

The People of Christmas

The Least Important Person in the Christmas Story

Luke 2:36-38

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December 24, 2010

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Scripture

We have just listened to the story of the birth of Jesus in our Scripture Lessons. We heard about the angel Gabriel, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, the wise men, Herod, and others. Most of these characters are familiar to us.

Tonight, however, I want to talk about the least important person in the Christmas story. Who do you think that might be?

That is probably an unfair question since we did not hear about that person in the Lessons we read this evening. And perhaps that is an indication of how little we are told about that person.

The person I am referring to is mentioned in only three verses in Luke's account of Jesus' birth. And it is not even a man! It is a woman, and her name is Anna. Luke writes this about her in Luke 2:36-38:

³⁶ And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, ³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:36-38)

Introduction

Anna was the least important person in the Christmas story. Luke tells us that Anna was a prophetess. She spoke God's

¹ Much of the material for this message is from James Montgomery Boice, *The Christ of Christmas* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 157-166.

Word to God's people. She was the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. Asher was not a very important tribe, and Luke probably wanted to show that she knew her genealogy and that she was truly Jewish. Anna was married for only seven years when her husband died. Although some Bible versions indicate that Anna was widowed for eighty-four years, it is more likely that she eighty-four years old when she met Jesus. Luke's point is simply that Anna was old. Anna apparently spent all her time at the temple, where she worshiped God with fasting and prayer.

Then, one day, when Jesus was forty days old, Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the Temple in Jerusalem for their purification and his presentation according to the Law of Moses. While they were at the Temple an old man named Simeon saw Jesus. The Holy Spirit told him that Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the One the Father would send to deliver his people. And so he blessed Jesus publicly.

Anna came in to the Temple area at that very hour and saw Simeon holding Jesus and blessing God for the arrival of Jesus. And so, naturally, she went over to Simeon, Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. And from what Luke tells us, Anna undoubtedly understood more about the full significance of the coming of Jesus Christ than any of the other people we are told about in the Christmas story.

Lesson

So, what is it that Anna the prophetess understood about the coming of Jesus Christ? I would like to suggest that Anna understood three truths about the coming of Jesus Christ.

I. Anna Understood That the Baby Jesus Was to Become the Redeemer That God Had Promised to His People

First, Anna understood that the baby Jesus was to become the Redeemer that God had promised to his people. We know that because Luke says that she began **“to speak of him to all who were**

waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:38).

The word **redemption** is “from a Latin root meaning ‘to buy back,’ thus meaning the liberation of any possession, object, or person, usually by payment of a ransom. In Greek the root word means ‘to loose’ and so to free. The term is used of freeing from chains, slavery, or prison.”² We use the word in reference to buying back an item that has been left at a pawn shop. We also use the word in business to describe the action of a company that is able to buy back bond issues in order to cancel a financial obligation.

However, during the time that the Bible was written the word **redemption** was used primarily for the act of freeing a slave. A slave could be set free only if someone would pay the price necessary for a full redemption.

When the Bible uses the word **redemption** in a spiritual sense it means that every single person in the world is a slave to sin, and Jesus came to pay the price necessary for a full redemption.

In many parts of the Bible that idea is reinforced by references to the *price* paid for our redemption. The apostle Peter writes to his readers, “For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (1 Peter 1:18–19, *NIV*). The price of our redemption, then, is the blood of Jesus Christ.

We sing about this in one of our hymns:

Redeemed—how I love to proclaim it!
Redeemed by the blood of the Lamb;
Redeemed thro’ His infinite mercy,
His child, and forever, I am.³

² Walter A. Elwell and Philip Wesley Comfort, *Tyndale Bible Dictionary*, Tyndale reference library (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2001), 1114.

³ Paul Eckert, *Steve Green’s MIDI Hymnal: A Complete Toolkit for Personal Devotions and Corporate Worship*, Electronic ed. (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1998).

That is what Anna was waiting for God to do for his people in the city of Jerusalem. So when she saw the baby Jesus she instantly recognized him as the One sent by God to pay the full redemption price for his people from sin and its power.

Christmas is far more than the birth of a helpless baby in a stable, the wonder of the shepherds at the manger, the praise of the angels in the sky, or the gifts of the wise men at the house. The focal point of Christmas lies in the truth that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

II. Anna Was Only One of Many Who Were Looking for This Redemption

It is amazing that Anna actually expected these things. But she did, and this is reinforced by Luke’s statement that she was only one of many who were looking for this redemption. Luke says that after she had seen Jesus she began **“to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem”** (Luke 2:38).

In Anna’s day people were waiting for their redemption. Now, frankly, most of them were looking for redemption in the wrong way.

For example, the Pharisees were looking for a redeemer, but they were looking for a political redeemer. They were looking for someone who would throw off the yoke of Roman oppression. And because that is the kind of redeemer they were looking for, they missed the Redeemer that God the Father sent to them.

The monk-like Essenes were also looking for a redeemer, but they were looking for a teacher, a new Moses. They were looking for someone who could bring new intellectual light to them. And because that is the kind of redeemer they were looking for, they missed the Redeemer that God the Father sent to them.

The Sadducees were also looking, but they did not know what they were looking for. They did not seem to believe in anything that the Bible taught. And because they really were not look-

ing for a redeemer, they missed the Redeemer that God the Father sent to them.

And then there the true and genuine believers. They, like Anna, were looking for a redeemer to free them from the guilt of their sin. And because that is the kind of redeemer they were looking for, they did not miss the Redeemer that God the Father sent to them.

Two thousand years after the birth of Jesus, little has changed. We have people who are looking simply for political freedom. If the party of the Republicans, or the Democrats, or the Independents is in power, then those opposed to them want someone from their own party to bring political freedom to them.

Or we have people who are the so-called intellectuals and elite of our society. They believe that the answers lie in education, or global warming, or wealth distribution, or social justice, or you-name-it.

Or we have people who are the so-called “new atheists.” They don’t believe that God exists. They rely on reason, like the atheists who commissioned a billboard to counter Christmas in New York City, which read, “This season, use reason!”

But then there are those today who believe that Jesus really is the Redeemer that God sent two thousand years ago. They believe that Jesus was born of the virgin Mary, that he lived a perfect, sinless life, that he died on the cross to pay the price for sin, that he purchased sinners by his blood, that he rose from the dead on the third day, and that he now lives and reigns in heaven forever.

Has Jesus become your Redeemer? If you are not a Christian, then you are still a slave to sin. If you die unredeemed, you will spend all eternity in hell. But, this Christmas—tonight!—you can ask Jesus to redeem you. You can ask him to pay the penalty for your sin. If you believe him for that, and if you repent of your sin, you will receive the gift of freedom this Christmas. Of all the Christmas gifts you will receive this Christmas, that will be the best by far, because it will last all the way into eternity!

III. Anna Spoke about Jesus to Others

And third, Anna spoke about Jesus to others. Luke says that after she had seen Jesus she began **“to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem”** (Luke 2:38).

Like the shepherds who visited Jesus on the day of his birth, she also became a witness of all that she had seen and heard. It is fascinating that this godly woman spent decades fasting and praying. Then, when she saw Jesus, she did not go back to fasting and praying. No, she started telling others about Jesus!

Do you tell others about Jesus? Are you a witness to Jesus Christ? You should be, if you are a Christian.

Never forget that while you are excited about Christmas with all the joy that comes from knowing Jesus, there are others, perhaps as close as your own family members, who do not know him personally and savingly. There is the neighbor who has been hit hard by the economic recession. There is the friend who has just learned about a terminal illness. There is the colleague who has just lost his job. There is the person whose child has started using drugs. There are the lonely, the disillusioned, the sad, and the abandoned of our community. For them, Christmas is a pain to endure, a day to forget, and a season to get beyond.

But these people need Jesus. They need to know about the redemption he brings. They need to know about the freedom and joy and hope that he provides.

And who is going to tell them? You! You must tell them about Jesus and his redemption. You must tell them how they can be set free from slavery to sin. You must tell them how they can discover joy in knowing Jesus personally and savingly.

Conclusion

I do hope that you, like Anna, will see that Jesus is indeed the Redeemer promised by God to his people. Amen.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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1. www.tampabaypresbyterian.org/Sermons
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PRAAYER:

Our Father, thank you for the redemption that Jesus paid for our sin. Thank you that he paid the full price for our redemption.

If there is anyone here tonight who wants Jesus to pay the full price of your redemption, would you pray this simple prayer quietly with me:

O Lord, I know that I am a sinner. I have broken your law. I am a slave to sin. If I die in my current state, I will go to hell for all eternity. Jesus, I believe that you have paid the full price for all of my sin in order to redeem me. I repent of all my wrongdoing and sin. Receive me now into your kingdom.

Father, will you answer this prayer that has just been prayed? Would you grant the gift of faith and repentance? Would you receive each believing and repentant sinner into your kingdom?

And for all of this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

CHARGE:

Go and glorify God in all that you think, do, and say! And as you do, may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.