

Presentation of our Lord
4th Sunday after Epiphany, Year A
February 2, 2020
The Rev. Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI

If I tell you that I grew up with lots of Stephanies, Jennifers, and Jessicas, you can probably guess my age give or take a few years. For about a year right around first grade, I didn't like my name very much because no one else had it in the whole school; substitute teachers would mispronounce it, and it didn't really sound how it was spelled. I remember coming home one day pretty adamant that I no longer wanted to be called Ian and instead wanted to use my middle name. My middle name, for the record, is Carleton, so how I thought that was going to blend any better is beyond me, but it seemed like a good plan to my seven-year-old self.

As I've gotten older, I've come to really like my name. I think I've grown into it. I can't tell you the number of times I've noticed the power of a name in my work as a pastor. Think about when we take a little baby and baptize them by name. We're not saying that God loves babies generically; we're saying that God is invested in being close to this one, specific tiny human. You do the same at a funeral or even at the graveside. God isn't interested in the dead generally; God is interested in bringing you, specifically, back to Godself. So, yes, names are important.

Jesus is being presented in the Temple this morning by his parents in accordance with their religious laws and customs. The arrival of the Holy Family caused quite a stir, and Simeon, a righteous man who had been looking out for the Messiah his whole life, saw the child Jesus and began to sing songs of praise about the deliverance of Israel. Imagine Mary and Joseph's surprise.

But the place where I would like to focus our attention this morning is not on Simeon but on Anna, the prophet. The text tells us that Anna was a prophet who was widowed young in her life. In her 20s at some point, she sealed herself into the temple and prayed there for going on sixty years. What caught me though, was that the author of our text made such a strong point to mention her name.

One of the great calamities of our religious tradition is that our sacred texts so often leave out the names of women. Can you remember the name of Noah's wife? No, you can't because she was never given one. Can you remember the name of Isaiah's wife, herself a prophet? No, you can't because she wasn't given one. Think about the hemorrhaging woman? The woman at the well? The woman with the alabaster jar? Our foremothers were sidelined from the main thrust of the narrative, and so when we have the opportunity to spend some time with a woman whose presence is so strong that she gets a name, I think we should do that.

Which brings us again to Anna. A prophet of God who was in the temple when Jesus was presented. The text says, "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." It's a little like if we were in the middle of a baptism, and someone just stood up and started to say all the amazing things that

the little baby would do in its life to heal our city and our world. Surely we would think this is a little crazy.

And yet, that's exactly what the story says. This holy woman, Anna, saw something in the child Jesus that not everyone could see. She had the special vision and then the courage to see and to speak.

I like to think that her story is included in this narrative by our forebears because their hope is that we might someday emulate the prophetess. What is it that we see in Jesus that needs to be praised and needs to be shared? In what ways do we see the salvation of the world in this Jesus and do we have the courage to speak about it?

I think that Anna probably saw in Jesus a different way of being a king — a prince of peace who would exercise power with words and surprising actions rather than with swords or armies. I think Anna saw a prophet and a scholar who delved deeply into the scriptures to divine the will of God rather than lurching from every ego-fed decision. I think Anna probably saw in Jesus a leader who wanted to lead with compassion for those who often get sidelined in society rather than just being a God for the powerful or the well connected.

Just like Jesus, my friends, you too have been presented at the temple. At some point in your life, someone brought you into church to present you to God, and the community all around you — filled with people like Anna — saw in you gifts for the healing of the world. When you were presented, we all rejoiced at the salvation that would come into the world because you are a follower of Jesus. And at that moment, we all made sure that we knew your name, just as God knows all our names.

I suppose the miracle might be that Anna was able to prophesy about how special this little baby was. After all, he was Jesus. But I also like to think that this scene has been recreating itself generation after generation for all those of us who follow Jesus and join him in the work of healing this world.

I will tell you that, reading the news this week — corruption and plagues, nationalism and border walls — has me worried about the salvation of our world. Faith for me this week, and maybe for you too, is a decision rather than a feeling. I decide that the vision that Anna shows us today in the Gospel is the vision I believe in — where Jesus is our God who preaches love, peace and healing. Thank you, prophet Anna, for your special vision. I believe it is our grace in weeks like this one. Amen.