

FOUR GREAT VISITS OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY
2013
Luke 2:36-38

INTRO: Let me quote from last year's message at Christmas to introduce the message for this morning. It went like this: "When I began the ministry as pastor, for the first number of Christmas's I preached through Matthew 1 and 2. Then in 1998 I began in Luke. I am going from Luke 1:26 through Luke 2:38. I give this section the title, "Four Great Visits Of The Christmas Story."

- I. THE VISIT TO MARY (Luke 1:26-38)
- II. THE VISIT TO ELIZABETH (Luke 1:39-56)
- III. THE VISIT TO BETHLEHEM (Luke 2:1-20)
- IV. THE VISIT TO JERUSALEM (Luke 2:21-38)

"We are now in the fourth great visit, the visit to Jerusalem. Last two Christmas's we considered the rites that take place in verses 21-24. There is the circumcision and the naming of the child which took place 8 days after birth, the purification of the mother, the presentation of the child at the temple and the sacrificial offering which took place 40 days after birth" end quote.

So let me give the setting of this passage. Joseph and Mary had traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem in the days when Mary was about to deliver. They had arrived when all the places to stay were full because there was a census being taken in which every Jew had to go to their birthplace to register. And when they arrived, because there was no room in the inn, they ended up staying at Migdol Ader, the place where the special Passover lambs were being cared for. And it happened that the Lamb of God, the Lord Jesus Christ was born there. It was most fitting, as He was the true Lamb of God.

After Jesus was born, when the time for circumcision came, Joseph and Mary went to the temple in Jerusalem from Bethlehem. This was a distance of several miles. And when they arrived at the magnificent temple that Herod was now so lavishly beatifying, there they first met Simeon. We spoke of him last year. This account is found in verses 25-35.

So let us read those verses to introduce where we are this morning (read).

This morning then, we want to consider verses 36-38, and I will add verses 39-41 as a conclusion to this whole series.

I. ANNA'S BIOGRAPHY

So let us look at a bit of Anna's biography in verse 36, which introduces the prophetess Anna to us (read). We note first her name. Now the name 'Anna', I understand is the Greek reading of the Hebrew 'Hanna'. It means 'grace' or 'gracious'. Our text says that Anna was a prophetess. Albert Barnes says that why she was called a prophetess is not known. I expect that she was called a prophetess because she was taken up with studying the prophets and seeking to understand when the Messiah was to come. It seems to me beyond doubt that she pondered or studied the prophets. Prophets, as those who wrote the prophetic Word of God had ceased for some 400 years.

Now, it is interesting to me that Anna recognized this child, in the arms of Joseph and Mary, as the Messiah. Think of that. For over 3500 years the Messiah has been prophesied and in all those years He had not come. Then the prophets fell silent for almost 400 years and Israel and still He did not come. Now Israel was under Roman rule, and still Messiah had not come. The prospects of His coming now was very dim.

But Anna comes to the temple at the very moment Joseph and Mary come. Has she heard about the star at Bethlehem? Has she heard that the shepherds have seen and heard marvelous things? Has she heard that the angels have made an appearance and a pronouncement? We do not know. It is very well possible. You see, this is eight days after His birth at Bethlehem. Look at Luke 2:13-17 (read). Could it be that she has been anxiously waiting to see if He will be brought to the temple? It may well be.

However that may all be, and it is worth pondering, she knew that the Messiah would come as a child and she recognized Him the moment she saw Him. So I expect she was called a prophetess because she knew and understood the prophetic Scriptures and likely spoke

to many who came to the temple about Him long before He came.

So, Anna was a prophetess. Then we are told that she was the daughter of Phanuel, who was of the tribe of Asher. Now why would it be pointed out who her father was? Well, like any good Mennonite community there were a lot of Anna's there. It is possible that her father was a man of some note among the Jews and when Luke writes that this Anna was the daughter of Phanuel they all knew which Anna he was talking about. My son went to Vanderhoof and sang in a church there and when he said who he was nothing happened. And when he said "My dad is Phil Schlamp", there was an audible 'ooohhhhhh'." It was not an ooohhhh for the famous but the infamous. There remained no more question who Trent was.

But let me give you a little history to this name 'Phanuel'. You will remember the OT story of when Jacob was on his way back to Israel. He and Esau had parted on bad terms. This was now many years later and Jacob was afraid that Esau might still have murder on his mind and he was greatly afraid of meeting Esau. So he sent presents ahead while he prayed alone one night. And that night an angel came and wrestled with him and Jacob was very insistent with the angel. He said to the angel, "I will not let you go unless you bless me." So turn to Genesis 32 (read 24-32). Jacob called this place, "Peniel". That is the same as the NT word Phanuel here. The name means 'the face of God'. Is there some reason in that history why in this account in Luke, Anna's father's name is pointed out? Could be.

Now we note further that Anna was of the tribe of Asher. When Leah, Jacob's first, but unwanted wife, bore a second son by her maid Zilpah, she called him 'Asher'. Turn to Genesis 30 (read 12-13). It is many years ago that I studied this name. Some say it means 'happy', but I believe it means 'blessed'. **I believe it is the Hebrew word behind the beatitudes of Matthew 5 which says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit" and so on. Many tell us the idea in this passage is 'happy'. Try this, "Happy are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake." Is that true? So translations translate it as, "Blessed are those who are

persecuted"... etc.

Now, if I were to translate it as I understand it to mean that someone has something for which others envy them. I don't mean envy in a negative way, but like when someone else gets something and you wish that could have been you. For example, let us say someone won a new car or a new house. And some of us might say, "Oh, I wish that had happened to me!" That is the word 'Asher' as I understand it. And Leah said, "Other women will say, 'Oh, I wish I was in her place.'" Anna was from the tribe of Asher.

Now from verse 36 we learn that she was of great age. She was an old woman. She had gotten married and had lived with her husband for seven years when he died. So, I would guess she was a young widow at about 22-25 years of age when her husband died. This verse tells us she had lived with her husband about seven years. We can conclude that this was her first marriage and she never remarried.

So, verse 36 has tells us that she was of great age. Now, if I had a mean streak this morning I would ask you to calculate from verses 36-37 how old Anna was at this point in time. But this is Christmas, and I don't feel mean. So, we'll work it out together. We will learn why in verse 37 the word 'great' is used to describe her age. It says she was a widow of about 84 years. I think that probably does not mean she was about 84 years old, but she was a widow for about 84 years. John Gill's commentary says regarding the 84 years, "Which is not the date of her whole age, as some have thought, but of her widowhood state, as distinct from her marriage state, and the time of her virginity. And this sense all the versions favour." So, if that is correct, let us say she married at 14, then she would have been 21 when her husband died and 21 and 84 is 103. That is why it says she was of great age.

But, not only was she of great age, but it appears she was still mobile and still serving God. Verse 38 says that 'she came in that instant'. Now note that she did not depart from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayer night and day. If all of this is correct, then she had served God at the temple for

some 84 years. If that is all so, then she would have served in the old temple for a long time before Herod began beatifying it. When Jesus began His ministry this temple had already been 46 years in building and it was not yet completely finished. The event we are reading of here happened about 32 years before that. That means the temple had been in reconstruction about 14 years by this time. Since she was likely 84 years in service at the temple, that means she was in the old temple about 70 years and served while the temple was in rebuilding for about the last 14 years. So, like many older people, she had seen great changes take place.

So, it is apparent that when Anna's husband died, a great change came in her life and she dedicated the rest of her long life to the service of the Lord. There was a man many years ago whom I learned to know from reading about him as "Uncle John Vassar". His name was John E. Vassar and he lived from 1813 to 1878. He was known for his prayers and his personal work. One article says, "In 1850 Uncle John became a full-time missionary for the American Tract Society at a salary of one hundred and fifty dollars a year plus traveling expenses, his major work for the rest of his life." The same article says, "He travelled from Maine to Florida, from the Atlantic coast to the Pacific, on foot, on horseback, by rail, and by steamer, resting not in summer or in winter, in the one intense, eager pursuit of souls; and wherever you found him there was the same burning zeal speaking out in his looks and in his words."

Vassar himself said, "I visit frequently forty families a day, have a meeting somewhere every night, and speak to three Sunday schools where practicable every Lord's day. I have conversed with over three thousand people during the last three months on the subject of personal religion..." Those who worked with him said they could find him any time at night and he was in prayer.

Now the reason I mention John Vassar is that I read somewhere years ago, I think it was LE Maxwell that mentioned it, that John Vassar said something like this, "When I laid little Jimmy Vassar to rest this world and I forever parted company." I expect that

something like this happened to Anna. When her husband died, she and this world forever parted company. And it may well be that now for some 84 years she served God with fastings and prayer, night and day in the temple.

A close friend of John Vassar said, "He absolutely prayed day and night. I have roomed with him night after night, and I rarely went to sleep without hearing him at prayer, or awoke without finding him at prayer. He seldom, if ever, came into my house or study that he did not propose a season of prayer. . . ." Uncle John Vassar's gift of prayer manifested itself along roadsides, in shops and in homes. Wherever a need could be found John Vassar could be found praying."

The article later says, "John Vassar's zeal and consecration were so intense that it often astonished and offended those who called themselves 'Christians'. 'Despised, rebuffed, and persecuted he held right on meekly and joyfully, in his simple and faithful way with his little worn New Testament in hand and his single eye fixed on Jesus. Coldness and insults were nothing to him, save that they made him sad for other's sake. No harshness could quench the ardor of his affection.'"

May I remind older folk here that you may render a very valuable service to God by fastings and prayer. If you give of your time to prayer and fasting, you are serving God.

III. ANNA'S MINISTRY

A. Gave Thanks for Him

We will now discover Anna's ministry in verse 38 (read). Now it says, "Coming in that instant..." The word translated 'instant' is *hora*, from which we get our word hour. But it might mean something like, "Coming in at that time." At what time? At what instant? Well, Simeon had just taken the infant in his arms and blessed God as we read earlier. Well, Simeon is just done, and Anna, coming in that instant fulfilled her ministry. First, she gave thanks to the Lord.

There are some instances in Scripture where it tells us what took place but it does not give us details of what was said, where one might wish if one could have been there. I wish I could have been at the temple when Simeon came in and spoke to this young couple and then when Anna gave thanks to the Lord and spoke of Him. I wondered, what might her prayer have been?

And as I thought of that, I wondered if I might be able to imagine some of the things she thanked God for. Maybe she said something like this: "Oh wonderful, wonderful, awesome Adonai. You promised in the Garden of Eden that the seed of the woman would come and would bruise the head of Satan, and I thank You for that. But years passed and he did not come. But you made promise again and again. Then You called, blessed be his name, and you made of him a special people but we have failed You and failed You and the Messiah did not come. But always we have had those who trusted You, and I thank You for that. They said, "He has promised and He will do it." The prophets too, over the years promised again and again and I give You thanks that You gave us hope again and again. Then came David, oh that great king David that we will never forget and I thank You for him. And You promised again and again and I thank You for that. Then came Daniel and oh what wonderful prophecies he gave to us, how I thank You for that. And I have calculated those years, oh how wonderful is Your Word. And we have arrived at the time the Messiah should be born in order to become of age to be our Deliverer by the years You gave. And Oh El Shaddai, I have waited and fasted and prayed and I was sure You would send Him. And you promised Simeon that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. I only hoped I would get to see him before I died. And now, just eight days ago we saw an incredible star and it remained for some time over Bethlehem. And I wondered, is this at last, the star of Jacob? And our hopes rose and for days we have been hoping and waiting. And then we heard from the shepherds of Bethlehem that they had seen angels and they had made some astonishing announcements and Lord I have been waiting here in anticipation and here He is. How can I ever sufficiently express my gratitude to You? I believe it, and yet I find it hard to believe! After 4,000 years, here He is! Oh El Shaddai,

El Shaddai, Erkamkanna Adonai, God Almighty, God Almighty, Oh Lord, Oh Lord, I love You! I thank You! He is here. My eyes are blessed above measure, my heart rejoices in Your provision for our salvation! Oh thank You Lord!"

Well, we do not know how she gave thanks, but we do know she did. And that this will have been a very high and holy moment is beyond doubt!

B. Spoke of Him

But our passage goes on to say she then spoke to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.

I mentioned before that there are some instances in Scripture where it tells us what took place but it does not give us details of what was said, where one might wish if one could have been there. Wouldn't you have liked to be able to hear and see what took place there on that day? I wish I could have been at the temple when Simeon came in and spoke to this young couple and then when Anna gave thanks to the Lord and then when she spoke of Him. What might she have said?

I think this must have been an incredible moment. There must have been an incredible sense of the presence of God at this moment of recognition of who this Child was. What a moment it must have been.

Recently I read the Israeli account of the six day war. It happened in 1967 and was provoked by President Nassar of Egypt. Israel was outmanned and outgunned by great odds and it looked as if Israel would be driven into the sea in one day. But in a few hours they had eliminated all of Egypt's jets. And by day three, they were battling to take the old city of Jerusalem which had been in Arab hands since the war of independence in 1948. Israel had never dreamed that in this war they would have a chance to take Jerusalem, but on day three of this war that battle took place. There was very harsh fighting in the narrow streets of old Jerusalem, and then Israel broke through and for the first time since 1948, they stepped onto the temple mount area. It was here that Abraham offered up Isaac. It was here that Anna met the baby Messiah as well.

And I want to read a little of what happened in the six day war when Israel took old Jerusalem. The book says, "Gur and his men, meanwhile, stepped into the tranquil, tree-lined plaza known to Muslims as the Noble Sanctuary (al-Haram al-Sharif) and to Jews as the Temple Mount (Har ha-Bayit). The site of both the First and Second Temples, believed to be the scene of Isaac's binding and of Muhammad's ascent to heaven, it was a Holy Place par excellence, revered by millions. Arik Akhmon, the intelligence officer, described the moment: 'There you are on a half-track after two days of fighting, with shots still filling the air, and suddenly you enter this wide open space that everyone has seen before in pictures, and though I'm not religious, I don't think there was a man who wasn't overwhelmed with emotion. Something special had happened.'" After a brief skirmish with Jordanian riflemen, Gur radioed Narkiss the three words—seven in English—that would resonate for decades afterward. "Har ha-Bayit be-Yadenu"—"The Temple Mount is in our hands." Gur received a delegation of Arab notables who proffered him the city's surrender, along with arms that had been stored in the mosques. To their surprise, the general released them and allowed them to return to their homes. But neither he nor any of his staff knew how to get to the Western Wall, and were forced to ask an old Arab man for directions. He guided Gur through the Mughrabi Gate, exiting just south of the Wall. A retaining structure of giant ashlar erected by King Herod, the wall was the only remnant of the Second Temple destroyed by the Romans in the year 70. Jews had not had access to the shrine, their holiest, for nineteen years. As Gur descended, men from both the Jerusalem Brigade and the 71st paratroopers converged on the wall, ecstatic and all but oblivious to the persistent sniper fire. Rabbi Goren broke free of the three soldiers Gur had designated to restrain him, and ran headlong to the wall. He said Kaddish—the mourner's prayer—blew his shofar, and proclaimed, 'I, General Shlomo Goren, chief rabbi of the Israeli Defense Forces, have come to this place never to leave it again.' Crammed into the narrow space between the stones and the ramshackle dwellings of the Mughrabi Quarter, the soldiers broke into spontaneous songs and prayers. Above them, the Star of David was hoisted."

A few years ago I was able to take my wife to Israel. One of our daughters and sons-in-law came as well. We were on a tour and we had the Sabbath as a free day, and we took a taxi to the gate into the Jewish quarter. What a special day that was. I had read a lot about the old city of Jerusalem and the Jewish quarter from accounts of the 1948 war. And it was one of those very special times for me in my life. We walked those streets that these soldiers were battling that I just mentioned. It was a very special day for me. But there was even a more special time. One day we went to the Western wall. We were at the western wall, sometimes called the wailing wall, within just a short distance of where the scene we have before us this morning took place. And in the evening we were given a tour of the wall underneath the present city. And we walked along the bedrock of the ancient wall of the temple of Solomon which went right by the temple. I cannot describe what I felt. Somehow I felt that this is as close as you can come physically to the Lord. This feeling surged through me. It was just such an incredible moment for me. I know it must have been something like it was for these Israeli soldiers when they took the old city in 1967.

Now let us go back to this moment when Anna met the Messiah as an infant right there at that place. I believe this must have been a moment that exceeds anything these Jewish soldiers experienced or that I experienced there. And if I could have been at one site on those of the time of Christ's birth, I would have liked to have been at the temple when Joseph and Mary came there with Jesus. What I would give to hear what Anna prayed and what she said when she spoke to others.

CONCL: So, let us close. What a story is the Christmas story. When you go to Genesis 1 and 2, the creation story, it is awesome, to use a modern common expression. And when I say it is a story, I am not talking about a fairy tale. The English word 'story' comes from the Greek word *historia*, meaning, according to Webster, "knowing, learned...and is rendered to inquire, to explore, to learn by inspection." Our word 'history' comes from this word as well. History is facts of the past. And the creation account is filled with things that cause awe. To this very day, we can behold a lot of it and it still brings a sense of awe.

But the birth of the second Person of the Triune God, both from the perspective as being born of a human being and as being born both as a human being and at the same time as a divine being; like creation, is a story of stories. And of one small part of this marvelous, momentous time in history, we have been privileged to let our thoughts dwell for a brief time this Christmas morning.