

A Christmas Story (from Luke 2)  
By: Rev. Dr. Steve Runholt

“There was also a prophet, Anna . . . she was of great age.”

That’s how the story the world knows as the Gospel of Luke introduces this devout woman.

She plays only a minor role in the events of the first Christmas. She’s voiceless, given no words to speak, and her part in the tale is so brief she gets almost no attention for what she did, no credit for seeing what almost none of her “superiors” could see, or for restoring their faith when it was almost gone.

That her own faith in Yahweh ran so deep is no surprise. In her last years she spent all day and every night in the temple, devoted to fasting and to prayer.

But if that makes having great faith sound easy and natural, like growing an orchid in a hothouse, it wasn’t that way for her. Her faith was born out of loss and burnished by deprivation and suffering, more like mining for ore through rock and heavy earth, in deep in darkness.

Which is why Anna’s role in the events of that first Christmas was so remarkable, and why the story of how she came to bear witness to the miracle deserves to be told.

And so, I’ll tell this tale from the beginning, where all good stories start. When Anna first met Caleb, her fiancé, she knew at once that he was the man of dreams. He was only of average height and not the smartest or handsomest boy in the village. And at 16 he was, in truth, more boy than man.

But he was perfect for Anna and she knew it immediately. His kindness shone from his eyes, and was on display every day in the way he treated people: his patience with, Lev, the mean old baker who tormented everyone. His gentleness with Gila, the little girl who was born with a twisted hand and a club foot.

That’s what Anna loved the most about him. Not his looks, or his intellect, but his goodness. She thought his name was perfect: Caleb, which means, like a heart.

Which is why his death was so ironic and why she knew she could never marry again. They'd courted just over a year, until they were both old enough to wed, and had only been together as husband and wife for seven years when Caleb was struck down.

It was a viper that got him -- the meanest creature in Israel -- striking him when he was helping to clear rocks from their neighbor's field to get ready for planting season.

Caleb may have had a generous heart but Anna's was now broken and she knew it would never mend. But barring another accident, she also knew she had a long life ahead of her. Which, in turn, is why the choice to leave her village was not hard.

"Momma, I know what I'm going to do," she announced to her mother after the required mourning period for Caleb was over, not that it would ever be over for Anna.

"I'm going to devote myself to Yahweh. I'm going to go to Jerusalem and serve in the temple."

"But will they take you in? The priests can be hard men," her mother replied.

"They'll take me in. I won't give them a choice," Anna answered, her faith in herself, and in Yahweh, resolute.

"Well, if that's what you want to do, your father and I won't try to stop you," her mother said. "Besides, you're a grown woman now. We haven't any right to stop you."

It surprised Anna that her mother did not try harder to change her mind about leaving their little village, the only place she'd ever called home. But the truth is that Anna's plans did not come as a surprise to her.

She had perceived a spark in her daughter from the time she was a little girl. Not just an unusual love for Yahweh -- Anna insisted on going to the village synagogue every Sabbath from the time she was three -- but also an unusual love for the truth, and an early devotion to fairness, which had blossomed, as she got older, into a full on passion for justice.

Which is to say, her daughter was a prophet. She knew this as well as she knew Anna's name. All her mother could do was bless her as she went on her way to find her life and her future.

"Here, this is for you," her mother said, just a week later, as Anna finished packing her few things and prepared to join a traveling caravan headed for Jerusalem. "It's from your father and me. Something to remember us by."

Anna took the small wooden pendant from her mother and turned it over in her hands. The word "Deborah" stood out in raised, precisely carved letters--the name of Israel's greatest female prophet. A woman who saw the truth clearly and gave voice to it fearlessly.

Her mother wanted to say more but couldn't. She just stood there, her hand over her heart, her eyes glistening. Anna unwrapped the leather cord attached to the pendant and draped it around her neck.

"Thank you, Momma," she said, as her own eyes filled with tears. "I did not get the life I dreamed of but I will make you proud of me. I promise"

Anna's mother was right. The priests made it hard for her. By code they couldn't turn her away. She was a widow with no children and nowhere else to go. They had to take her in. But they made it clear she was not welcome in the temple precincts.

They made her sleep in the pens where the sacrificial animals were kept. They gave her only the most menial jobs, cleaning out their private latrine and sweeping the large outer courtyard, where the Gentiles could come to sell their things, which had to be done every evening to make the courtyard ritually clean again.

And they offered her only the meagerest crumbs to eat--barely enough to subsist on.

Anna tried to be hopeful about her new life. She held on stubbornly to the belief that her circumstances would improve, a belief fueled by her resolute faith in Yahweh.

But underneath her hopeful disposition another truth was beginning to unfold. Anna was miserable. After only a year her hands had grown so red and calloused from the rough work she barely recognized them as her own.

The years slowly passed and Anna's life improved only marginally. She graduated from cleaning toilets and sweeping an unclean courtyard to preparing the turtle doves for ritual sacrifice.

The work was better in some ways but she still disliked it, knowing the fate of the birds she cared for.

But that was not what she disliked the most. She hated that she was excluded from the inner temple.

She got occasional glimpses inside when a negligent priest failed to shut the heavy doors behind him. She loved the pungent scents that always wafted out from the dim interior -- the smell of candles and incense, the smell of holiness, she thought.

And she was mesmerized by the huge wavering shadows cast on the walls by the flickering candles.

They looked to her like moving pictures of the giants of the faith: King David, facing down the giant Goliath; Daniel, staring down a pride of lions, and, her favorite, Deborah, singing her song of victory.

It hurt Anna not to be able to enter the inner sanctum and to pray with the male priests. Worst of all, though, she hated that she had no voice.

In those first years, the priests would sometimes send her to the market to do their bidding, and on these trips she would learn of the injustices visited on her countrymen and women, how the Roman soldiers would take what was not theirs and how they treated their Jewish hosts like pests to be tolerated, rather than like the holders of the lands they occupied and the owners of the markets and shops they raided.

Then there was what happened in the storage room one day, when Ehud, the laziest and most corrupt priest in the temple, a man Anna despised, surprised her and had his way with her.

The insult to her people, the insult to herself, might have broken a weaker woman, or robbed her of her faith in Yahweh's goodness and mercy.

But they had the opposite effect on Anna. The insults inflamed her passion for justice. She wanted to speak out, to give voice to her truth.

She was desperate to incite the temple priests to speak out against and resist the occupation, and to take decisive action against Ehud, but she knew better.

She knew these men, knew they would likely dismiss her as a shrill, cranky woman and probably discourage her, severely, from meddling in affairs that did not concern her. And so she held her tongue.

But her silence cost her. She grew restive and had to tamp down her smoldering anger. She doubted she would ever get used to being voiceless when she felt like she had so much to say.

Lately it had all become too much for her--the hard, thankless work, the subjugation at the hands of her male counterparts. She was ready to be done with it.

And so she finally resolved to do something about it. She'd learned of a group that lived out in the desert. The Essenes, she'd heard them called.

She wondered if they would be more open to her gifts, more open to her being a her. She was on the cusp of leaving the temple for good and traveling into the desert to find them when fate, or maybe Yahweh himself, intervened.

"What is it you're doing there?" one of the senior priests said to her the next day, the one they called Simeon. He had never spoken to her, though she knew him well by sight. She saw him every day.

"I'm preparing the doves for sacrifice," she replied evenly.

"Well you're doing it wrong," he said.

Anna was quite sure she was not doing it wrong. The high priest himself had shown her this technique for taking the birds' lives quickly and painlessly, and she'd been doing it this way for the last sixteen years.

She set down the dove she was holding in deference to Simeon's superior status but said nothing.

He picked up the dove. Sure enough, he showed her a better way.

The next day, to her complete astonishment, the venerable priest spoke to her again, and Anna's life changed forever.

"Anna, it's time you left the outer courtyards behind and came into the temple," he said. She was surprised he knew her name then realized she probably shouldn't be.

He had an aura about him. He was one of those priests -- and there were surprisingly few of them -- who appeared to have a direct connection to Yahweh and somehow seem to know everything.

"You belong in the sanctuary, not out here in the dovecote," the old priest continued. "You don't strike me as a destitute widow. You strike me as a woman who is utterly devoted to Yahweh. You should spend your days in prayer, not up to your elbows in feathers."

So that's what Anna did.

The years that followed passed in a slow arc, so slow she hardly noticed, like the sun passing through the sky on any given day, only over the course of thirty years.

For the whole of that time Anna did what Simeon suggested. She spent her days and nights in the temple devoted to fasting and prayer. And, yes, her love for Yahweh grew deeper, her faith stronger.

Still, she could feel that something was not right. Twice a year -- at Passover and Rosh Hashana--she returned to her village to visit her people and to celebrate the holy days with them.

On the journey there, and in the village itself, she could tell life in her homeland had changed. Fewer flowers in the flower pots. Fewer pastries on the bakery shelves. Less joy on people's faces. Less hope in their voices.

It felt like night was falling, only not literally. And the darkness seemed to grow deeper every year. It was the Roman occupation, she knew. Their presence felt like a shadow on the land, a menacing threat to everyone. Maybe more like a viper than a shadow.

But what could she do, a lone woman up against an empire? She pondered this question constantly. It lay underneath all of her prayers.

“What are you doing?” Simeon said to her one day, coming up behind her and startling her so badly she nearly flung her prayer beads into the air.

“I’m praying,” Anna replied. “I thought you might know this, since, at your invitation, I’ve been doing it every day now for more years than I can count.”

“Well you’re doing it wrong.” Anna thought back to her first conversation with Simeon, many years ago now. She smiled at the memory but said nothing, and continued fingering her prayer beads.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Carry on. I’m just upset.”

Anna laid the beads aside. “What’s bothering you?”

“Haven’t you heard?” She raised her eyebrows to indicate she hadn’t.

“Emperor Augustus has issued a decree that all the world should be registered.” Again Anna raised an eyebrow, this time just the one, her way of saying “This matters because?”

“They want to keep track of us, Anna. It’s because we’re Jewish. This is a very bad sign.” The old priest picked up Anna’s prayer beads, and worried them between his thumb and fingers, his face pinched with anxiety.

“Next they’ll tax us to expand their empire, then they’ll conscript our children to fight in their wars. You just watch. You’ll see.”

He handed the beads back to Anna, who gladly took them.

“But that’s not even the worst of it as far as I’m concerned. I was wrong, Anna. Just flat wrong.

“Wrong about what?” she replied.

“About what I told you. Apparently it was just a dream.”

Anna recalled the conversation she'd had with Simeon many years ago. Shortly after he had invited her to pray in the inner temple, he confided in her that the Spirit had visited him one day when he was himself deep in prayer.

In hushed tones he explained that the Spirit had assured him he would not see death until the coming of the Lord's anointed one.

She knew he had not intended to tell her. She suspected he hadn't intended to tell anyone. But it was too big a secret to keep it to himself and it just slipped out.

And now, nearing the end of his life, with no Messiah in sight, he was in crisis, his faith wavering like the shadows on the temple wall.

"Why do you say that?" Anna shot back. "I don't believe it was just a dream."

"Don't you see the darkness, Anna? It's been building for years. Now it's all around us. It's about to swallow us. Everything we believe, everything we hold dear could be lost."

Anna again set the beads aside and began to finger the pendant that hung around her neck, the one her mother had given her all those years ago. The raised letters of Deborah's name were now so worn down a stranger likely could not even feel them.

But Anna could.

"Of course I see the darkness, Simeon. But I believe in the Light."

"Aren't you afraid of what they'll do to Israel? What they'll do to us? We're Jews, Anna. We hail Yahweh, not Caesar. They won't let that go unpunished."

"Honestly," she said, wrapping her fingers around the pendant, making them into a fist. "I'm not afraid. I believe the light is coming."

"But why? There's absolutely no evidence to support that belief."

"There is evidence Simeon. I've been watching the sky at night and there is evidence. There's a star hovering low over the horizon, just to the south. It's been getting brighter every night."

“I haven’t seen that,” Simeon replied, an edge in his voice. “Besides, that proves nothing.”

“You haven’t noticed it because you haven’t bothered to look,” Anna said. “And because sometimes you have to believe before you can see.” She was tempted to add that when it came to faith in God’s promises, he was doing it wrong.

“Fine,” he said, and abruptly took his leave

Just a few days later the old priest again burst in on Anna while she was praying, this time startling her so badly she let out a little yelp. “You’ve really got to stop doing that,” she said. “You’re going to give me a heart attack.”

Simeon ignored her. “Apparently there were angels involved,” he said, his voice tight with excitement and three times its normal speed. “Except rumor has it they appeared to a group of shepherds. It makes no sense.”

Anna agreed it made no sense. She had no idea what her friend was talking about.

“Slow down, Simeon. I’m not quite following you.”

“They say it’s the Messiah.”

“Who says that?”

“They say he was born last night, in Bethlehem, to a young maiden. It lines up with the prophesies. Except the shepherds. They make no sense.”

“You were expecting a royal greeting party to meet a king? There were angels, don’t forget.”

“I don’t know what I was expecting. I only know what we’re up against.”

Simeon paused for a beat to consider Anna’s question. “Actually, I am expecting a king. Someone to led us all to freedom. I believe his official title is Messiah.”

He turned to leave. “Shepherds,” he said again, mostly to himself. “Visiting a baby born in a stable. This can’t be right.”

“What if it is?” Anna said, stopping him in his tracks.

He spun back around. “It can’t be.”

“But what if it is?”

Anna knew her friend well enough to know that further argument would get her nowhere. “Wait and see Simeon. And remember, sometimes you first have to believe in order to see.”

Just over a week later a young couple came to the temple for the purification rite for their newborn son, and to present him to the Lord. Ordinarily it was not Simeon’s duty to preside at occasions like this. He was very old now and had been relieved of many of his day to day duties.

But he’d been deep in prayer the day before and the same Spirit that once told him he would live to see the coming of the Lord’s anointed one now visited him again and told him to be in the temple the next day, for he was about to bear witness to a miracle.

When the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

*‘Master, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word;  
for my eyes have seen your salvation,  
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,  
a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel.’*

At that moment Deborah entered the inner temple. When she saw the look on Simeon’s face she knew he finally believed, knew that his dream had come true. He had lived to see the coming of the Lord’s anointed one and now he could indeed depart in peace.

But as for herself, she, too, was very old now, but she was nowhere near ready to depart in peace.

She would never be silent again. She began to praise God openly and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Which is how Anna came to be known as a prophet. And why her mother would have been proud.