

Stillness and Silence

Luke continues the Christmas story with a few scenes from the Temple, recounting that Mary and Joseph circumcised Jesus on the eighth day and presented him to the Lord 40 days after his birth. Luke places striking emphasis on Mary and Joseph's fulfillment of the Jewish law.

Their actions also place them in contact with two elderly figures, Simeon and Anna, who are prophets. Luke has many pairs of stories involving men and women. While the episode with Simeon is longer, I wish to reflect this morning on the brief verses about Anna. First, the scripture—Luke 2:22-38.

What do we know about Anna? For starters, we know her name—she is the only named female prophet in the New Testament.

When she encounters the baby Jesus, Anna is an elderly woman. There is a translation ambiguity with her age; the Greek could be read as stating that she is an 84-year-old widow or that she had been widowed for 84 years, meaning she was over 100.

In any case, she became a widow at a young age, having only been married for seven years, and it appears she had no children. This suggests tragedy. It also would have made her vulnerable. Many places in the Bible specifically mention widows and orphans as the categories of people who need assistance.

Tragedies occur. Things happen beyond our control. Anna responds by dedicating her life to the Lord.

She might have felt pulled to the temple in her grief, yet I still imagine that her faith developed over time as a gradual process. In a recent op-ed, professor Mary Townsend writes, “My favorite thing to do is find an empty church and sit.” She’s looking for more than peace and quiet—she desires a sacred silence. After Townsend had experienced a painful divorce, she found that “in a quiet spot off to the back [of a church], I don’t have to explain anything to anyone about my job, my family, or my plans for the future.”¹ She could breathe. She could be.

I imagine this was Anna’s story. When there are no answers for suffering, sacred spaces can provide a will and a strength to keep going. They offer something

¹ [Opinion | What I Am Looking for in Empty Churches - The New York Times](#)

beyond words. A silence, a light through the window, a chance to breathe, a place to be. As the Psalm reads, “Be still and know that I am God.”

After decades of such silent practice, Anna never left the temple but remained there day and night in fasting and prayer. Anna had become a mystical wise woman over time, no longer defined as a widow but as a living saint. People likely sought her advice and found inspiration in her example.

Anna fasted and prayed in the Temple, which had specific meanings for ancient Jews. Fasting was a way to mourn, which might have been Anna’s initial motivation after the death of her husband. Fasting was also a means of repentance. Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, is a fast to seek forgiveness for sins.

Fasting is also a means of discerning God’s will. It was and is a voluntary act of humility and devotion in hopes of glimpsing the mystery. Anna fasted and prayed for the redemption of Israel—for the promised Messiah. The specific Greek word used to express her type of prayer conveys a sense of longing and pleading to God.

What are you longing for? It is a holy question. The new year is almost upon us, and perhaps you have resolutions. Maybe you want to spend more time praying or even fasting. Maybe you want to spend more time in sacred silence, giving yourself space to breathe and be. Anna could be an example for you.

This new year is filled with troubling, tragic news here and abroad: economic and social stress, wars and rumors of wars, natural disasters, and climate catastrophe. These threats are real and serious. All of us will have to grapple with these challenging truths.

And we can grapple, hope, and pray with the light and inspiration of our faith. Jesus still comes to those who seek him and long for him. Like Anna, we can remember the promise fulfilled, even if we catch only a glimpse. And for me, such a glimpse often comes in stillness and silence.

This past year I’ve found myself claiming stillness and silence, sometimes being claimed by them. It’s not been an easy year. But when stillness and silence have found me, ease felt nearer.

I find silence and stillness on walks in my favorite places—the woods around my neighborhood and the church.

I find it at the core beneath the visible surface of meals with friends, of the privilege of accompanying people in pain, and of being accompanied in mine.

It's been present when people have shared a kind and encouraging word or when a wise elder has told me they understand what I'm struggling with.

There's also a sacred stillness and silence after a clever joke or meaningful moment of humor. I have laughed so hard that I've cried and had to pause to catch my breath. This serves as a reminder that seemingly incompatible elements, such as laughter and silence, sorrow and joy, and even death and life, often dance with each other. I have found the stillness and silence that I long for in the night sky—the vastness of space that makes me feel both small and exquisite, both fearfully and wonderfully made, and a part of creation.

I close with a blessing of stillness and silence, dear ones, in light of Anna, the wise prophet, and through the words of another elder, the poet Lois Roma-Deeley:

if and when
you dare to look up at a moonless night sky,
may a thousand flickering stars
overwhelm you.
May you see in the dazzle of white lights
the faces of everyone you've ever loved and lost.
May they guide you to a better life—
Let it be so.²

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² [Let It Be So by Lois Roma-Deeley - Poems | Academy of American Poets](#)