

## **Sermon for Triune Mercy Center**

**July 21, 2024**

### **Faces of Faith: Simeon and Anna**

**I have a few questions for today's faces of faith (our sermon series). Like some of the others that we have read about, these are, well, sort of no-bodies—not powerful or famous or official proclaimers in any way. But the Gospel writer Luke, who wanted to set the record straight, chose to mention them by name, and one is even a woman! Who are these people, how are they being faithful to God, and what do they have to do with us today?**

**Anna and Simeon appear on the scene in the first few days of what came to be known as the first century. They both happened to show up at a most precipitous moment. Was this just random synchronicity? Maybe, but I think not! Let us turn now to their short story with the faith that it will transform our faith too. But first let us pray:**

**Revealing God, quiet us and fill us with your spirit that we too may open wide to your good news. Through Christ, our Lord, Amen**

#### **Luke 2:21-38 NRSV**

**<sup>21</sup> After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.**

**<sup>22</sup> When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present**

him to the Lord <sup>23</sup> (as it is written in the law of the Lord, ‘Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord’), <sup>24</sup> and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, ‘a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.’

<sup>25</sup> Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. <sup>26</sup> It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. <sup>27</sup> 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, <sup>28</sup> Simeon<sup>[d]</sup> took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

<sup>29</sup> ‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant<sup>[e]</sup> in peace, according to your word;  
<sup>30</sup> for my eyes have seen your salvation,  
<sup>31</sup> which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
<sup>32</sup> a light for revelation to the Gentiles  
and for glory to your people Israel.’

<sup>33</sup> And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. <sup>34</sup> Then Simeon<sup>[f]</sup> blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed <sup>35</sup> so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.’

<sup>36</sup> There was also a prophet, Anna<sup>[g]</sup> the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived

with her husband for seven years after her marriage, <sup>37</sup> then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. <sup>38</sup> At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child<sup>[h]</sup> to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

The Word of God for the people of God today. Thanks be to God.

Before we seek to know Anna and Simeon better, let's first let's take a moment to think about what Luke is doing here. What is the big message that we are to take away?

Luke use the words and prayers of these two simultaneous witnesses to alert everyone that this baby Jesus is the one who will bring a fresh perspective to the faltering hopes and dreams of ancient Judaism—that is, that this baby Jesus will become the bridge between the old ways and a new way of living for God. This Jesus, babe in arms, IS the longed for Messiah who will redeem Israel and all the world.

Luke also wants us to notice that this is the first public recognition of the child Jesus as Messiah—recognition by two witnesses who were not part of the birth-related revelations by angels and heavenly bodies. In this ordinary event—the routine bringing of a first born son to the temple for a religious ritual, Luke is reporting a confirmation of his identity and future role by witnesses who had no extraordinary powers except for their devout faith, life-long praying for a Messiah and the leading of the Holy Spirit. The ordinary and routine is suddenly aglow with extraordinary meaning! What wonder!!! What gratitude these two temple pray-ers expressed in their words to the parents of Jesus.

These two humble witnesses, Simeon and Anna evidenced a level of faith that brought them to the doorway of holy revelation. What can we learn from them about witnessing the holy?

I'm going to say it now and come back to it later. These two persons of faith were living in prayer. They were both, we are told, unceasingly devoted to the intermingling of their own spirits with the Spirit of God. Each had, in their own way, spent a lifetime in prayer. I want to know more about that—about what it looks like to be living in prayer, to be alive with prayer, to be a prayer.

Now we are told that Simeon was a resident of Jerusalem, no doubt living a life of work and family there—nothing unusual to report—except that he is exceptionally devout and righteous, and regularly experiences the Holy Spirit as his inspiration and guide. Simeon, living an ordinary life, nonetheless seems to have maintained an intimate connection with God—to have been intimately attuned to God. Doing what is required of the day all the while tuned in to God's presence and guidance, ever hoping for and trusting in the ultimate breaking in of God's redemption for all people.

What vision of living in prayer do we detect in Simeon? We know too well how hard it is to be faithful in the messy middle of life happening around us. But maybe that is exactly where prayer is most needed, and where we gain the most wisdom, insight and the guiding of the Holy Spirit towards precisely where we need to be in each moment.

But really, how did Simeon's day compare to our days of disruptive distractions? Surely we are distracted at a scale

even we could not have imagined a half century ago. Maybe Simeon could stop and pray as he watered his livestock or harvested in the field, or whatever simple work he might have been doing. But me? The eternal beeping of technological distraction leaves no room for living in prayer, right? Who can remember the words of The Lord's Prayer when the phone is ringing and the TV blaring?

This makes me wonder whether there is a difference between saying a prayer and living in prayer. Both are important to our faith, as they were to Simeon's, but they are not the same. I'm sure Simeon spoke out loud or under his breath some of the traditional Jewish prayers and psalms, even the words of Isaiah describing the messiah. Comforting, hopeful words. You may have your favorite word prayer like the Lord's prayer too or the simple mantra, Lord be merciful to me, a sinner or the twenty-third psalm. But how often is prayer simply part of living the day for any of us?

Luke connects Simeon's devotion to prayer directly to his righteous actions. We get the impression from this story that Simeon is living his prayer by simply keeping the line to God open always-- no matter where he is or what he is doing. As becomes obvious in the story, you never know what can happen then! And whatever happens, no matter how mundane it may seem, it will be holy in the midst of prayerful attention.

Simeon was worried about his people, and the people of the world. I think we can relate. And so, rather than wringing his hands in despair (which I am sometimes tempted to do), Simeon continues in prayer, hope, surrender and righteous action. A true man of a living faith!

**That's Simeon. But Anna is a different model of faith altogether—the monastic model of living in prayer; that is, like the desert mothers and nuns who came later and lived apart from the world to pray day and night. Not in the messy, distracting middle of things, but in a sacred space where the heart could be still and know God.**

**Perhaps it is coincidence, or maybe not, that this life-long devoted pray-er is named Anna, whose namesake in Hebrew is Hannah, the mother of Samuel, who prayed for a child at temple so long and hard that the priest thought she was drunk. Long pray-ers—both of them.**

**Now Anna is clearly an old woman, now at least 84 (some, counting differently, estimate 105!). She was married briefly, probably around the age of 14, and widowed around the age of 21, and then lived 84 more years. So she was old! And like all of us older people, very, very wise!**

**The temple in those days provided a safe space for widows who had no one to care for them. Anna had lived on the temple grounds most of her long life. Maybe she had some small tasks to do, or maybe she just welcomed and spoke briefly with pilgrims who came for rituals, but mostly, we are told, she prayed and fasted—night and day.**

**And notice this: Like Simeon, Anna prayed for the salvation of Israel and of all people and not for her own needs and wishes. Not so much like the kinds of prayers we tend to utter when facing our own private crises. These two devout pray-ers, prayed mostly for the whole world. We could learn something from that!**

Strikingly, Luke called Anna a prophet, in the line of a very small number of women prophets of Israel. We know nothing of her prophetic gifts except the one told in the text—the prophetic affirmation of Jesus as Messiah. However, to be named a prophet, the person is known to be fully present to the Divine—indeed, to be a voice of the Divine. So, in devout prayer, this was Anna’s calling.

This is a different kind of faithfulness than Simeon’s—with Anna we have someone whose fulltime job or calling was to pray. Even small daily tasks, like making up the bed, were probably viewed as little prayers. Unwelcome distractions from the outside were kept at a minimum. No actual living in the messy middle of things for Anna. A life apart—just to pray for the world.

Beautiful, but not many of us are called that way. Yet, I’m glad some are—still today.

Maybe we can learn something from Anna’s practice of complete devotion—complete attention to God, even if, for us, it needs to come in shorter time frames. Perhaps we could experience something of this version of living in prayer if we were willing to taking regular retreats from life’s compulsions—an hour here, a day there, or longer if we have that kind of time to spare solely for God.

In a recent essay, psychologist Arthur Brooks wrote about the difference between isolation and solitude. This is helpful when we think about praying apart from others. The difference between isolation and solitude is in the inner experience. In isolation, we feel alone and abandoned. It’s not a good experience and not, I might suggest, an experience of faith. But in choosing the prayer of solitude,

even for brief periods of time, we offer our inmost selves to God's loving attention. This is a beautiful, freeing and faithful experience, but for most of us, I imagine, it has to be cultivated and practiced. We aren't used to it and we have to break some old habits and compulsions that shield us from having to give up control. The prayer of solitude requires surrender, turning ourselves over in complete devotion to the moments we spend in Divine Presence.

So I would offer that Anna's way of living in prayer, the prayer of solitude, is worth considering by us at needed intervals for the sake of our souls and, I believe for the world. No matter what, no matter how brief or how long, that time will not be lost and may well yield a blessing. It surely did for Anna.

So, our faithful role models, Simeon and Anna, are both devoted pray-ers—one in the active middle of life and one intentionally removed from the distractions of life. It is their devotion to prayer that moves us to be more faithful.

So, what about us? I don't know about you, but sometimes I can't seem to find the right words to pray, and sometimes I confess I run out of patience with God who doesn't seem to be answering my prayers. Maybe prayer is less about trying to change God and more about trying to change ourselves and the world in which we live. Maybe, just maybe, prayer is less about the words we use and more about quieting down for God to enter our souls. God's words will find us there.

Our temples may not look like the one where Simeon and Anna met Jesus. They may not always look like this sanctuary. They may be turn out to be those hidden sanctuaries where streams run through, trees stand guard,



and birds sing the hymns. Christ found temples for prayer in places of worship, yes, but also on hillsides, in gardens, aboard fishing boats, and in the desert, not to mention in the temples of outcast souls and uninvited guests. It's not where we pray, but how prayer enters into us where we are.

So, we don't have to choose which way we seek to live in prayer. We just need to get going. This whole desperate world is waiting for our prayers—not so much our specific words or where we are when we pray, but our full attention to the voice and work of God through Christ and the Holy Spirit calling us, guiding us and giving us wisdom for the living of these days.

We know the same savior, the same Jesus Christ that Simeon and Anna met that day in the temple. May we join them in being living witnesses to that One from the middle or from the sidelines of lives in prayer. Amen