

Living with Purpose

Luke 2:36-38

January 8, 2023 Darrel & Maureen Schmidt

Happy New Year! This morning, the sermon will look different. We'd like to invite you into our living room for a little chat. Maureen and I have been reflecting about the past year. What a year it's been! We thought two years with Covid and things would get better, but year 3 was filled with its own challenges. Maybe you can relate?

M - So, do you remember when we talked about writing our Christmas letter this year?

D - Oh, I remember. It seemed the negatives far outweighed the positives. Summer vacation plans went out the window in exchange for two surgeries.

M - Yes and I wasn't able to teach this fall. Then your mom passed away and we sure miss her.

D - Then in the midst of planning for a joyous Christmas season, I injured myself and the weather forced us to cancel 2 of our services.

M - Even our family get-togethers were affected. So many heavy things this past year, the Christmas letter didn't get written!

D - But before we get too sidetracked, let's come back to what would have been our fourth Sunday of Advent and see what we can learn from Anna, who had her own share of difficulties. We will focus on her but with an eye to what we can learn regarding how to **live a life with purpose**. Please turn to Luke 2:36-38 and let's read it together.

"There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem."

1. Who was Anna?

We don't know much about this woman, only these 3 verses in all of Scripture describe her. But what we have is very revealing, and also very challenging for us as disciples of Jesus. So what do we know about Anna?

A prophetess. It's interesting that Luke mentions this first because there were only a few female prophets listed in the OT. We don't know how she came to hold this title but

as a prophetess, she would have been one who heard the Lord's word and then spoke it out to other worshippers in the temple.

The text says that Anna is **Of the tribe of Asher**. That would likely be one of the things I'd skip over in my reading of scripture, but why is this important? Luke is making a deliberate attempt to set her up as a recognized ancestor of Jacob. He is giving her credibility. She would have been considered one of the faithful remnant of Israel that God promised would see the arrival of the Messiah. There is also a good chance Luke would have known her, or at least known about her.

Very old. She is at least 84 years of age (possible that this can be translated as being 84 years as a widow, which would make her around 104 years old). The point is, she was a very old woman!

A widow. She has been a widow since she was about 20 or 21 years old, never remarrying. That these facts about her appear in Luke's account indicate that she was a well-respected person in the temple, known to generations of families who came at Passover and other events.

She lives in the temple. Finally, Luke tells us she lives in the temple. It seems that after her husband died, rather than remarry as would have been the custom for a young widow, she chose to live in the temple. We don't know what other options she had, but it is very telling of her spiritual character that she chose to serve God. Some scholars feel she was given a small room just off the main temple area which were her living quarters. She may have been given food by the priests or generous worshippers. In other words, she was totally dependent on God's provision for her.

2. What does Anna do and what can we learn from her?

So that's a little about who Anna was. Let's talk about what she did and what we can learn from her.

She Suffered. One of the first things that comes to mind, which we can infer from the story, is that she suffered. She became a widow at a young age! How would she process her loss and grief? Not all of us have lost a spouse, but we've all lost things that were significant like health, friends, a family member, job, not to mention what happened over Christmas! Just like Anna had a choice in her grief, and chose to run to God, we too, have choices to make when life throws us into turmoil.

Maureen, you can relate to this talk of loss and grief, can't you?

Maureen - Yes, these past 6 months of my cancer journey have been excruciatingly difficult in many ways. I had never experienced emotions like I did. I had never felt the darkness of sadness that was wrapped around me for a time and I'm still struggling to hold onto hope now into this new year. Grief is a funny thing. We don't talk about it a lot. It comes in waves and sometimes hits when you least expect it. Grief evokes intense feelings that sometimes we have to walk through. It would be easy to walk away from God, to doubt His love and compassion for me. If I allow myself to wallow in my self-focus and hold only onto these big emotions, I may be ruined. Each day can be a struggle but I am choosing a different path and as we dug into the life of Anna, she too, knew a better way, a way of staying anchored to the Almighty, all-powerful God.

So what did that anchoring look like and what will it look like in 2023?

The Word of God is really important for anchoring. One of the verses I am purposely holding onto is Psalm 62:5-6 - *"Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from Him. Truly He is my rock and my salvation."* In the daily battle, I also choose to worship and pray. Sometimes my prayers are as simple and desperate as, "Help me Jesus!". I also choose to do activities such as being with friends and family, listening to music, getting outdoors to see creation and all of those things together help to keep me anchored. But honestly, I don't really know what all this is going to look like in 2023.

Neighbour Nudge: Have you ever lost something or someone significant? How did you respond? Where did you turn? Maybe you have a verse, habit or a practice that anchors you in times of trouble. Turn to someone near you and share what it is. If you can't think of anything, just listen to someone near you.

She Worshiped. What is very clear from our text is that Anna had a heart of worship. We see this in the way Luke writes, *"She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying."*

How does someone worship night and day? It is possible that over the years, as Anna has learned to anchor herself in God, she also came to know Him deeper. As a prophetess, she would have had on her heart what was on God's heart. She was deeply in touch with God and sensitive to what He asked her to do.

How does she demonstrate her heart of worship? I'm sure she would have poured out her sorrow in times of lament, but our text also says she fasted and prayed. Her desire was to seek the face of God and through fasting, she was able to focus on listening and responding to God. She would probably have spent hours in prayer.

Today we would call her a prayer warrior, wouldn't we?

What adjustments do you need to make in order for worship to become more meaningful in this new year?

What does worship look like for you and me? Does it involve our whole being like Paul describes in Romans 12?

“And so, dear brothers and sisters, I plead with you to give your bodies to God because of all he has done for you. Let them be a living and holy sacrifice—the kind he will find acceptable. This is truly the way to worship him” (Romans 12:1).

Take a moment right now to silently present yourself before God and whisper your prayer of worship.

She was thankful. Did you catch what Luke says? *“She gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.”* Flowing out of a heart of worship is a heart of thanks. The one naturally leads to the other. After years of waiting her prayer had been fulfilled right before her eyes and this caused her to break into praise! Think about it. Would Anna have been ready to receive the Saviour if she hadn't walked through challenges earlier where she had to choose to anchor herself in the Lord?

What a beautiful picture of how God uses tragedy and loss to lead to praise and thanksgiving! Thankfulness is a great way to live with purpose. We see this over and over in Scripture. One example is Phil. 4:6-7, *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”*

We often focus on the prayer and petition and forget the thanksgiving! Maureen, this is an area that was a struggle for you at times during your dark days. Can you share about that with us?

M - One example comes to mind that occurred after my second surgery. I began bleeding right through my bandages and down my clothing. I panicked and got Darrel, who just “happened” to be home from work that day. We were able to contact one of my nurses who was able to see me to take care of the issue and rebandage me. I was NOT feeling very thankful at all and could only see the tough stuff of the day. It took Darrel to remind me that we could be thankful that he was home to help and to drive, and to be thankful that the nurse was available to look after me (a half hour later, this would not have been the case!) The timing was just perfect, even though it was hard for me to see it. Sometimes we need people around us to help us SEE in the dark. We also need to make it a habit to seek out thanksgiving daily, so that we are more easily able to hold onto it, even during the tough stuff.

Neighbour Nudge - As you go into this new year, what are you thankful for? What can you praise God for? Turn to a different person and share briefly.

She served. For decades Anna faithfully served the people who came to the temple to worship. Day after day, week after week, month after month and year after year she served. We don't know all that her duties would have involved, but I imagine people sought her out for her wisdom and to ask for prayer. Because she was a prophetess, this would have included people hoping for a special word or revelation from God. This is another way Anna lived with purpose.

Last month I suggested that "God uses ordinary people to reach ordinary people." Today I would like to expand that to say, "**God uses ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things.**" Let me explain. Anna was one of those ordinary people and you are too!

Anna wasn't looking for the limelight or trying to make a name for herself. She simply looked for ways to serve and did so quietly and faithfully. As I look at our church, I would have to say I see a lot of "Anna's." Faithful men and women who have served tirelessly and selflessly, some for decades, like Anna. THANK YOU! We wouldn't be who we are without you. We also know many of you serve or volunteer at organizations outside of our church. It is always fun to hear stories of servants involved in various ministries.

Think for a minute, are you involved in our community in any way? Anything from cooking meals or cookies to share, soup kitchens, gleaners, helping babysit for a neighbour, volunteering in a program, using your hand crafts to raise money, etc. Raise your hand if you serve in our community in some way! Whether in or out of the church, no matter how great or small, God can use these offerings in His Kingdom.

Both Peter and Paul have things to say about this! *"Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace in its various forms" (1 Peter 4:10).*

"And whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him" (Col. 3:17).

If we could dream together, what might God be calling us as a church to get involved with? What new ministries or outreach might be possible? How will we live with purpose this year?

Remember, "**God uses ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things.**" Are you one of those ordinary people God wants to use?

3. Hindrances...

This has been interesting and helpful to look at Anna, but let's be realistic...none of us are going to live 24/7 in the church! Anna lived in a different culture and time period. We face different hindrances that may keep us from living life on purpose.

Busyness

The biggest hindrance for me is busyness! Always needing to be doing something, rushing here and there, frustrated when people are passing me on the freeway, finding it difficult to relax and just **be**. A few weeks ago I said to Maureen, "I think God is telling me I need to slow down, maybe learn how to better listen to his voice." What I was really saying was I needed to learn more of what it means to BE rather than DO. Become more like Anna!

That was Monday night. Well, be careful what you wish for. Tuesday afternoon, on the spur of the moment, I decided to try my hand at Pickleball. About 5 minutes later I was on the floor with a torn Achilles Tendon! Wow! I guess God took my comments seriously because now I don't have much choice. I need to slow down for a few weeks.

Are you saying that if we're too busy that God will strike us with an ailment?

Well not exactly, but I am suggesting that maybe, if you are struggling to find a role in our church, or a way to meaningfully contribute in the community, it's because you are too busy! Or maybe you are too busy to pray, listen for God's voice or anchor yourself in Scripture. That's also a problem.

Priorities

Maybe busyness is not your issue. What about how you order your priorities? We all have time to do what we want to do.

Let me read something from the book The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry. Author John Mark Comer suggests that "Attention is the beginning of devotion." "What you give your attention to is the person you become" (p.53, 54). We see this with Anna. She gave her attention to the Lord in the temple and God spoke to her and used her to serve His people. She had her priorities right. We need to be asking ourselves - How much time are we on the computer, or watching TV, or on social media, or whatever it is that distracts you from BEING and DOING as Anna is showing us. Can I ask you to do some evaluating at the beginning of this new year? What might the example of Anna say to you regarding priorities? What you choose to focus on will directly impact your ability to live with purpose.

Fear. And if it's not busyness or setting your priorities, what about fear? Fear of commitment. Fear of not being good enough. Fear of failure. Fear can be debilitating

and is a favorite tactic of the enemy. If this describes you, please memorize and hold on to 2 Timothy 1:7, *“For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline”* (NLT). Surrender your fear to God and ask Him to transform it into courage so you can rest in His grace and love, and then step forward into service in a way that matches your interests and giftings.

4. Know Your Limitations.

But it's not just these three hindrances that can hold us back. What about recognizing our own limitations? I think Anna must have wondered if there were other things she should or could be doing but she was limited by her age or financial status, or cultural restrictions. Here's the thing... We all have limitations and we shouldn't feel guilty about that. Our bodies, our minds, our giftings, our education, our seasons of life. These are limitations and we need to simply accept them. To quote from the book again, *“Limitations aren't all bad. They are where we find God's will for our lives.”* (p.69). This statement feels very freeing to me. Learn to live within your limitations and let God use you—just as you are!

This is what Paul says in Romans 12:6-8. *“In his grace, God has given us different gifts for doing certain things well. So if God has given you the ability to prophesy, speak out with as much faith as God has given you. If your gift is serving others, serve them well. If you are a teacher, teach well. If your gift is to encourage others, be encouraging. If it is giving, give generously. If God has given you leadership ability, take the responsibility seriously. And if you have a gift for showing kindness to others, do it gladly.”*

So, just as Anna played a special role in the temple, each of us plays a special role in the narrative of this church and community. As the worship team comes forward, let us leave you with three questions to ponder.

1. How do you hold onto hope in this new year?
2. Where are you finding ways to worship, to give thanks, to use your gifts to serve?
3. What is distracting you from living life with purpose?

I was reading in my devotions this week...Romans 13:14. *“Clothe yourself with the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.”* I can't think of a better way to live life with purpose! May God bless you and us as a church as we enter 2023 together.