

CHAPTER SIX - THE TIME OF THE JEWISH EXILE AND
THE 400 YEARS OF SILENCE
ca. 600-6 BCE
Section Four

God Chose Anna
ca. 6 CE

God chose Anna's voice to be the first . . .

- *Eye-witness proclamation by a prophet that the Messiah had been born*

Anna's aging bones were reminding her of her advanced years on this brisk spring morning. After her daily ritual bath at the Temple, required by all who wanted to enter the Temple courts to worship, she ascended the steps toward the Court of Women. She caught herself grinning and almost giddy with some unusual sense of anticipation. She wondered what had stirred her soul on this particular morning.

While thinking through the past few days and considering what lay ahead for this new day, she settled into her favorite spot on the bench that was bathed in the morning sunlight in the corner of the Temple court. The wisps of sunbeams floated in between the tall marble columns surrounding the large platform on which the glistening white Temple stood.

From this vantage point, she watched hurried priests go by and people delivering their sacrificial offerings to the priests at the next gate. She had noticed the elderly Simeon was out early this fine morning. She had not seen him for a few days. He was always a welcome sight. He was a faithful old soul that could make her laugh and one of the few who could reminisce with her about the days before the rule of the wicked King Herod. As she passed the time, she especially loved to see young Jewish families showing their children the splendor of the Temple. She remembered with bittersweetness her brief married life. It had ended more than six decades earlier when her husband died unexpectedly. Ever since then, she had spent more time in the Temple courts than in her home.

The rhythm of her days was comforting, but never boring. She had long established a habit of fasting several days a week and her prayers were frequent and fervent. She had been a comfort to many by helping people understand God's activity in their lives and how God's grace and mercy was with them always. This and her daily presence at the Temple had established her reputation as a respected prophet and she was sought out for her wisdom. She could share God's truth with great conviction because she was now in her 80s! God had been so merciful to her as a widow all these years, providing for her, and giving her such a life of peace and joy in spite of the oppressive culture King Herod had wrought on her people, the Jews. She would bring her mending projects with her and about once a week, usually on market day, she would gather with other women friends in a tucked-away corner on the expansive porch where they could spend an afternoon visiting and sharing the latest news from their families.

Resting her head against the cool stone wall behind her bench, she closed her eyes and took in all the sounds: the laughter of some nearby children, the heated discussions between teachers of the law, and the clinking of the coins being dropped in the offering urns. Then she caught the sweet sound of an infant cooing along with some turtledoves. She opened her eyes and saw a young couple with a babe in arms approaching the elderly and wise Simeon who seemed overjoyed to see this couple. Anna wondered if they were friends of his.

Simeon had been around the Temple almost as long as Anna, but not quite as often. Anna watched as a very young mother, still looking a little tired, gently placed her infant into the waiting arms of Simeon. The father put down the small cage he was carrying that held the two turtledoves for their sacrifice of thanksgiving for this firstborn son. He stood close to Simeon in a protective posture. Anna stood from her bench to move in a little closer and leaned on the marble column nearest the scene in front of her. Simeon was obviously enraptured by the child. Anna hadn't seen Simeon smile like that in ages. Then, quite unlike Simeon's normal behavior of softspoken stillness, he raised the infant above his head and danced around in sheer delight. The couple stood there mesmerized at the old man's confidence in handling their tiny infant. The father was poised ready to catch the infant dangling in midair.

As a gleeful Simeon lowered the child from overhead, the new father breathed a sigh of relief. Then a ray of sunshine crept over the glistening Temple roof and sunbeams danced around the baby's face. Anna gasped and for a moment she couldn't breathe. She felt that familiar warmth when Yahweh would give her a word of prophecy. But

this time, she was aware of something unique. God's presence was tangible, palpable. She knew she was in the physical presence of God Almighty. She could stand still no longer. She rushed to Simeon's side to get a closer look at the baby. Simeon held the baby so Anna could see his tiny face and introduced her to the new parents, Joseph and Mary from Nazareth. Anna exchanged happy smiles with the couple as she put a supportive arm around the young mother. She marveled at the youth of the mother and the questioning face of a more mature father. Anna looked back into the joyous face of Simeon and they nodded to one another in full recognition of this baby's identity. "He's here," they whispered to each other in utter amazement.

Anna and the young family watched Simeon raise his face toward heaven and exclaim, "Now, Master, let your servant go in peace according to your word, because my eyes have seen your salvation. You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples. It's a light for revelation to the Gentiles and a glory for your people Israel."*

Anna glanced back and forth between the radiant face of Simeon and the somewhat startled faces of the baby's parents. She now fully understood that unexpected stirring in her soul earlier that morning.

Simeon gently returned the squirming infant to his father's arms and then gave a firm, congratulatory squeeze to the new father's shoulders. As he raised his face toward the heavens once more, he gently placed his hands on Mary's and Joseph's shoulders and spoke a blessing over the young family. As he lowered his eyes, they met the warm, midnight eyes of the young mother and he spoke softly yet decisively to her saying, "This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel."* Then he looked seriously at Joseph and spoke a word of warning, "And to be a sign that generates opposition so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed."* Simeon paused, closed his eyes as if listening to someone. When his eyes opened, his demeanor changed and Anna watched a tear stream down the weathered face of Simeon. He swallowed, took a deep breath as if he was being compelled to voice these final words to the young, new mother before him, "And a sword will pierce your innermost being, too."* Mary put her hand to her mouth and her knees buckled. Anna's arm steadied Mary as the concerned father held tightly to the baby.

After a moment of composure, Anna asked Mary's permission to hold the infant. Mary nodded. As Joseph handed the baby to Anna, he proudly said, "His name is Jesus." Anna brought the infant close and drank in the sweet aroma of fresh baby skin. She caressed his head of soft black baby hair and gazed into his eyes squinting in the sunlight. She uncovered his hands and feet and let his new little fingers wrap around a finger on her aged hand. That unusual feeling of anticipation came upon her again but more intensely as if a warm cloak was enveloping her. She knew Yahweh was confirming in her heart the message she should proclaim. Her voice lifted to the heavens and she praised Yahweh for the answered prayer she was holding in her arms. She knew full well that this tiny infant would grow into the One who would redeem Israel. After a few moments of sheer delight in the presence of this infant and his parents, she gently laid a whimpering Jesus in his mother's arms. Joseph picked up the cage with the turtledoves and they said their goodbyes. A few steps away, Mary paused and turned to see these two aged people once more as if to seal this memory in her mind. She smiled and held Jesus so they could see his face peeking out from the swaddling clothes once more and then walked quickly and carefully to catch up to Joseph.

Anna stood there with Simeon quietly, trying to memorize every detail of the moment. After a few exchanges of awed wonder at the blessing they had just experienced, it was time for Simeon to join the men gathering in the Temple's inner court to worship. Anna stayed behind because women were not allowed past the Court of Women.

As a prophet, Anna knew the task ahead of her: to proclaim to all who would listen that the long-awaited redemption of Israel was at hand—the Messiah had been born! She made her way to a group of women gathering for a time of prayer and told them what she had just experienced. The reactions were mixed. The hardness of some hearts would not allow Anna's words of truth to penetrate. For others, Anna's joy told them all they needed to know. Finally, their God was about to fulfill the Promise of the ages.

*Quoted from phrases in Luke 2 (CEB)

The Bible Speaks

Anna's story is found in Luke 2

Jerusalem was a bustling crossroads in Palestine during Jesus' lifetime. While the Jews may have been the majority population, the pagan Romans had certainly made their presence known as the occupying rulers. The Greek language and culture had been influencing the city and its residents for centuries. Jerusalem was a big city compared to the small village of Nazareth where Mary and Joseph lived. They must have stayed in or around Bethlehem for at least 40 days after the birth of Jesus since they were there in Jerusalem for Mary's time of purification, or ritual

cleansing. To be considered purified, a Jewish woman would enter a *mikveh* bath and immerse herself completely after her monthly period and after childbirth. Since Bethlehem was just a few miles from Jerusalem as compared to the 90-mile journey from Nazareth, it made much more sense, especially for a poor couple, to stay in Bethlehem than to journey home and back again.

On the day that Mary and Joseph brought their son to the Temple, Jerusalem may have still been pretty crowded with people who had traveled there to register for the census. The many confused travelers trying to figure out which alleyway would get them to their destination had no idea who the tiny baby was who just passed them. Can you imagine the anxiousness of a teenage mother and a new father trying to navigate their way through the streets that day? Mary and Joseph are about to be surprised by two people *expecting* their arrival.

The Prophet Anna's Encounter with the Infant Jesus

Luke 2:21-38

21 When eight days had passed, Jesus' parents circumcised him and gave him the name Jesus. This was the name given to him by the angel before he was conceived. **22** When the time came for their ritual cleansing, in accordance with the Law from Moses, they brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord. (**23** It's written in the Law of the Lord, "Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord.") **24** They offered a sacrifice in keeping with what's stated in the Law of the Lord, *A pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.*

25 A man named Simeon was in Jerusalem. He was righteous and devout. He eagerly anticipated the restoration of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. **26** The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn't die before he had seen the Lord's Christ. **27** Led by the Spirit, he went into the temple area. Meanwhile, Jesus' parents brought the child to the temple so that they could do what was customary under the Law. **28** Simeon took Jesus in his arms and praised God. He said, **29** "Now, master, let your servant go in peace according to your word, **30** because my eyes have seen your salvation. **31** You prepared this salvation in the presence of all peoples. **32** It's a light for revelation to the Gentiles and a glory for your people Israel."

33 His father and mother were amazed by what was said about him. **34** Simeon blessed them and said to Mary his mother, "This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition **35** so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your innermost being too."

36 There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, who belonged to the tribe of Asher. She was very old. After she married, she lived with her husband for seven years. **37** She was now an 84-year-old widow. She never left the temple area but worshipped God with fasting and prayer night and day. **38** She approached at that very moment and began to praise God and to speak about Jesus to everyone who was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem. (CEB)

The Bible tells us Anna was a prophet and a widow. I would think that since the gospel writer was sure to include her title of prophet, she must have had a positive and respected reputation. And the fact that she was an elderly widow faithful to Temple worship indicates her devotion to her God and to her faith. At that time, widows were often left destitute if they had no sons to care for them. The Bible gives us no indication of Anna's economic condition, so I am assuming that she was well cared for and had the freedom to spend her days at the Temple for prophesying and worshipping—instead of needing to spend her time begging.

Since the gospel writer did not acquire the details of this story firsthand, we can be sure that Anna's part in this birth account of our Savior was memorable and significant enough to be recorded for all eternity. According to the biblical record, Anna was the first named prophet (male or female) in Scripture who actually *saw* the Christ child and then went about telling others about him. **God chose a woman's voice to be the first eye-witness proclamation by a prophet of the Messiah's birth.**

We don't know much about Anna, but the details that are provided reveal an interesting background of her people. The gospel of Luke seems to try to authenticate people's names and history by giving their lineage. Anna's father, Phanuel, is named and we know nothing else about him except that he was descended from the Israelite tribe of Asher. Asher's name meant "happy" and he was born to Jacob through his wife Leah's maid, Zilpah. Anna's name is actually the Greek version of the Hebrew name Hannah. Isn't it interesting that the first person to use the term "messiah" prophetically in the Hebrew Scriptures was a woman with the same name, but different version of the name, as the first prophet to see the Christ child and proclaim his birth in the New Testament?

When you look at a map of ancient Israel and the locations of the allotments of land given to the different tribes, Asher's land is located farther north than any other tribe. They were next to the mighty Phoenicians who dominated

the coast. According to the biblical record, Asher was blessed by his father Jacob to produce rich crops and to provide delicacies for kings (see Gen. 49:20), yet his tribe never produced a king or even a mighty warrior. The tribe of Asher is even chastised in Deborah's song in Judges 5 because they did not come to the aid of their brothers when they battled against the Canaanites. So, I wonder why this gospel writer wanted to be sure we knew Anna was from the tribe of Asher. My suggestion is that the writer wanted to make it clear that a person's background has no bearing on the purpose or message God has for any individual with whom God chooses to have a relationship.

Anna was married for seven years and then lived as a widow for a very long time, indicating that she had never remarried. So, we know she was single. We are not informed about any children, yet the Scripture does not indicate that she was destitute. The Bible also lets us know that she was at least in her 80s when she saw the Christ child.

The picture Luke's gospel paints for us of Anna's encounter with Mary and Joseph and their infant son Jesus allows us to enter into that sacred instant of recognition when Anna witnessed the fulfillment of the promise of God. This singular moment in time reminds us that even brief encounters with the holy are worth the wait.

The Message in Anna's Voice

Even though we have only a few verses telling us about Anna and how she responded to the Christ child, those few verses actually speak volumes about her influence and leadership. **According to the biblical record, Anna was the first prophet to proclaim to others that their long-awaited redemption had arrived.** We do not know how the people received her message. We do not know if they thought she meant this child would grow up to rescue them from Rome in a military fashion. We don't even have the exact words she spoke. All we know is that she responded to her encounter with Jesus with praise and then fulfilled her prophetic purpose by telling others about God's activity in their time. Let Anna's voice remind you that whenever we respond to God with praise, there will be a message we can share with others.

Biblical Truths Taught through the Story of Anna

1. God chooses women to announce God's activity in the world.
2. God chooses women prophets to proclaim God's message of redemption.
3. God affirms and blesses a single woman's commitment to faithful, religious service.
4. God chooses women of all ages to be the communicators of God's hope.
5. God sometimes chooses a woman's voice as the best voice to announce that God is with us!
6. God blesses faithful women worshipers with firsthand knowledge and experience of God's activity in the world.

Why the Voice of Anna Matters . . .

To elderly women: because Anna's story proves age does not determine your usefulness to the kingdom or the need for your message.

To faithful church workers: because Anna's story shows no matter how long you serve or wait for God to act, there *will* come a moment of God's revelation.

To widows and single women: because Anna's story illustrates the absence of a husband does not excuse you or prevent you from continued faithful service in a worshiping community.

To communicators of God's truths: because Anna's story shows there is no more powerful testimony than firsthand knowledge and experience of God's activity in the world.

To those who announce/celebrate a baby's birth: because Anna's story reminds you each newborn child is a proclamation to the world of God's hope, peace, and purpose.

To those eager to hear a message of peace and hope: because Anna’s story reminds you the elderly people around you may be the best source for such a message.

Questions Raised by the Story of Anna

Why has the church remembered Simeon’s song of benediction but has not created a more memorable picture of Anna’s experience with the Christ child?

Why don’t we have the words Anna used to praise God or to announce Jesus’ birth?

Who do some churches deny women the opportunity to speak or proclaim God’s truth in public?

Who are the elderly women who faithfully serve in your church? What message might they be ready to share? What truths have they witnessed that could inform your church about God’s faithfulness?

How is your ability to communicate God’s truths affected by your level of church involvement, faithful worship participation, fasting, and praying?

How do you determine who your waiting audience is and what they need to hear?

Anna’s Keys to Resilient Confidence

I believe Anna would tell us that her keys to resilient confidence were faithful participation in a worshipping community and purposeful communication of truths experienced in the presence of God. Anna’s story reminds us that a word of good news wraps peace around a longing heart.

During Advent, we celebrate the arrival of the Prince of Peace—the long-awaited Messiah—and we are reminded how Jesus was born into a world that was anything but peaceful. Yet, even then, there were faithful people still waiting expectantly for God to change things.

When God was ready for the people who were hoping for the liberation of Jerusalem to hear of the birth of their long-awaited Messiah, **God chose a woman’s voice to be the first to proclaim that message.** The careful writing of Luke’s gospel indicates that **Anna was the first prophet to see the Christ child and then tell an eager audience that their expectant peace had arrived.**

God continues to choose women’s voices to communicate important messages. Whether you are announcing the next meeting, leading a Bible study or training session, preaching or teaching, asking for volunteers, making a formal presentation, giving a report to your boss, or telling a story to your grandchildren, you need to have a purpose for communicating your message.

The prophet Anna is described by Luke as one who “never left the temple area, worshiping night and day with her fasting and prayers. At the very time Simeon was praying, she showed up, broke into an anthem of praise to God, and talked about the child to all who were waiting expectantly for the freeing of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:37b-38 MSG). In two sentences, the **prophet Anna’s actions confirm some applicable practices.**

Four practices of a purposeful communicator:

1. Participate faithfully in a worshipping community.

Anna’s constant presence at the Temple allowed her the privilege of seeing God at work firsthand. Her response to the sight of baby Jesus was to praise God. Establishing an unwavering habit of committed church involvement will provide a faith foundation like no other. Anna’s habits of worship, fasting, and prayer are still the habits that will give you the awareness and discernment of God’s activity around and through you. *Your spiritual authenticity as a communicator of God’s truths depends on your committed involvement.*

2. Know your audience.

Anna spread her message to those who shared her expectant attitude. A purposeful communicator studies her audience *before* she speaks or writes to them to understand whether she needs to be persuasive and practical or encouraging and empathic. *Your compassion as a communicator depends on your knowing your audience.*

3. Use trustworthy sources.

Anna had firsthand experience with the content of her message, was sensitive to God's Spirit, and had probably witnessed Simeon's prophecy as well. A purposeful communicator is diligent in using reliable sources. Just because something is in print doesn't make it true or accurate. Research any information you use back to its original source whenever possible. *Your integrity as a communicator depends on your using trustworthy sources.*

4. Communicate a message your audience is both longing and needing to hear.

Anna communicated a message of peace to people who were living in a land occupied by their enemies and whose faith practices were tolerated, at best, by the ruling government. Freedom, deliverance, redemption, and liberation were their deepest desires. A purposeful communicator finds a way to make her message resonate within the spirits of her listeners or readers. *Your ability to have people who want to listen to you depends on your telling them something they want and need to hear.*

Effective communicators know that *how* you communicate a message is often as important—if not more so—than the content of the message. Being faithful in participating fully in worship, in taking the time to know your audience, in researching your sources, and in being committed to sharing a relevant message will help you communicate with purpose and be important keys to developing your resilient confidence.

“She approached at that very moment and began to praise God and to speak about Jesus to everyone who was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.”

—Luke 2:38 (CEB)