

Anna had been in the temple of Jerusalem so long she looked like part of the furniture. We don't know if anyone knew her, but everyone had to recognize her because she was always there—dressed in black, shawl over her head, murmuring endless prayers night and day.

Luke tells us only a little about Anna except that she was at least 84 years old. Her husband died after only seven years of marriage, and sometime after that she settled into a life of prayer. We're also told she was a prophet, which just means she would sometimes get a vision and speak about the will of God. We don't know how often Anna spoke or if anyone listened to her when she did, but we get the feeling Anna didn't much care if anyone listened. She knew God heard her prayers.

This is a woman who believes in rituals. Day after day, year after year, decade after decade, she was in the temple maintaining the ritual of prayer. Whatever visions Anna received came quietly through her rituals.

If you ask most people today if they believe in rituals, you would probably receive a blank look. Most of us think of rituals as mindless repetition of old words and practices that are meaningless today. Our insatiable passion is for something new. That is, except at Christmas when everyone turned into a ritualist again this year.

If your family is like most, you have rituals for how you decorated your home, where you put the tree, how you adorn the tree, and whether there is a star or angel at the top of it; when, how, and in what order you open the presents; what you eat, when you eat, and who sits where at the table. If you try to change any of this, you will have to contend with the children who become fundamentalists about Christmas rituals. Hopefully you also had a few religious rituals this Christmas, such as lighting the Advent wreath, coming to worship, the Lessons and Carols service, and reading Luke's story of the nativity again. You have done it all so many times, the story is beyond familiar.

You may have noticed that we didn't change the Christmas story this year. The last thing anyone wants is a little innovation on the ritual of the story we tell. Imagine if I told you our scholars have discovered that Mary had twins in Bethlehem. That would be rather disturbing. Or if I said our archeologists uncovered evidence that Jesus wasn't actually born in Bethlehem but in Las Vegas? "No thanks," you would say. "Don't mess around with Christmas."

Like Anna, year after year, decade after decade, from one generation to the next we've faithfully followed the same rituals, prayed the same prayers, and told the same Christmas story with great devotion. The question today is do we, like Anna, also receive visions through our rituals?

One day a couple from out of town, named Mary and Joseph, entered the temple of Jerusalem. They brought with them their baby who had just been circumcised, another ritual, and was publicly named Jesus. Now they came to the temple to follow still another ritual, which was to offer a sacrifice to God in gratitude for the birth of a healthy newborn baby. Nothing appeared extraordinary about this young family. They were just an ordinary couple fulfilling ordinary religious rituals with an ordinary looking baby. But while they were making their offering, the most extraordinary things happened.

First, an old man named Simeon, guided by the Holy Spirit, took their baby in his arms and said, "Now I can die in peace for my eyes have seen the salvation of the Lord.... This child will be a light of revelation for the Gentiles and glory for the people of Israel." We're told the parents were amazed by this. But it had been a pretty amazing nine months for Joseph and Mary, and it's hard to understand how anything can still surprise them.

Then, after they got their baby back from Simeon, Anna came upon them, and began to do a little preaching, claiming this child was born for our redemption. Now it's the reader of Luke's gospel who should be amazed.

Simeon went to the temple because the Holy Spirit specifically told him to go there to find the Messiah, but we're not told Anna received any special revelation. I think her ability to recognize the Savior when he appeared came from her devotion to the ordinary rituals of prayer. Anna is the only person in the Nativity narratives who receives no miraculous guidance to find Jesus. No angel comes to her with the big news. She has no dream like Joseph, and no special revelation from the Holy Spirit like Simeon received. There was no star guiding her to the right place. Anna recognized the incarnation of God because she had been talking to the Lord for 84 years. That's amazing.

This is how all our religious rituals are supposed to work. Our times of worship and prayer, our repeated practices of mission and community, our sacred music and the arts, and our liturgical holy days like Christmas are all windows, or icons, that can allow us to see holiness is in our midst. But as the Apostle Paul said to the church in Ephesus you have to engage in the rituals with the eyes of your hearts opened to see this holiness.

There is so much horrible violence in the world these days, and so many reasons to despair. And when we add to that our personal wounds and deep disappointments, we're tempted to keep the eyes of our hearts shut tight all the time out of sheer fear. But the rituals of Christmas we've just completed compel you to open yourself to the gifts of the Messiah we've been looking at over Advent—the gifts of hope, peace, joy, and love. These are the holy gifts from heaven Jesus Christ brought us and set loose on earth. There is so much holy drama breaking into our domesticated rituals, if only we could see it.

Let me describe for you how the first Christmas Eve looked from the perspective of heaven. This depiction is provided by the 12th chapter of the Book of Revelation. That text says nothing about shepherds or wise men, but it depicts a great dragon leading a ferocious struggle in heaven. A woman clothed with the sun, wearing a crown of 12 stars, cries out in pain as she gives birth. Suddenly the enormous dragon descends. His tail sweeps away a third of the stars and he couches hungrily before the woman, eager to devour her child after his birth. At the last instance the child is snatched away to safety as the woman flees into the desert. The dragon is furious and takes his anger out on the other children who remain behind.

Now, all the world saw was a humble country woman giving birth to her child in a stable. Then she and Joseph fled to Egypt when they heard her son was a threat to Herod who slaughtered the other children of Bethlehem. All we saw was just more crazed horrible violence. But I believe old Anna saw everything heaven saw on Christmas Eve—through her rituals of prayer. That's why she recognized the holy child and knew the gates of hell could not prevail against his redemption of the world.

Soon we will take down all the decorations of Christmas and we'll pack away the ritual for another year. But if you were able to get the eyes of your heart open, even for a few precious moments of the holy day, don't waste that glimpse into the sacred drama. Don't shut your heart back down as we all return to the harsh world around us. Instead, resolve in this new year to maintain the spiritual rituals that will keep you open to Christ and his gifts of hope, peace, joy and love. Amen.