

NBC Devotional
December 2, 2020
"Coming Up Thankful"
Luke 2:36-38

As I have thought about the interesting celebration of Thanksgiving we had this past week, and the very challenging year most of us are anxiously hoping will end soon, I was reminded of a passage in Luke chapter 2 about a prophetess named "Anna." As we find ourselves in the season of Advent, this is a passage that often falls a little bit between the gaps. Even though this passage talks about the Christ child, it is not a passage we usually think about during Advent because it narrates an event that took place a little while after Jesus' birth when Jesus was only 8 days old.

As you might remember, when Jesus was 8 days old, he was taken to the temple in Jerusalem for his consecration to the Lord as the Law stipulated for a firstborn child. Luke tells us that a prophet named Simeon was there, and he took the baby Jesus in his arms and he praised God. Simeon prophesied that this child was a salvation child who would be a light for revelation for both the Gentiles and the Jewish people. But then we read these words in Luke 2:36-38:

"There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage,³⁷ and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.³⁸ Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."

One of the things I love about Luke's Gospel is that Luke always seems to include a woman's experiences and perspective to the gospel, whereas the other gospels tend to reflect the gospel message from a male point of view. Luke is not content to merely tell the story about the prophet Simeon, but he also tells us the brief story about the prophetess Anna. I just wanted to point out this characteristic of Luke to us today, because I love the attention and value that Luke always brings to the perspective of women. He does this all throughout his gospel.

I think there are a couple of helpful and inspiring lessons we can learn from this elderly, often-overlooked widow.

We have just celebrated Thanksgiving in America. I love this holiday because it seems that the over-commercialization that has overrun many of our other national holidays has actually skipped over or missed Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving seems to be uniquely "other-centered" as we focus our attention on giving thanks for our blessings and giving thanks for the people in our lives who mean so much to us. Thanksgiving is a special day in which we can give thanks to others. And it is really quite enjoyable and refreshing to have this day of giving thanks, and of course, we can't forget the turkey!

But the question I think we need to ask ourselves today is whether we are a people, or perhaps, maybe more specifically, am I a person, who spontaneously gives thanks in the midst of new experiences and challenges that come our way?

It is usually pretty easy to join up with an entire nation as we together express our thanks for the blessings in our life. But it's often another thing entirely to be the kind of person who responds gratefully at the very moment when something unexpected happens.

I love the way Luke describes Anna in verse 38 of this passage. What Luke tells us about Anna is that, "coming up at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem." Anna's response to the dedication of Jesus was not a situation of dutifully joining everyone else in their expressions of thanksgiving. This wasn't a question of dutifully remembering what we ought to be thankful for (because everyone else was doing this). Instead, it's a question of being the kind of person who naturally and impulsively gives thanks at the very moment when something breaks into the regular routine of our day.

Anna's example invites us to ask a deeper question than simply the question, "Am I willing to give thanks to God for all he has done for me?" Rather, the question Anna forces us to ask is the question, "Am I the kind of person who always comes up thankful?" Think about that phrase for a moment, "Coming up thankful." Am I the kind of person who always comes up thankful?

I always find it interesting to notice that what comes up and spills out in a moment of crisis depends on what we have inside our heart. When something bumps into your life, that which spills out tells a lot about what you are inside. I think we have seen a LOT of this during this year of 2020. Difficult and bad things happen, and it reveals the heart of a person. So the grumbler will grumble, the cynic will be cynical, the complainer will complain, the irritable will be irritated, and the thankful will thank God. This tendency is the reason why our closest friends can usually predict fairly accurately how we will react in almost any circumstance. I can think of nothing better for any of us here this morning than to be set on the course of being and becoming truly thankful people.

Many times, when we see someone who has established a life's habit of being thankful, we can find ourselves thinking, "Well, sure, that's easy for them. They've had it pretty easy in life." But if we will look more closely at this, I don't think this is true. Once again, what comes up and spills out in difficult and stressful times depends on what we have inside our heart, much more than it depends on the specific circumstances of our life.

Let's look at Anna again for a moment. Luke tells us a little bit about how her life had gone, and it was NOT a pretty picture. Her husband only lived for seven years after they were married, and then he died. The Greek text is unclear whether Luke points out that Anna had now been a widow up to her current age of 84, or whether Luke was pointing out that she had been a widow for 84 years. But regardless of how you translate the Greek text, Anna had been a widow a LONG time. The culture of the 1st century was not kind to widows, since women were fully dependent upon men for their care. Several early historians observe that many young widows were forced to go into prostitution in order to survive. As a widow, there was *no one* to take care of them. This might have even been one of the reasons why Anna never left the temple because it provided her a safe haven, and perhaps a place to beg for help. Life had not been easy or kind to Anna. And yet in the only brief glimpse we catch of this woman who was not only a widow, but who was almost certainly without any children, we find her thankful. I see Anna as the kind of old lady who always comes up thankful when she saw babies in the temple. She might have said, "I wish they would leave their babies at home or in the nursery!

Babies always cry and disturb my quiet prayer time. Fussy and crying babies interrupt my time with God.” But this was not the attitude that filled Anna’s heart. She undoubtedly had no children of her own, but she was thankful for those given to others.

And God rewarded her with an insight into who this infant Jesus really was—the promised Messiah. She was so excited, she couldn’t wait to spread the news. And so, Luke wrote, “Coming up at that very moment, Anna gave thanks to God; and she talked about the child to all who were looking for the liberation of Jerusalem.” When we see Anna, we see her “coming up thankful.”

Luke also tells us, perhaps with a touch of exaggeration, that Anna “worshipped day and night, fasting and praying.” Translate that into our own terms, and we learn that acquiring a thankful nature has a lot to do with the habits of regular worship and prayer. We are unlikely to develop a spirit of thankfulness and joy that is always ready to overflow when the crisis comes, if we have gotten out of the habit of worship and prayer. And so, when the Christ child came, Anna was ready, and we see her “coming up thankful.”

So, what about you? What about me? When hard times come, when unexpected things break into our schedule, how do we come up? What comes up out of our hearts? Do we come up angry, or impatient? Do we come up irritated and critical? Or do we come up thankful and joyful, like Anna?

And so, I would like to challenge you during this Advent season, during this Christmas season, yes, even during this Pandemic season, to worship the Lord at such an intimate and personal level that you can’t help but come up thankful. Maybe we need to spend some more time worshipping the Lord, perhaps even night and day. Perhaps we need to engage in some prayer and fasting, as we focus our attention NOT on the circumstances of our day, but on the Lord, who has saved us, and who fills our life with his presence and joy. And yes, even in very difficult and challenging times, we too, like Anna, can come up thankful. May it be so! Amen!

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