry cites a poem by John Donne he read during his time of loss which pointed out the fact that although east and west seem farthest removed on the map, they eventually meet on a globe. What therefore appears to be opposites - east and west - in time come together, if we follow one or the other long enough.

Later, Jerry's sister Diane told him that the quickest way for anyone to reach the sun and the light of day is not to run west away from the approaching darkness. It is to head east, plunging into the darkness of loss and pain until you come to the sunrise. I believe that Anna discovered this truth, and she emerged from the darkness of the loss of her husband to embrace the new light God had in mind for her.

What about you? What loss have you experienced in your life this year? Have you lost a husband, a wife? A business? A child? A dream? A marriage? A job? Your health? How will you respond to that disappointment this Christmas? Will you chose to be swallowed up by your loss, or will you choose to take in the loss, like a seed which must die in the soil in order to produce the new growth? The choice is ours. Let's learn from the life of Anna, and note the blessing that was given to her to see the Son of God, who would save His people from their sins.

Conclusion.

This week I read in a book of devotions by Philip Yancey where he said that Christians are people who believe in parallel universes. One universe consists of glass and steel, wool clothes and leather briefcases, and the smell of freshly ground coffee. The other consists of angels and sinister spiritual forces and somewhere out there places called Heaven and Hell.

We palpably live in the material world; it takes faith to consider oneself a citizen of the other, invisible world. In Bethlehem, the two worlds came together and realigned. What Jesus went on to accomplish in

His life made it possible for God someday to resolve all the disharmonies of both worlds. No wonder a choir of angels broke out in spontaneous song the night He was born!

Anna was a person who believed in both worlds. All the women of Advent did. They saw with eyes of faith in a way that enabled them live more faithfully in this world because of their confidence in the spiritual reality of the other. And God was with them, just as He will be with you.

Doug Congdon is our Director of High School ministry. In this year's Advent devotional book our church created he wrote:

"Growing up, my favorite parts of Christmas were always the fun and often ridiculous family traditions that we had. Some of the traditions were silly - like lining up outside the living room on Christmas morning, in reverse birth order, to enter one-by-one and claim a seat for the gift opening. Other traditions, however, carried deep meaning.

"The one that has forever impacted the way I think about Christmas is caroling after the Christmas Eve service. Every year after the service, my mom and dad picked out 5-10 families in the church they knew were suffering through the Christmas season, and we would go sing carols for them. Many of them had lost a spouse or close family member recently and would be going through Christmas alone for the first time. Others had lost jobs or were in nursing homes without family nearby.

"As we walked into houses and saw the mixture of pain and gratefulness on each person's face, I could not help but forget about what I wanted for Christmas. Many times they would weep openly as we sang to them. It was such a powerful reminder that while Christmas was such a fun and joyful time for us, others were in pain and desperately in need of someone to show them Christ's love.

"Christmas exists because the Son of God chose to give up His status and comfort to come and serve the needs of humanity. I pray that we would all remember to do the same this Christmas."

That's my prayer, too. Merry Christmas, friends.