



December 23, 2007

Advent 4

Luke 2:36-38
The Hopeful Family
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Old Anna had been in the temple of Jerusalem so long that she looked like part of the furniture. We don't know if anyone knew her, but everyone had to recognize her. She was always there—dressed in black, scarf over her head, and murmuring endless prayers night and day.

Luke tells us only a little about Anna. She was at least 84 years old. Her husband died after seven years of marriage, and sometime after that she settled into her life of prayer. Luke also tells us that she was a prophet, which only means that she sometimes received visions or inspiration to speak about the will of God. But we don't know how often Anna spoke, or if anyone listened to this little, old widow. We get the feeling that Anna didn't much care if anyone listened. She knew God heard her prayers. This is a woman who believes in rituals. Day after day, year after year, decade after decade, she was in the temple maintaining the ritual of prayer. Whatever visions Anna received came through this ritual.

If you ask the average person today if he or she loves rituals, you would probably receive a blank look. Most of us tend to think of rituals as the mindless repetition of old words or actions that are really beneath an enlightened people. Our insatiable passion is for something new. Except at Christmas when everyone turns into a ritualist again.

If your family is like most families, you have rituals for how you decorate the house, where you put the tree, when you open the presents, how and in what order you open presents, what you eat, when you eat, who sits where when you eat, and maybe even what old arguments you bring up while you eat. Hopefully you also have a few spiritual rituals such as lighting the candles of the Advent wreath, coming to worship, listening to sacred Christmas music, and reading Luke's story of the Nativity. You have done it all so many times now that the story is beyond familiar.

The Christmas story didn't change this year. Everybody knows the ritual of the story, and the last thing anyone wants is innovation on it. Imagine if I told you today that our scholars have discovered that Mary actually had twins. That would be rather disturbing, wouldn't it? Or, how about if our archeologists claimed that the birth of Christ occurred not in Bethlehem but in Las Vegas? "No thanks," you would say. "Don't mess around with the Christmas rituals." Like Anna, year after year, decade after decade, from one generation to the next, the same rituals have been observed with great devotion. The question is: do we, like Anna, also receive visions through our Christmas rituals?

One day a young couple from out of town, named Joseph and Mary, entered the temple in Jerusalem. They brought with them their new baby boy who had just been circumcised, another ritual, and given his name of Jesus. This family had come to the temple to fulfill yet another ritual, which was to offer a small sacrifice to God following the birth of their healthy first-born son. Nothing appeared extraordinary about Mary and Joseph. They looked like an ordinary, young family fulfilling an ordinary ritual in the temple, much like our ordinary rituals at Christmas. But while they were in the midst of making their sacrifice in the temple, the most extraordinary things happened.

First, an old man named Simeon came up to them, took their baby into his arms and said, “Now I can die in peace for my eyes have seen the salvation of the Lord.” Then looking at Mary and realizing what this salvation would cost both her and her son, he cautioned, “But a sword will pierce your soul.”

We are told the parents were amazed by this. But it had been a pretty amazing nine months and an incredible week in Bethlehem. After all this drama, it is hard to believe that anything can still amaze Mary and Joseph.

Shortly after they got their baby from this man, old Anna came upon them and began to preach in the temple claiming this child was born for our redemption. And now it is the reader who should be amazed. Simeon went to the temple because the Spirit told him to go there to find the Messiah, but we are not told that Anna received any special revelation from God. I think her ability to recognize the Savior when he appeared came from paying close attention to her ordinary rituals of prayer.

Isn't that amazing? Anna is the only person in the nativity narratives who receives no miraculous guidance to find Jesus. No angel comes to her with the big news. No special word is offered from the Holy Spirit as Simeon received. And no star guides her to the right place. Anna recognized the incarnation of God only because she had been talking to him for 84 years.

That's the way a ritual is supposed to work. It is only a vehicle, and the point of it is to take you somewhere. So the ritual doesn't draw attention to itself but guides to the truth to which it leads. And that is why spiritual rituals are so valuable—they lead us in the paths of holiness. But you have to let the rituals take you where they are designed to go. Don't get preoccupied with the vehicle.

When I lived in Colorado, I decided to buy a four-wheel truck so I could drive on the back roads of the high peaks and see the wilderness in all its pristine beauty. That's what I told myself. But on the day I brought this big, beautiful truck home from the dealership, my daughter Lyndsey asked, “Are you going to take me up to the mountains today Daddy?” All of a sudden that seemed like a terrible idea to me. If I took this truck to the mountains, it would get dirty. Actually, I was trying to figure out how to get it in to the living room. How silly.

The point of any vehicle is not to draw attention to itself but to get you where you need to go. All rituals are vehicles. The purpose of the ritual of prayer is not to be preoccupied with your words but with the one to whom you speak. And the purpose of the ritual of Christmas is not to be preoccupied with a holiday but with the God who is now with us.

This Christmas ritual, with which we are now about neck deep, has the capacity to allow us to see what old Anna saw—the high drama of salvation. It doesn't matter if this is your first or, like Anna, your 84th year of the ritual. It doesn't matter if you are having the Christmas of your dreams or your nightmares, the ritual can open your eyes to holiness.

Let me describe for you how the first Christmas Eve looked from the perspective of heaven. This heavenly perspective is given to us in the 12th chapter of Revelation. That text says nothing about shepherds or wise men, but it depicts a dragon leading a ferocious struggle in heaven. A woman clothed with the sun, wearing a crown of twelve stars, cries out in pain as she gives birth. Suddenly the enormous, red dragon descends. His tail sweeps away a third of the stars. He crouches hungrily before the woman, eager to devour her child after his birth. At the last instant, the child is snatched away to safety as the woman flees into the desert. The dragon is furious and takes his anger out on the other children who remain behind. Wow!

All that the world saw was a humble countrywoman giving birth to her child. Then she fled to Egypt when she heard of Herod's anger, which he took out on all the other children of Bethlehem. But I believe old Anna saw everything that heaven saw, through her rituals of prayer. That is why she recognized the baby as holy the moment she laid eyes on him. So can the rituals of Christmas allow you to see through the ordinary routines of a holiday to behold the high and sacred drama of what it is really happening on Christmas Eve.

Now I realize that the rituals of Christmas are a lot more distracting, a lot more work, and a lot more stressful than prayer. But I am not telling you to make the ritual of Christmas less stressful. Early in my ministry I tried that and discovered it does little good. The rituals of Christmas are what they are for us, passed down from generation to generation. And stress just seems to be part of it. So these days I encourage people to turn even stress into a ritual, a vehicle, that can carry you to salvation.

Remember, there is a dragon, or a Herod, or a sword, in every edition of the Christmas drama. That dragon is what creates the stress for you, makes you flee and run around like crazy, and leaves you afraid of losing your newborn hope. But you cannot allow even the stress to be an end in itself. It, too, is a vehicle, a ritualistic part of the drama that shows up every year. Even the dragon has a role. Its role is to remind you of why we need God to be with us.

Just don't get too preoccupied with any of the rituals—the delightful ones or the frightening ones, the one you love or the ones you hate. A ritual cannot save you. But the best rituals, like Christmas, can take you to the Savior. Amen.