

Anna in the Temple/Julian in the Anchor-hold

Luke 2:22-40 by Patty Friesen Christmas Sunday, Dec. 27/20

Just as the Spirit had come upon John the Baptist, Mary, Elizabeth, and Zechariah, so also now Simeon is identified as one on whom the Spirit rests. Following this introduction of Simeon, the narrator reports that the meeting in the Temple was no accident. Simeon was guided there by the Holy Spirit. For the third time the Spirit is mentioned in the introduction to this scene. What is about to happen is God's doing. Devout Simeon was in the Temple because he was prompted to be there by the Spirit; Jesus' parents were there because they were fulfilling the requirements of the Law. Simeon says the coming of Jesus heralds peace, salvation for all peoples, a light for the Gentiles, and the glory of the Lord in Israel. "Peace" occurs 14 times in Luke, where it is both the goal and the result of God's redemptive work in Jesus. Simeon saw God's salvation not because he happened to live at the right moment in history but because his devotion and the work of the Spirit in him had led him to understand that God's hand was at work in Jesus' birth.

Luke is fond of pairing male and female figures in his narrative. The role of Simeon and Anna in the Temple at the end of the birth narrative balances the role of the aged Zechariah and Elizabeth at the beginning of the narrative. Anna's character and piety are emphasized, but not her words. As a prophet, Anna continues the tradition of female prophets in the OT (Miriam, Deborah; Huldah; and Isaiah's wife, Isa 8:3) and anticipates the role of female prophets in the early church (Acts 2:17; 21:9; 1 Cor 11:5).

I love this story of Anna the prophetess living in the temple. Sometimes I feel like I live at church during busy weeks but imagine actually living here: sleeping in the youth room,

making breakfast in the kitchen and working out in the gym. It wouldn't be so bad. Other people in church history besides Anna have lived inside religious spaces. In the middle ages these people were called anchorites who lived in tomb-like/womb-like round dwellings attached to churches - inhabiting the liminal space between church and world. Socially distanced from the world, and freed from the distractions of the active life, they could devote themselves completely to contemplation and intercession. It took a step of faith to enter a space of isolation and it required even more faith, patience and resilience to remain there and find contentment. Can we learn from these church dwellers how to make the most spiritually of physical distance and isolation? (Christian Century, June 17/20, p. 12)

The late fourteenth century was a time of terrible upheaval. With the Black Plague, the Hundred Years War and the crisis of one pope refusing to give up to another pope burdened Europe with an atmosphere of anxiety. Intense concern about personal salvation outside the prescribed confines of church theology led to a proliferation of new forms of religious expression. Much of the new spirituality emerged from lay people aspiring to lives of holiness outside of conventional religious orders.

The yearning for a personal, experiential faith contributed to a flowering of non monastic Christian mysticism. Fourteenth century England produced a significant number of mystical classics, written in the vernacular, often by lay people living in self-isolation addressed to other lay people seeking a more intimate relationship with God. The Showings by Julian of Norwich is one and perhaps the greatest of these works.

Julian was born in 1342. At some point in her youth she prayed that she might be granted three graces: recollection of Christ's passion, and three wounds of contrition, compassion and longing for God. Her prayer was answered at the age of thirty when she fell so serious ill that

she was given last rites. She did not die, but she experienced revelations about God our Creator who is also our Protector and Lover, working good through all manner of things. We are soul and body enclosed in the goodness of God.

Julian also meditated on feminine images of God. Jesus, she says is our true Mother who bears us in the womb of his love and nourishes us with his own flesh. Throughout her writings, the affirmation of the goodness of creation and her stress on the beauty, friendliness and love of God contrast sharply with a theology that emphasizes the anger and omnipotent judgement of God over a sinful world. She spent 20 years meditating and writing about these death-bed visions she received, patiently waiting for their meaning to emerge.

Later in life, she entered an anchor-hold which means she would have been literally sealed in a dwelling attached to the wall of a church. Her cell would have allowed a view of the church interior, as well as an outside window for the delivery of food and the reception of visitors seeking spiritual counsel. She may also have enjoyed a garden and the companionship of a cat. She is often pictured with her cat.

What may today seem like an extreme form of rejection of the world was recognized in her own time as serving an important social function to her community. She did not directly address the major political and health crises of her day but she was not remote from them. In an age of anxious uncertainty, Christians were desperate to seek assurances of salvation, of the meaning of suffering and of the power and goodness of God. Julian's central insight was that the God who created us out of love and who redeemed us by suffering love, also sustains us and wills to be united with us in the end. This love, and not sin, fundamentally determines our existence. Evil has no independent status; whatever we may suffer, God has already suffered. The worst, as she noted, has already happened and has been repaired. Thus, she would say, in

her most famous words, “All will be well, all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.”

(Robert Ellsberg, *All Saints*, p. 210)

For Julian, the anchor-hold was not a tomb but a womb, as she was being formed into new life. Isolation can be a place or period of darkness, discomfort and uncertainty where nothing seems to be happening. It may not yield up ready insights or meanings. It may feel unproductive and useless. But for Julian in the anchor-hold and for Anna in the temple, the deeper truth of enclosure is that it is also a place of gestation. To believe this requires both patience and hope. It asks us to practice watching and waiting for what may be emerging, while we shelter at home, like anchorites resting in their cells and prophetess waiting in the temple. (CC. p. 13).

Let us pray...Sheltering God, you have held us and enfolded us in our homes while we wait out this pandemic. Thank you for glimpses of mercy and purpose in this waiting even while we get restless and bored as well. Help us see this time as rest and trust as we wait on you in the new year. Amen.