

PREACHED ON MAY 6 AT THE CATHEDRAL

Sermon preached by Margaret Guenther - May 6, 2010
Washington National Cathedral
Luke 2: 25-38

Whenever I read Luke's account of the presentation of the infant Jesus in the temple, I always picture a late afternoon in winter. Nature has slowed down. The day is dying. Things are slowing down in the temple, but Simeon and Anna two faithful old people are there.

Their long lives are drawing to a close. Maybe they are still physically robust, or maybe their bodies are trembly and their joints creaky; Luke doesn't tell us. We know, though, that their spirits are strong and their faith is powerful. We know that their priorities are clear: they are looking forward in hope, not backward in bitterness and despair.

This is a grandparent story. In some, maybe many ways we are all grandparents it's not so much about biology or our role in the nuclear family as it is about our reaching that stage of grandparental wisdom, of beginning to get an inkling of what really matters. For this is a story of the coming together of the great thresholds birth and approaching death, beginnings and endings, endings that are in truth new beginnings.

Simeon and Anna do they know each other? .Maybe it's a first time for Simeon, righteous and devout. Luke tells us that he has been waiting for a bittersweet message: looking forward to the consolation of Israel and the promise that he will not die until he has seen the Lord's messiah. Even as he yearns for the good news, he knows that it presages the end of his earthly life. So now he has come in response to the message.

Anna, on the other hand, has been around seemingly forever, a fixture in the temple She's not just a pious old lady she is a prophet I have to wonder: who conferred that identity upon her? Female prophets in Scripture are few and far between. Of course, there was Miriam, Moses' sister, who saved her infant brother by a timely deception. Years later she joined him in a song of triumph. Spunky, she argued with the men folks and was stricken with leprosy as a divinely ordained punishment. Anna is no Miriam, but she is spunky in her own distinctive way: for decades she has been a faithful presence in the temple, a patriarchal place par excellence. That cannot always have been easy.

I am a little miffed that Luke doesn't give her equal time We have a full report of Simeon's words the nunc dimittis, that glorious, gentle hymn of surrender and fulfillment. "Dear God," he prays or sings, "I'm ready to go now. You have given me all that I could desire. I'm ready to come home." I, who sing like a crow rather than a nightingale, remember a Good Friday evening decades ago, when I was on overnight chaplain duty in a New York hospital. On my rounds, I visited an aged priest, clearly at the point of death. Rallying a bit, he asked me and his two middle-aged, nonobservant children, to sing the nunc dimittis. I found a hymnal in the hospital chapel, and somehow we sang. We really sang. Without self-consciousness we sang Simeon's prayer. of release. Coincidentally (or perhaps not), the patient--who lives in my memory as a twentieth-century Simeon--died at dawn on Easter. He's always therein my memory and my imagination when I let myself sink into this scene in the temple.

Simeon has wise words for Mary. He tells her what she already knows from her memorable conversation with the angel Gabriel: this is no ordinary child. (Of course, for all mothers and grandmothers--there are no ordinary children.) But then he speaks a poignant truth: a sword will pierce your own soul. How could he know this? This is a mother-truth about experience never to be sought but impossible to avoid. Simeon's words come to me unbidden (and usually unwelcome) when I watch our much loved parish children rollicking on the playground or when I spend a morning with our young mothers group where there are always a few babies greedily nursing or crawling around on the floor or being passed around the circle to be held for a moment by those of us who yearn for the joy of holding a cuddly little person if only for a few minutes. Or when I think of the inevitable sufferings great and small, and mostly still to come--of my own grown-up children. Maybe Simeon's words were news to Mary. Perhaps she was still in that euphoria of the fulfillment of the angel's promise. Certainly, she could not have imagined a spring afternoon on a hillside outside Jerusalem about thirty years in the future.

That piercing sword is an inevitable part of motherhood. Indeed of parenthood. Maybe Anna knew more about it than Simeon but just refrained from saying it. Because we don't know what Anna said! Luke tells us, "At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem." But what did she say? Was she cradling the baby in her arms as she spoke? Did she fall into that natural easy rocking movement as she held him close to her own body? Did she look into his face and speak softly, or did she raise her voice and attract a crowd of onlookers? Greedily, I want more of the story. I want the whole story!

A year or so ago I was making a routine hospital visit to a parishioner who was recovering nicely from minor surgery. As I waited to step into the elevator, a young man stepped out and greeted me by name. It took me a minute; then I remembered that we had met only once at a newcomers gathering at St. Columba's. Now he was so excited that his words tumbled out, almost faster than he could say them. "We've just had a baby! We've just had a baby! Do you want to see her?" There was only one answer: of course! As we rode to the maternity floor, I began to remember this endearing young couple earnest, vibrant, and much in love who had recently moved to our neighborhood and found their way to our parish.

Marta was in bed, beautiful and exhausted. Her mother was sitting in a chair by the window. Dave introduced me, and Marta added, "I'm afraid my mother doesn't speak English." "Thank God," I thought, "for the universal language of grandmothers. And thank God, too, for my rusty housewife Spanish." So while Dave went to fetch Gabriela from the nursery, we had a few minutes of warm mother talk. The prophet Anna would have fit right in, and Simeon would have been welcome to listen unobtrusively and maybe offer a word or two.

Then Dave came back with a tiny bundle that was this family's holy child. "Do you want to hold her?" he asked. Of course I did, so he tucked her into my arms. Then like my great role model from the Jerusalem temple, I praised God and spoke about this child who maybe would have nothing to do with the redemption of Jerusalem but was clearly a manifestation of God's love. I felt every minute of my age as I rocked Gabriela gently and blessed her. I rejoiced in every one of those few minutes. Together we were complete, bringing the two great thresholds together

Now well into my ninth decade, I feel a sisterly kinship with Simeon and Anna with a slight bias toward Anna. I think she knew more about grandmothers. Moreover, she shares the name that tradition has given the Mary's mother, Jesus' apocryphal grandmother, St. Anne to whom I have great devotion, even if she isn't scriptural. But together these two old people in the temple are splendid teachers of vital subjects for which we have no textbooks or formal courses. By their very being they embody holy aging. They show us how to move toward the second threshold with strength and style. Bodies wear out, faculties may and probably will diminish, physical energy decreases, but our souls can only grow stronger. We can grow into that wisdom that is quite beyond words. With a rich past joy and pain interwoven and the divine promise of the ultimate homecoming, we can live truly in the moment. We can savor what my fourteenth-century Dominican friend Meister Eckhart called "this present now." Letting go of distractions, we can concentrate con-centrate, center ourselves-- on what really matters. The scene in the temple is clear, almost stark. Simeon and Anna show us the way. Between them and uniting them is the Holy Child.