

*Note: The Rev. Caleb Kim will deliver the sermon below on Sunday, December 29, 2024, at 10:00 am at St. Andrew's, Fenelon Falls and via Zoom.*

### **Title: Anna's Unexpected Blessing**

During this past Advent season, we studied the Christmas stories from the Gospel of Matthew. As we concluded our Advent theme, we celebrated the good news of great joy for all people through the birth of Christ. At that sacred moment, the heavenly choir raised their voices in joy, proclaiming about Baby Jesus: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests" (Luke 2:14).

Some time after this divine announcement, Mary and Joseph presented their son, Jesus, to the Lord at the temple. Simeon, known as a "righteous and devout" man of Jerusalem, rejoiced in his encounter with the infant and praised God for His greatest gift, Immanuel, Jesus. As Simeon held little Jesus and presided over the ceremony for His family, the prophet Anna joined in the blessing of Christ. With heartfelt gratitude, she too praised the Lord for "the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38) through this child. She believed Baby Jesus would bring salvation to all people.

Today, as we reflect on Anna's faith and devotion, I encourage us to commit ourselves to Christ and receive God's abundant blessings in the coming year, just as Anna did (Luke 2:29-31).

Let us begin by considering Anna's background. Her name means "grace." Anna was a prophetess – a female prophet. In the Old Testament era, prophets were appointed to speak God's words and reveal His plans to the people of Israel. However, since the time of Malachi, the last prophet of the Old Testament, there had been no revelation from the Lord. For 400 years, the people lived in spiritual silence and chaos.

Anna was the daughter of Penuel and belonged to the tribe of Asher. In those days, this tribe was considered insignificant. Unlike the city of Jerusalem, Penuel's hometown was obscure and largely unnoticed. Yet God, in His sovereignty, often chooses the humble and overlooked to accomplish His divine purposes.

Anna was also advanced in age. According to the Gospel of Luke, she had been married for seven years before becoming a widow. She remained widowed until she was eighty-four years old (Luke 2:37). In Jesus' time, widows were among the most vulnerable members of society, often lacking support and facing social disadvantages. To many, Anna might have seemed like someone who didn't have much left to contribute. But at the appointed time, God chose her to testify about Baby Jesus.

From Anna's life, we learn a powerful truth: God can call and use anyone for His Kingdom work, regardless of age, gender, or personal circumstances. Whether we feel significant or unnoticed, strong or weak, God has a purpose for each of us. He can reveal His plans and messages to anyone willing to listen and obey.

Now, let us reflect on some of Anna's characteristics. The Bible does not give us many details about her. The only verse in today's main scripture highlights her unwavering loyalty to God and His temple: "She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying" (Luke 2:37).

In the Old Testament, the temple, or tabernacle, was known as God's dwelling place. King David made the blueprint for the temple, and his son, King Solomon built it based on that outline. Priests and other religious leaders maintained this house of God. The people of Israel came to the temple to have fellowship with God through these chosen leaders. Over time, however, the earthly temples of God were destroyed on multiple occasions and, sadly, became corrupted.

By the time of the New Testament, Jesus Christ Himself was referred to as God's temple. When Jesus saw "people selling cattle, sheep and doves and others sitting at tables and exchanging money," He was deeply upset and drove them out of the temple courts (John 2:13-22). He rebuked them, saying, "Stop turning my Father's house into a market" (John 2:16). He then made a profound statement: "Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days" (John 2:19). Later, Jesus explained that this "temple" referred to His own body. Through His death and resurrection, He demonstrated this truth.

Jesus also built a spiritual temple. He said to the Apostle Peter, "I will build my church" (Matthew 16:18). This "church" refers to the gathering of believers—those who confess that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). Since then, the places where believers meet to worship God have been called churches, sacred spaces where His people come together in His name.

Think about this: How blessed we are to freely gather in this dwelling place of God and joyfully worship Him with all our hearts. The Psalmist beautifully captures this by expressing his happiness about God's temple: "How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord Almighty! My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord... Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked" (Psalm 84:1-2,11).

Whether we are here in this sanctuary or joining via Zoom, we are grateful to be in the house of the Lord, present with our Creator God. We delight in listening to His Word, placing our burdens in His hands, and seeking His guidance and strength. We rejoice in the opportunity to sing to the Lord with all our minds and strength in this divine assembly. With God's dwelling place in mind, let us consider Anna's devotion to God. The Bible says, "She never left the temple" (Luke 2:37). While the scripture may not mean that Anna literally lived within the temple walls, it emphasizes her spiritual dedication. Anna's life was centered around worship with fasting and prayer. She prioritized her relationship with God while dedicating herself daily to His service.

When we worship God, we declare Him as the top priority in our lives and express our desire to love Him with all our hearts. When we truly love someone, we want to spend

as much time as possible with them and do things to bring them joy. Likewise, Anna demonstrated her longing for deeper fellowship with God through fasting and praying. Her love for God was evident in her ongoing spiritual practices. Fasting allowed Anna to focus on God, setting aside physical needs to seek His presence. Prayer connected her to God's power, helping her present her needs and grow in faith.

Much like Anna did in her service at the temple, God calls us to follow her powerful example and prioritize worship in our faith journey. God also wants us to honor Him through praise and prayer and seek to deepen our relationship with our Creator through daily devotion.

At this point, some of us might wonder: Why did Anna devote herself so fully to God's dwelling place? Was it out of religious duty? Did she feel obligated to perform these tasks for God? I believe Anna acted out of pure joy. When I was younger, I hesitated to fully follow Christ as my Lord and Saviour. I thought if I did, it might take away all the fun in life. In some ways, I wasn't entirely wrong. As followers of Christ, our bodies are called the temple of the Holy Spirit, and we are also called to honour God with our daily activities. This includes caring for our God-given bodies, both physically and spiritually, and being mindful of what we read, speak, watch, and listen to. Just as we want to adorn God's physical temple in a sacred way, we are also to "offer our bodies as a holy sacrifice" (Romans 12:1).

The center of God's dwelling within us is our spiritual heart. When we truly repent of our sins through Christ and humbly invite the Holy Spirit to guide us, the Triune Lord fills us with heavenly fruits: "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Galatians 5:22-23). These godly gifts from God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are much better than any earthly pleasures we might create for ourselves.

From time to time, we may find ourselves asking about the source of true satisfaction and lasting joy in our spiritual journey. King David asked a similar question: "Where does my help come from?" (Psalm 121:1). He could have looked to his authority, fame, wealth, or talents for an answer, but he didn't. Instead, David proclaimed, "My help comes from the Lord, the Maker of heaven and earth" (Psalm 121:2). For David, authentic joy came from his intimate relationship with the Lord. Later, he exclaimed, "my cup overflows" (Psalm 23:5) after reflecting on how his Shepherd provided everything he needed. Like David, Anna's deep fellowship with God gave her spiritual strength and assisted her to remain young at heart despite her advanced age.

What are the benefits of a closer relationship with God? The prophet Isaiah gives us an incredible promise: "Those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength" (Isaiah 40:30-31). Hoping in the Lord means earnestly seeking Him every day. The word "renew" in this scripture can also be understood as the term "exchange." In other words, when we trust in God, He exchanges our weaknesses for His strength. Even though our energy runs out as we age, God's power can sustain us and help us handle any difficulties we may have.

Additionally, Isaiah provides us with another benefit of having this renewal strength using the imagery of eagles: "They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint" (Isaiah 40:31). Imagine the freedom and strength of an eagle soaring higher and faster than any other birds in the sky. Eagles, often symbolic of the Christian life, renew themselves by shedding old feathers and growing new ones each spring. This renewal makes eagles appear youthful again. In the same way, when we place God first and abide in Him, He replaces our earthly limitations with His Heavenly strength. The mighty and merciful Lord empowers us to rise higher and stronger in our spiritual realms, just like eagles.

However, as followers of Christ, whether we like it or not, we will face challenges one after another since we live in this sin-influenced society just as the prophets Isaiah and Anna did. Negative thoughts, worries, and discouragements may attack our minds, often feeling like the work of the enemy. By ourselves, our intellect and willpower are not strong enough to overcome these evil influences. But we must remember that Jesus Christ defeated Satan, our spiritual adversary, through His death and resurrection. When we feel overwhelmed or tempted to give up, we should meditate on Christ's mercy and might. When we reflect on His unchanging love and ultimate sacrifice on the cross, we gain the courage and confidence to press on in our spiritual race.

In today's advanced society, it can feel as though we are living in a modern Garden of Eden. Some economists have predicted that we could build a utopia on earth as people's earnings increase. However, even though people's incomes have increased, they still have not found true happiness. Instead, many have become lonely, empty, fearful, and unhappy. Why is this? The reason is simple: they have not met their Redeemer. They continue to struggle under the weight of sin and the fear of death.

Anna had been waiting to meet "the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38), which is the Lord. The word "redemption" here means "to buy back" and set people free from slavery. In the Bible, "redemption" often signifies freedom from the bondage to sin. In other words, if we are in bondage with something, it can control us. Whether we recognize it or not, each of us may be governed by something in our lives. From God's perspective, each of us is broken in some way.

After Adam disobeyed God and sin was introduced into the Garden of Eden, we, as his spiritual descendants, inherited this sinfulness and lost the divine characteristics that God originally intended for us. This fallen nature traps humanity in various forms of bondage. On our own, once again, we are powerless to escape and often become more entangled because sin is both attractive and destructive. Because of this spiritual brokenness, Jesus had to pay the ultimate price for sinners to be free when He died on the cross. Anna, even though she saw only the infant Jesus for a brief moment, recognized Him as the Redeemer. She became one of the first Christmas disciples. Afterward, she didn't just thanked God for the baby; she went out and testified about the Saviour, Jesus.

Friends, let us remember that Jesus, our Redeemer and Saviour, came to save us from the consequences of sin: eternal death and deceptive condemnation. But knowing this truth alone is not enough. As we worship on the first Sunday after Christmas, let us recognize anew and again the indescribable gift God has given us-His only begotten Son, Jesus. Let us repent of our spiritual bondages and ask Christ the Redeemer to restore our broken relationships with ourselves, our loved ones, those around us, and with God – so we receive His unlimited forgiveness. Like Anna, let us praise God and thank the Lord for this precious gift. That is why we are gathered here this morning.

Once again, I want to remind us of our true identity as temples of God in a world darkened by sin. I also want us to reflect on the unexpected blessing Anna experienced when she encountered Christ. In the temple, she rejoiced as she met the Baby Jesus, the Redeemer. The angel had told the shepherds about this child: "Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11). This good news brings great joy and must be shared with everyone. All people need to hear about Christ, the light of the world.

As we look back on the past year, many of us may have mixed emotions. Some of us are happy to have received good news from our loved ones. Others may be reminded of our shortcomings and weaknesses. But by reflecting on Anna, God invites us to see our lives through His perspective. Through His eyes, everything, even our failures and mistakes can be part of God's profound plan for us. When we examine our hearts through the lens of God's Word-the divine mirror- we find renewal and remain youthful in spirit through Christ.

As we prepare to make New Year's Resolutions, let us remember this: Above all else, in every choice and commitment we make for the coming year, God calls us to draw closer to Jesus Christ and embrace His guidance. He further invites us to learn the faith and dedication that Anna demonstrated. When we follow these divine instructions, Immanuel, Jesus Christ, our Redeemer, who has walked with us throughout the joys and challenges of this year, will continue to guide us in the year ahead. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can do all things for God's glory.

*\*In this sermon, I have drawn inspiration from various messages based on the texts: Psalm 84:1-12; Isaiah 40:27-31; Luke 2:36-39.*