

**A Sermon from the Episcopal Parish of
St. John the Evangelist in Hingham, Massachusetts**

Preached by the Rev. Jacqueline Clark on February 2, 2020 (Feast of the Presentation)

As a young child, I learned to pray from my parents. My brother and I would kneel beside our matching twin beds just before bedtime, our hands held like this (never like this, although I couldn't tell you why!) and we would say, "God bless Mommy and Daddy and Jackie and John, and all our aunties and uncles and cousins and friends. God bless everyone." It was a beautiful start to prayer, asking for God's blessing on ourselves, on the people we knew and loved, and then on everyone else, too. But I never really learned much about how to pray beyond that. And then, in third grade, I distinctly remember Sister Gertrude telling us a story about a young girl, a model of goodness and faithfulness. On the first Saturday of the month, Sr. Gertrude said, this girl and her mother would spend the whole day in prayer. Or actually, maybe it was a whole hour. Both were equally unthinkable to me. What would you even do for all that time?

This year, I realized that, while my prayer life had grown from those early bedtime prayers, it was in need of some work. I signed up for a prayer program through Boston College. On the night of the orientation, I walked nervously into the chapel where we meet, not sure what to expect. Each of us was asked to light a candle and to place it in a bowl of sand, representing our hopes for the program, and then to speak our hope aloud to the group. I sat in the chapel deeply moved as I listened to person after person naming their longing for God.

I am drawn to Anna, because it seems to me that she was a person who longed for God. Since her life seems so completely different from mine, from ours, it's worth sitting with it for a minute. Anna was married, probably sometime in her late teens. Only seven years after her marriage, her husband died. At some point, Anna begins to spend her days and nights in the temple. I wonder what drew her there. Maybe it was a deep innate connection to God, the same connection I see in some of our children. Maybe it was her joy at her marriage, or her desperation in the midst of her husband's illness, or her grief after his death. Or maybe it was simply her soul's longing for God, her awareness of the God-shaped vacuum at the center of her being. I wonder how she prayed, sitting in companionable silence with God, or meditating on the Scriptures, or singing the psalms that gave voice to her the things in her heart. I wonder what it was like, on the days when she could feel God's presence and on the days when God seemed hopelessly remote and on the days where the minutes felt like hours.

Most of all, I wonder what she prayed for. On that particular question, Luke offers us a clue. He tells us that like Miriam and Deborah and Huldah before her, Anna is a prophet. The job of a prophet is to bring God's word to the people. But that's only half of it. They also bring the people's word to God, lifting up their longings and prayers, interceding and advocating on their behalf. I imagine that these are the things Anna prays for: For her neighbors who are grieving as she has grieved. For the poor, living in the shadow of the rich. For the pain and fear and humiliation of occupation by the Romans. And above all, in this moment some 400 years since the Holy Spirit last spoke through the prophet Malachi, for a word from God, for fulfillment of the God's promise, a messenger, a Messiah.

This, I think, is what keeps drawing Anna to the temple. Her longing for God, and her longing for her people. Others would come and go, the crowds around her multiplying and swelling at the pilgrimage festivals, and then dwindling again to the priests, the locals, and those who had some business with God, a sacrifice or a celebration or a sorrow. But Anna was there day after day, season after season. Her praying and fasting, they are exactly what God's people do in so many of the times when they are in need-- of forgiveness or deliverance or the answer to a prayer. I wonder how her prayers might have impacted God, how they might have affected God's heart.

They affected Anna. Her longings and her prayer sharpen her perspective. They prepare her to recognize God and what God is up to. On this ordinary day in the temple, she sees what, of all the people who pass through the temple that day, only she and Simeon can see. Her longing for God is answered not just through her prayer, or in the presence behind the curtain in the inner sanctuary of the temple. Her longing for God is answered in the infant son brought to be presented by his young parents. And her longing for her people is answered in this same infant, who has come to bring redemption, salvation, healing, for Israel and for all the nations.

Anna's life seems so completely different than ours. Her vocation to prayer is beyond what most of us could even begin to imagine for ourselves. But every one of us is created with that same God-shaped vacuum at the center of our being. We were created to long for, and to be filled by God. It seems easier, sometimes, to try to fill that vacuum with other things, things that seem like surer ways to find worth and meaning and security. But that vacuum can only be filled by God. It can only be filled by finding ways to connect with God that work uniquely for us individually. Finding that connection takes time and work and trial and error. I would LOVE to help you find what might work for you.

And I know that, on any given day in this church, just like any given day in that temple, we arrive in many different places. Some of us come hungry and expectant. Some of us find ourselves going through the motions. Some of us are suffering under the fog of grief or depression, the weight of anxiety, and do not have it in us to long for anything. Some of us are captive to pain in ways that leave no room for anything else. And some of us have showed up for someone we love, but are pretty sure that there's nothing here for us. At times, I have been in each of those places. I'd bet that Anna was, too.

But that is why we come together as church. Because in those times, when the best we can do is to get our bodies here, if that, we depend on those who are not struggling to intercede for us, to lift our longings to God. We depend on them to point out the presence of God in our midst, the ways that God is working for our salvation and redemption, for our healing, even when it is still far, far off. We depend on them to inspire us by their faithful prayer, by their relationship to God, and to offer us an example of what is possible. And we know that the time will come when they will depend on us.

Please know that I pray for you. I would love to know how I can pray for you, the things that you need prayer for. And I hope that you will pray for me, and for each other, and for the world. We are not all called to be Anna, but every one of us is called to long for God, and to long for God's people.