

*Where is Anna?*

Luke 2:22-40

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The first thing I want you to know is that Anna is present and accounted for. So you can listen to this story without being overly worried. But Anna was not easy to find.

Several families were gathered in the backyard around a campfire. Children were running in and out of the woods, and as dusk settled in, the adults began asking where Anna was. She is a totally reasonable and competent tween, and really - where could she have gone? But her dad - and a set of younger siblings from several families who were delighted by the adventure - went traipsing through the woods calling her name - and after we had sung many verses of songs around the fire - we heard them crunching back up towards our yard - but Anna was not with them.

Her parents did not love it that she was absent, but they also shrugged it off. She's fine. She likes to be alone. She'll come back when she's ready. We wish she were here but she's not. Let's proceed with the festivities without her.

And so we did. We proceeded with the festivities. And she was absent. And she showed back up later, having enjoyed her solitary adventure but having been absent from our time together.

All of this came to mind this week as it slowly dawned on me that the prophet Anna, whom we heard about in the reading from Luke today, is absent from popular tellings of the Christmas story. And she isn't really choosing this for herself, is she? Do any of you have an "Anna" standing next to the manger in the creche? Have any of you ever played "Anna" in the Christmas pageant? Where is she? She is hard to find. We proceed with the festivities without her.

Sure - she wasn't actually AT the manger. She came into the story about 8 days later. But this seems like a good time to point out the intrusive presence of the magi.

Spoiler alert: the magi were never at the manger - ever. But I bet that you have seen them in a creche set, standing there next to Mary and Joseph and a donkey. And they are perennially present in Christmas pageants. Not only were the magi not ever at the manger, they were not even mentioned in the one gospel that describes the holy birth with any detail.

That's Luke: Luke describes the shepherds and the angels and the swaddling clothes and the manger. And then the very next thing is this interaction in the Temple. Matthew, on the other hand tells us that Joseph had a dream in which Gabriel told him that Mary would have a baby, and then that she did. And then, years later, Herod sends the magi.

And so - looking at the wooden creche on the shelf next to my fireplace, I found myself asking: Why is Anna not here?

If the magi are there, surely Anna and Simeon ought to be! Unlike the tween, Anna, going for a walk alone, the prophet Anna is only missing if we do not tell her story! And unlike Simeon, about whom I found details in every commentary I opened - there is precious little written about Anna.

So let's talk about Anna - and the Temple - and why it matters that she is there.

Anna encounters Jesus at the Temple in Jerusalem.

This telling about the trip to the Temple is significant because it ties Jesus to both the priestly tradition and the prophetic tradition - which is very much what Luke was about. While the gospel of Matthew (the gospel with the Magi) tells the story of Jesus by emphasizing his kingship and his inheritance of the line of David (look at the opening chapter - one long lineage) Luke emphasizes, throughout the text, that Jesus is the inheritor of both the priestly and prophetic tradition of Israel.

And here, in the story about the Temple, we are told, with very little fanfare or detail, that the holy family follows the priestly rules associated with purification and the birth of a firstborn son. They just did it.

But this priestly exercise is punctuated with prophetic encounters with Simeon and Anna.

Simeon predicts that Jesus will be good news for Israel and for the Gentiles, that Jesus will divide Israel, and that Mary will be hurt.

Anna offers praise to God - and then begins telling about Jesus to all who hope for redemption of Israel. She testifies about who Jesus is. And she sounds a whole lot like Isaiah, deuterio Isaiah, the second part - like the passage for today - the part where Israel is redeemed, where the green blade riseth.

Anna is the only female designated as a prophet in the New Testament. Though Elizabeth, the mother of John, and Mary, the mother of Jesus, both prophesy in this gospel of Luke, Anna, alone, is identified by vocation or title as prophet.

Anna is credentialed by her father's name and her tribe, and from that we learn that she is not from a priestly family, and also that she is from the tribe of Asher. In Deuteronomy, Moses prophesies regarding the tribe of Asher: your strength will equal your days. This is significant because Anna is described as being very old. Her longevity is noteworthy, perhaps miraculous, perhaps another miracle (along with Elizabeth and Zechariah's age, the virgin birth, and Simeon's holding on until he had seen the Messiah) surrounding the birth of Jesus.

She is a widow, and she has lived IN the temple for decades. Possibly more than 75 years.

She would have been revered. She would have been revered for her age and her piety.

The only woman identified as a prophet in the New Testament was a very old woman, a very old widow, whose vocation was proclaiming redemption.

Anna's presence in the gospel matters because it encourages us to reconsider those things we take for granted about who belongs in the Christmas story. And when we ask where Anna is in the nativity, we must also ask where Anna is in our churches. When we tell stories about who we are as followers of Jesus, and we tell them without innovation and interrogation, who gets left out? Which prophets are lost to us?

As we turn from the Magnificat, and the manger, and the angels, and shepherds - as we turn toward a life that is changed by the incarnation, by the humanity of Jesus - the priestly prophet who changed everything - let us hope for redemption, and let us make space for Anna, and for all of the prophetic voices that get written out of our story.