

## 24/7

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

October 12, 2025 – Morning worship

Text: Luke 2:21-24; 36-38

Once again, we find ourselves looking more deeply at a text we usually connect to the Nativity story and its aftermath, if we think about this particular story at all. Whatever the reason, this particular story is one that is often overlooked during that fraught week between Christmas and New Year's and that is really too bad because it is such an important story. It takes place eight days after the baby Jesus was born. We know this because the text is quite specific about the time frame due to its connection with the strict observance of two rituals which had to take place at the temple after Jesus' birth. In Luke 2:22 we learn that Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus have to make a trip to Jerusalem for two reasons. First, Mary would have to go through the purification rite required of all mothers who had just given birth. Second, and more importantly according to the text, baby Jesus needed to be "presented to the Lord" at the Temple and a sacrifice made on his behalf by his parents. This sacrifice, according to Mosaic law, could have been either a pair of turtledoves or a pair of young pigeons. The text doesn't tell us which one they chose. I personally think it was the turtledoves but, who knows.

This is where we learn that the point of this story is not so much Jesus' presentation or even Mary's purification so much as it was what happened just after these two rituals were completed. Two unexpected yet very important encounters occurred which took the young family totally by surprise. First, they were greeted by Simeon whom the text describes as "righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit rested upon him." It seems that Simeon had felt an urgent need to

go to the Temple arriving at the precise moment when Jesus, Mary and Joseph were leaving having just completed the required rituals. This connects directly to Simeon's having discerned previously from the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Messiah. So, when Simeon encountered the baby Jesus in his mother's arms as they crossed the courtyard of the Temple, Simeon took the baby in his arms and praised God with words that would become a cherished song or spoken blessing still used today. We know it as the *Nunc Dimittis*:

*“Master, now you are dismissing your servant  
in peace, according to your word; for my eyes  
have seen your salvation, which you have prepared  
in the presence of all peoples ...”*

Needless to say, this was, I am confident, a moment for Mary and Joseph. Simeon continued on: *“this child is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed – and a sword will pierce your own heart too.”* Yikes! This odd encounter just went from amazing to scary in a couple of moments as Simeon ends his “song of praise” with the news that this newborn baby will not have an easy life. In fact, it will be dangerous, and Mary's heart will be broken by what is to befall her tiny son. Okay then! Perhaps we can see why this particular part of the nativity story does not usually make it in to our worship services during this decidedly happy time of year.

But wait, there's more. There's someone else who was waiting to meet the baby Jesus and this old woman named Anna is our focus for this week. She only appears in two verses in this story, in the whole Bible in fact, but her presence, at least to me, is incredibly significant. Why is this? Well, first of all, Anna is named in the text as a prophet. A woman and a widow and she is

named as a prophet. How did she manage that in a world where women were lucky to be given second class status? That's what those two verses explain to us. Anna had always been extraordinary in every sense of that word. She was the daughter of Phanuel, a prominent man in Jerusalem at the time and he, and therefore she, came from the tribe of Asher. So, right away we learn that Anna has a specific and respected lineage. The text continues to tell us that she was "of a great age," and had lived most of that time as a widow. She married presumably at a young age, lived with her husband for seven years and then he died. Then, the text tells us she lived as a widow from that time until the time of this encounter at which point she was 84 years of age. Okay, sad that she never remarried and presumably had no children from that too brief marriage, but what is so special, so unique about Anna? Again, the text tells us. It seems that once Anna became a widow, she never left the Temple. She. Never. Left. The. Temple. The text explains that she spent all her time there in worship, in fasting and in prayer, night and day. Seriously??? If we do the math – estimating her age at the time she married as 15 (typical at that time), she would have been spending every day, all day, nights too at the Temple for 76 years. 76 years of 24/7 life at the Temple in worship, fasting and prayer. 76 years.

In case you hadn't already figured it out, this is the reason this entire Temple presentation interlude is so incredible and so worthy of our deeper reflection as we consider our own faith and its renewal annually as we remember and celebrate Jesus' birth. This story of the Temple presentation is important for the reason which would have been important for those early followers of Jesus who, like him, were Jews because it made clear that he had definitely completed all the ritual requirements of a male Jew and

he did them on time and in the right place. There could be no doubt that Jesus, therefore, was the real deal who had a legitimate right to be teaching this new way of relating to God as a rabbi. He had the qualifications he needed. No doubt.

But that's not what I see as so vital in this story. What I see in this story is two people – one old man and one old woman – who devoted every day to living the faith they had devoted their entire lives to. It was so thoroughly integrated into their very beings that when they saw this tiny baby, they immediately recognized him as the long awaited Messiah. How? Why? We don't know. And, we're not supposed to know. They just did, and that's that. Both of them sing their joy at encountering the Messiah after long years of waiting. Both told everyone they knew, everyone they encountered, just what they had experienced. For them, the entire arc of history shifted in that moment of recognition and they had no doubts at all. That's what's amazing in this story. That's why it's so important. Anna's story especially reminds us that living our faith every day is not easy. It requires devotion, commitment, and an incredibly strong faith.

Okay then, am I suggesting that we all need to have Anna's level of commitment to faith and the church? No. Of course not. Anna's story here is intended to be exemplar for us. She presents an ideal which no one can realistically achieve. Of course, there have been incidences throughout Christian history of religious zealots who have attempted a similar level of devotion – sometimes having themselves walled into a small cell within a church or abbey. Julian of Norwich comes to mind as an example of this but, not surprisingly, this is not a fad which caught on even among religious orders.

Yet, I know that there is such a thing as 24/7 devotion to our faith. What do I mean by this? I mean that it is possible to live our

own faith in such a way that all of our days are grounded in our love of God and our desire to live as Jesus taught. Some of you, I'm guessing, are confused right about now. How do I live my faith 24/7 you're wondering? I mean, I pray. I do. I join in the prayers here at church. I listen to the incredibly long list of all the names of folks and situations we pray for every Sunday. My mind doesn't wander too much. And I try to pray during the week. I do, really. But, all the time? I don't even know what that means, never mind whether or not it's something I even want to do. How do I pray like that? How does anyone pray like that?

Well, while I commend Anna and even Julian of Norwich for the commitment to prayer unceasing within a sacred structure, that is not the ideal way to live your life in a prayerful way. And it certainly isn't practical. And Jesus was nothing if not practical. That's why he used the kinds of teaching metaphors he did – like the bread and wine of communion, like the metaphors of growing seeds and tending vineyards and caring for sheep. He wanted people to understand what he was talking about. He wanted people to understand that prayer without ceasing is possible, but not in a conventional way. Prayer without ceasing happens when you invite God into your life each day through intentional prayer and Bible study, by quiet time just soaking in the world around you in that moment. Mindfulness is key to continual prayer. Mindfulness just means you are paying attention to what is happening around you in a deeper way. Let me explain as Jesus would, by example.

If you're sitting at a stoplight in your car, what are you paying attention to? Traffic, certainly. But, what else can you see while you wait? What else can you hear? What else draws your attention away from yourself and toward something else? Now, let me be clear that I am not talking about daydreaming. That's a very

dangerous thing to do while driving, whether you are waiting at a stop light or not! No, I'm talking about turning off the radio and maybe even the part of your brain that is obsessed with the next thing on your to do list. Instead, take just a few seconds to notice something else around you. The bumper stickers on the car in front of you, for example. They tell you a lot about the person behind that wheel. Pray for that person, whatever those bumper stickers reveal. Notice the dogs with their heads out the window. Their joy is usually so boundless and so contagious, if only we take a second to soak it in. That moment, dear ones, is prayer. Notice the other cars in traffic around you. Some are sleek and new. Others look like they might end up on the side of the road before making it back home. Both types tell you a story about the occupants of those vehicles. And both invite you into prayer about those people. A prayer that the person driving the expensive, sleek new model use some of their obvious resources to help someone else in need. A prayer for the person driving the clunker that life doesn't beat them back too hard, that just one good thing happens to them this day.

This, dear ones, is what it means to live prayerfully every day. Paying attention to the other people, the other situations in your life. Holding them in prayer in whatever way feels appropriate in the moment. That is living prayerfully. Praying familiar prayers from worship – like the Lord's Prayer and the Doxology – outside of worship just because you can. That's living prayerfully, living mindful of God's place in your life. So is living as though Jesus is walking right beside you or riding in the car right next to you – that's living prayerfully. And I promise that if you can learn to master this kind of prayer, the kind that immerses you in living life with God at the center, you will

experience for yourself the calm joy that Anna lived every day. The world becomes your sanctuary, just as the Temple did for her.

You're probably thinking – “wow, that sounds like a great idea but I don't think I can do that!” To that I answer, of course you can. You just have to want to and you have to be willing to practice this as a new discipline. A “discipline” is a devotional practice, like prayer for example, which you create and then practice – do – every day until it becomes automatic. Sort of like muscle memory but for your spiritual well-being. The root word of “discipline” is, in fact “disciple” and we know what a disciple is. Theoretically, as followers of Jesus, that is what we aspire to be. But, dear ones, discipleship does not just happen. It needs to be created and then nurtured through intentional daily practice. It takes time. It takes mindfulness. And it takes prayer. But just one prayer at a time. Then one becomes two and two becomes four, all in response to things you see and feel a tug at your heart strings that a prayer response is in order here. Then, before you even realize it, that spiritual muscle memory in your heart gets stronger and stronger and prayer becomes like breathing for you. Just like Anna. How marvelous would that be – for you and the world. Amen.