

# The Songs of Christmas

## *“Anna”*

Luke 2:1-15

January 3, 2010

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Anna and Simeon are two of the most neglected characters in the Christmas story. But there's a lot to learn from both. Simeon shows us how to wait on God – a need that grows in importance all the time in our immediate gratification culture.

Anna shows us how to see. More specifically, she is a prime example of how to recognize when God is present and when God is at work – especially in those times when it doesn't seem apparent to you or anybody else.

While Simeon is holding Jesus in his arms and speaking prophetically to Mary and Joseph, Anna comes into the story and seconds Simeon's witness to Jesus' identity as the Messiah – and then it says she later told everybody she knew was hoping for the Messiah about it.

Unlike Simeon, we aren't told that Anna had been given any advance word that she would ever see the Messiah – but when she chances upon this event, she immediately recognizes who Jesus really is. She sees. She gets it. When almost everybody else in the Temple that day sees only a mother and father presenting their new-born son for circumcision – Anna sees the messiah.

How does she do this? How is it that Anna recognizes what everybody but Simeon misses? She does it as the result of life-long preparation and training to see God's presence and work. We're told that Anna has lived for most of her 84 years as a widow – faithfully praying and fasting day and night in the Temple courts. She spent her whole life hearing God's word, and speaking it back to him in prayer. Fasting shows you your limitations AND your desperate need for God. Prayer is not just a way of asking God for stuff, but a way of shaping the way we see everything around us, and the events we encounter every day, whether large or small.

Show me someone who has spent their whole life being shaped and trained to look at their world through the lens of fasting and prayer, and I'll show you a person who can recognize when God is present and at work when no-one else can detect a thing.

It's as simple as this – we *see* according to who we *are*. Your nature shapes what you see. A good example of this is the old nursery rhyme:

Pussycat, pussycat, where have you been?  
I've been to London to see the queen!  
Pussycat, pussycat, what saw you there?  
I saw a mouse, under her chair!

In other words, a cat will see according to a cat's nature... here's a cat who has gone to London and been in the Queen of England's palace. Let's say you asked the cat some questions when it got home: "Did you go to the palace?" "Yeah..." "Was it grand?!" "Yeah – it was so...so." "Well, what about the queen...was she as regal as they say? Was the rest of the court impressive? And were her clothes beautiful and what about the crown jewels?! Was she wearing the crown?" "Yeah...I guess so. "You guess so? Well, good grief, Kitty, was there anything that impressed you about your audience with the queen?" "Oh YES! Underneath the queen's chair, there was the most beautiful, fat, juicy mouse!"

So – a cat sees according to its nature as a cat. And we see all of life according to our nature too – and I don't just mean our human nature, but especially, we either see or don't see the universe and life itself according to our redeemed nature in Christ, or our fallen nature as sinners.

I've known people, and so do you, who, on the one hand, because they are so shaped by God's grace and by God's Word, and by the habits of the heart that come from a life of prayer – can see God and God at work everywhere. They wake up in the morning and, even in the worst of times and the most challenging of circumstances, they are quietly aware of God's presence. I'm not necessarily referring to people with naïve optimism or who overwhelm negative situations with the power of positive thinking. I'm not against that kind of approach to life at all, but this is different – this is people who can see and recognize where God is all the time, even when they're not able to be positive.

On the other hand, I've known people, and so have you—who can't see anything in people or life but the bad stuff, who are always cynical, critical, or even sickeningly taken in by a culture obsessed with outward appearances. All they can think about is money, things, celebrities, and food, or worse. They seem unaware of God's reality or presence, even while flippantly claiming to 'believe' in him. They see life according to their true nature. Paul put it this way – to the violent, all things are about violence. To the impure, all things are impure. But to the holy, all things are holy, to the pure all things are pure. You see according to your nature.

According to long training – Anna sees according to what she is able to see – according to what shapes her and makes her who she is.

Now, I suppose it's true that we all have a mixture of these two viewpoints, since our salvation in Christ is still in process. We aren't perfect. But if we have handed our lives over to Christ as Savior and Lord, the new nature we have been given in Christ is, even today, growing and changing us from within by the ministry of the Holy Spirit, and slowly, as we turn away from being shaped by anything other than God's word and worship and prayer, we see differently than those who aren't believers or followers of Jesus.

But let's be honest, sometimes it's hard to see God at work – even as followers of Christ. Why is this? I think it's usually because sometimes we get out of touch with God. We let the culture shape us, we sow to our old nature, and we slowly lose the ability to recognize God at work in us, or in the world. We still have salvation in Christ, but we may have lost touch with who we really are in him. Our Baptist friends call this 'backsliding!' And it does happen. It's destructive in a strange and silent kind of way, like a solvent that quietly and silently eats away at the glue that holds plywood together, it seeps in and takes away.

Let Anna be our guide and heroine as we stand on the threshold of a New Year. She was infinitely more shaped by her relationship of closeness with God than the sordid realities of life in Jerusalem. And when the time came, she could see what others passed by – God present in the very Temple set up to worship him. She could see God where others only saw a baby. She knew God was at work there, that day, to redeem the world, when others were complaining about the price of bread.

What shapes you this first day of 2010? What do you see as you gaze into the year ahead? Winter? Gray skies? Or days filled with the grandeur of God? Worries about home prices? Interest rates? Employment concerns? Or God, going ahead of you into the year with plans of redemption and work for you to do that might just be pivotal for the part of the world in which he's placed you?

Answer these questions honestly sometime today, but above all, re-enter a commitment to be so in touch and in tune with God through his Word and prayer, that you live daily out of your new nature in Christ.

Begin this New Year totally committed to seeing life through Jesus Christ.