

BMC Sermon – November 10, 2024

As I mused this week about how I could preach on the Prophets Mary and Anna today, I couldn't help but let the context of this week's political events impact my writing. Whether or not it can actually be attributed to him, it is said that the Swiss theologian Karl Barth once said we should hold the bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other, and I've always found it an appropriate and helpful thought. The events that fill our news feeds are not that alien to the events described in the Bible, and in this way the scriptures are as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago.

This relevance is what I've tried to uncover in today's reflection on the prophets Mary and Anna – a reflection that I will offer you by way of a monologue. The stories of Mary and Anna originate in an ancient context, with geographical locations, traditions, and customs that are far away and often unfamiliar to us. And yet, many connecting points to our own context remain in their stories nonetheless. I chose to focus today's story on the events that took place in the Jerusalem temple some 30 or so days after Jesus' birth. I ask you to join me as I use my imagination to take on the voice of a Temple Priest that was managing the treasury and serving in the temple the day that Mary and Joseph encountered Anna.¹ As my monologue progresses, you'll notice that I depict Mary and Anna as prophets of God's redemption – declaring for those who have eyes to see and ears to hear God's liberating and saving action in the past, present, and

¹ In using my imagination, I am not presuming to have all the details about the Second Temple priestly service portrayed with total accuracy. This is a topic about which I confess not knowing as much as I would like to know. That being said, I am under the impression that there were several duties performed in the temple by a variety of Priests, treasurer being one of them. Whether or not the treasurer would have participated in the ceremony of Jesus' presentation is, for me, uncertain. My impression is that the very idea, portrayed by Luke, that Mary and Joseph would have had to have brought Jesus to the temple for this ritual is also a point of curiosity and unattested in the literature given that it could have been done much closer to home. Nonetheless, for the sake of working with the Lukan text, I am imagining it this way.

future. And so, now I wish to introduce you to an unnamed Temple Priest, who has a unique perspective on the Prophets Mary and Anna

[step down, wireless mic, offering plate with 5 coins]

*Counting Silver Coins Out Loud: *One Shekel, Two Shekels, Three Shekels, Four Shekels, Five Shekels**

Anna and Mary: Prophets of God's Redemption
A Monologue in the Voice of a Temple Treasurer

*Temple Treasurer holds 5 coins at the front
and starts the monologue after counting the 5 coins.*

I remember that day like it was yesterday, even though now many years have passed. I was fulfilling my duty as a Priest in charge of the Temple Treasury that day, when a young family showed up with their child. Mary, Joseph, and their newborn boy named Jesus walked in. They were coming to present Jesus as part of a traditional ceremony called the *pidyon haben* or, in English “the redemption of the firstborn son.” It is a tradition with a long history going all the way back to the Exodus (cf. Exodus 13). Humour me for a moment while I tell you about it.

As the story behind this tradition goes, when God spared the firstborn males of the Israelites while in Egypt, they were marked for priestly service. While the people of Israel were taken from their enslavement and redeemed – a word that carries the meaning of freed, ransomed, or liberated – they were nonetheless redeemed to serve a new master, God. As part of this service, they were to offer their firstborn male children to God as life-long Priests. But then something happened later during the desert journey. What happened, you ask? The Golden calf happened. Most of the Israelites were said to have participated in this idolatrous worship service and after that, God decided to appoint priests only from a tribe that had not participated in this incident, and that tribe was the tribe of Levi. Rather than have every firstborn male serve God as a priest, only some from the tribe of Levi would take on the priestly roles in the community.

Despite this change in priestly policy, our people were still to remember that God had originally called all firstborn male children to be priests in God's service, and so a ritual was developed whereby the parents would *redeem* (there's that word again) their firstborn child – they would have their firstborn *freed* or *released*, in this case from their life-long priestly obligation to God. The parents could do this by paying five shekels to a *cohen*, to a priest. This was to be a way of recognizing that ancient command received by Moses to consecrate for God all firstborn males in Israel – and...it also helped to contribute to the upkeep of the Tabernacle and later the first and second temples.

So, why did I tell you this history lesson? Right – Mary and Joseph and their new baby. On the day Mary, Joseph, and Jesus showed up for his redemption, I was to be their *cohen* – their priest. As they entered the temple, they looked like any other regular couple, and yet I sensed something was different about them. Watching them from afar, I stood ready to receive them, when a man in the temple whose name was Simeon approached them first. It looked like Mary and Joseph were a little taken aback as he excitedly approached, but Simeon held out his arms, as if asking, “can I hold him?” and waited. Joseph looked at Mary and Mary looked at Simeon and then obliged; after all, it's common for people to want to hold such a beautiful, newborn gift of God. I couldn't hear exactly what Simeon said, but from a distance I could make out the words: “my eyes have seen your salvation.”

This was quite the statement for him to make and I wasn't sure if I should just chalk it up to him being a bit eccentric. I don't think Mary and Joseph knew what to think either - you should have

seen the look on their faces – a mixture of uncertainty and amazement. Simeon then laid hands of blessing on each of them and leaned closely to speak to Mary. Her face went from showing amazement to concern, and I wondered what Simeon had said to elicit this change in Mary’s demeanor.

After Joseph and Mary had collected themselves from this encounter, they began walking closer to me. They were all of fifteen feet away from me when they were stopped yet again, this time by a Prophet named Anna who appeared to strike up a conversation with Mary in particular. Anna was a fixture at the temple, fasting and praying there night and day. She had been a widow for decades and was now 84 years old. She would often talk with people who came to the temple for sacrifices or prayers or priestly duties. Often, she would speak prophetic wisdom into the dire social situation our people found themselves in and proclaim God’s coming deliverance. She frequently said to people who came to her: “watch and wait, cry out to God, for God will redeem us from the struggles of our time.”

There was much that was wrong in our time, you see. We struggled with poverty, hunger, social inequality, and frequent violence. Much of it was a result of corrupt leaders and political systems that kept the powerful on top and the powerless well...powerless. We were governed at the time by King Herod, known as Herod the Great; a pretty ironic title, if you ask me. While he liked to think he had made Judah ‘great again’ [sorry, I couldn’t resist], he did it through dirty politics and brutal policies. For the average person, and especially for the most disadvantaged, there wasn’t much that he made great – in fact he made things much worse.

True, he massively renovated the temple (for which he was praised by some) and did much to improve Judah’s civic infrastructure. But he also spent a lot of time protecting his own interests while buttering up the Roman empire. He even placed an Eagle at the entrance to the temple, a tribute to Rome in our most sacred space – that act caused a massive stir. Many Jews, myself included, were unhappy with Herod’s willingness to bend the knee to the Roman Emperor Augustus and saw many of his policies as ultimately self-interested.

Anna, a widow who was in a socially precarious position, often spoke boldly and prophetically against Herod and Rome and this whole context of inequality and struggle. I was afraid for her, and I often cautioned her against speaking out too boldly, saying, “Anna – be careful what you say and who you upset.” She didn’t seem afraid, however. When I would pass by her in the temple, I would often hear her praying the words of the Psalms:

O guard my life, and deliver me; do not let me be put to shame, for I take refuge in you.
May integrity and uprightness preserve me, for I wait for you. Redeem Israel, O God, out
of all its troubles. – Psalm 25:20-22

In my service as the temple treasurer, I learned a lot from Anna, especially about what it means to actively wait for God in prayer and in study. She knew the sacred scriptures as well or better than some of the priests I knew, and she drew wisdom from the deep well of the Prophet Isaiah’s writings. She helped me understand more than anyone else how God promised through Isaiah to redeem us just as God had redeemed our ancestors from slavery in Egypt so long ago. She would sometimes say, “Why do so few of us refuse to cry out to God? Why do so few of us wait on the

Lord? In Egypt, change did not come until the people refused to be satisfied with the status quo and cried out to God for deliverance” (Ex. 2:23-25).

While a long time had passed since the Exodus, the reality of enslavement remained up to our own day – but it impacted us unequally. Many of us, including myself, were able to live quite privileged, comfortable lives under Herod’s rule, while others, like the widow Anna, struggled to get by. I was thinking about all of this as I watched Anna and Mary talk, with Joseph listening in. Whatever Mary had said to Anna in the course of their conversation, it led Anna to tears of joy. She began praising God for all to hear, declaring words from the Prophet Isaiah (52:9):

Break forth together into singing...for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.

I watched all of this with a combination of curiosity and scepticism. I respected Anna and her prophetic authority, but thought she was being naïve. How could this little child herald the redemption – the liberation and freedom - of Jerusalem? What would that even look like? Weren’t the problems simply too complex to deal with? And, what had Anna and Mary discussed that had led her to such a joyful and bold proclamation? While I was wondering this, Anna left the temple, crying out:

“Listen all you who are looking for the redemption of Jerusalem,” Break forth together into singing...for the LORD has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem, [for he has sent us a Saviour].

At this point, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus finally made it to me. I felt like asking them to explain what had just happened, but then I fell into routine. Mary placed Jesus in my arms, and then Joseph laid the five shekels on the table while saying the appropriate words, after which I responded with the litany for the redemption of the firstborn and released little Jesus into the care of his parents. The ritual was over almost as quickly as it had started, but I was left perplexed. What had all of this meant?

As I left the temple that day at the end of my shift, I found Anna continuing to prophesy among the people. I had to go talk to her. As I approached her, I couldn’t get the image out of my head of Mary speaking to Anna and Anna responding with words of praise for God’s redemption. I addressed her by name: “Anna, daughter of Phanuel, Prophet of God!” She turned to me, and I said, “what words did young Mary speak to you inside the temple today?” “Not words,” Anna said, “rather, a song.” And then Anna began to sing it. I won’t do justice to the song if I try to sing it, but it was a prophet song, not unlike the Prophet song of the Miriam of old, about “God’s liberating power” (cf. *VT 208*, other references to this song below in quotes)– it spoke of God’s mercy and care for his people, it spoke of how God had brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; how he filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty.

I asked Anna what the song meant, and she said it meant that the firstborn of Mary, Jesus, was God’s promised redeemer, the one Isaiah had spoken of – he had come to bring us freedom. It seemed outrageous to believe it – after all, we’d had many supposed redeemers show up in the

last several years - but somehow God's Spirit confirmed it for me in that moment too. Then, the irony hit me like a tonne of bricks. I had led the redemption ceremony for the one who was to redeem us. I had officiated over a ceremony hearkening back to God's liberating action for our people, and meanwhile, I was holding God's very liberation in my arms.

As I began to take my leave of this conversation with Anna, she stopped me and said something that has been seared into my mind ever since: "You take the payment for the redemption of the firstborn, right?" she asked. "Yes," I said. She replied, "Have you ever thought about what you need to be redeemed from and what the cost might be? From what do you need freedom and liberation and what might you have to give up?" Then Anna left me, speaking "about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem."

I don't know your story – but I assume that like me, there is something you need to be redeemed from – freed from in order to serve God with greater faithfulness and trust. I know that Anna helped me see that I needed to be liberated from assuming that I could serve God faithfully without questioning my own privilege. I needed to be redeemed from assuming that true freedom could be bought at the price of keeping quiet and accepting the status quo.

With the widow Anna's help that day, God began redeeming me – began helping me step out in boldness, like Anna and Mary, to proclaim against the Herod's of my world that love and justice is the true, liberating power. Since that day I've been daily choosing to no longer fear Herod or the consequences that my speaking out about Jesus might have on my own privilege. I still await and long for the full expression of God's redemption in my time – the road seems long at times. The question I leave you with today is, as you too await this redemption, will you join with Mary and Anna in declaring God's redemption with boldness in the face of those tyrants and political leaders that want to use fear to keep you quiet? I pray that God will lead you to sing with Mary and Anna with voices "clear and strong" until God's redemption shall "mend every wound."

May it be so. AMEN

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