

“Ordinary Days”
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Readings: Luke 2:22, 25-38

January 1, 2012

Luke 2:22, 25-38

22 When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord...

25 Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; ^{*} this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. ²⁶It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. ^{*} ²⁷Guided by the Spirit, Simeon ^{*} came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, ²⁸Simeon ^{*} took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

²⁹ ‘Master, now you are dismissing your servant ^{*} in peace,

according to your word;

³⁰ for my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹ which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,

³² a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.’

33 And the child’s father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. ³⁴Then Simeon ^{*} blessed them and said to his mother Mary, ‘This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that

will be opposed ³⁵so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

36 There was also a prophet, Anna* the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, ³⁷then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child* to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Anna was 84 years old when she met the baby Jesus. We don't know much about the prophet woman, just some sparing details given by Luke. She had been married, presumably young – as was customary at the time. Her husband died seven years into the marriage, leaving her a widow. She had lived on her own for the subsequent fifty or so years of her life. 365 days a year, most in the temple, where she was living when we meet her. Day in and day out, fasting and prayer. We meet her on another of her ordinary days. An ordinary day in a more or less ordinary life. We don't know much about her days before, and we never learn more about her days after.

Jane Franklin Mecom, youngest sister of the venerable Benjamin Franklin, was 82 when she died in Boston in 1794.¹ We don't know much about the widow, just

¹ Jill Lepore, *New York Times* Opinion Piece, April 24, 2011.
http://www.nytimes.com/2011/04/24/opinion/24lepore.html?_r=2&scp=1&sq=jane%20mecom&st=Search

some sparing details that survived in letters. Perhaps you are better Biblical scholars than I and remembered the prophet Anna, but I was surprised to discover her only in seminary. Anna is a fairly obscure biblical character. Odds are also pretty good you had never heard of Jane Mecom, she is an even more obscure historical character.

Historian Jill Lepore discovered Jane when writing an article about Ben Franklin. Having mined his many letters, Lepore was intrigued by this sister – the person to whom Franklin wrote most frequently, the person to receive the second and second-to-last letters of Franklin’s life, the last person to whom Franklin wrote before entering the constitutional convention and the first he wrote when he came out.² Lepore was equally intrigued to find out that no one had yet mined the depths of this Jane character – this mother counterpart to Ben Franklin’s founding father. So she set about writing her biography.

Lepore recently described the process of writing this biography at a pre-lecture dinner in Villanova. It was arduous. And depressing. So depressing that after two hundred pages of manuscript, she quit. Historical biographies are supposed to follow a narrative arch, a plotline, she explained. The character is supposed to encounter challenges and survive, or rise through the ranks, or at least experience ups and downs in their life. As Lepore put it, Jane... flatlined. While Ben Franklin rose from the ranks of poverty to excel on the global scene, Jane came from the ranks of poverty... and stayed there. Her life was unchanging, sad

² Jill Lepore, “Poor Jane’s Almanac: The Life and Opinions of Benjamin Franklin’s Sister”. The Lore Kephart Distinguished Historians Lecture at Villanova University, December 6th, 2011.

from beginning to end. She married at fifteen, had twelve children. She was widowed in her twenties and outlived all of her twelve sons and daughters. She died alone. Utterly ordinary for the time. Utterly heartbreaking for Lepore.

Jane's life was unremarkable, but for her relationship with Ben Franklin. The facts and dates of her being would no doubt be lost, had she not possessed letters signed by her brother. Her obscure and rather ordinary life would no doubt be forgotten, had she not encountered a man history found remarkable.

Anna, too, might have been lost to the nameless world of Biblical widows. She, too, might have been forgotten by time, had she not encountered someone history found remarkable. Both Anna and Simeon certainly serve a function in this encounter with the baby Jesus in the temple. For Luke, the pairing of an older man and an older prophetess woman helps to illustrate Jesus as fulfilling prophecy. The couple follows a classic Old Testament motif. Simeon's beautiful if ominous praise and prediction provides a handsome literary frame and foreshadow for the life of Jesus. Having the old encounter the young establishes the scope of salvation: the end of the lives of Simeon and Anna are part of the story of the beginning of life for all. Certainly the character of Anna becomes an important tool for telling this Christmas story.

In the same way, Jane may be understood as an important tool for telling the Benjamin Franklin story. Perhaps even the story of the founding of the United States.

Anna is important because she encounters Jesus. Jane is important because she encounters Ben. I believe this is true.

But our Gospel story also tells us something more. The season of Christmas allows us to see something more.

Because Anna does not encounter a great man. Anna encounters a small, ruddy baby. A baby brought to the temple by ordinary parents, doing the ordinary thing. Presenting their baby for circumcision – doing what generation after generation has done, day after day, year after year. Anna does not encounter a great man, Anna encounters the great truth of our Gospel, the great truth of our God: that God chose to be incarnate; chose to come to us in human form. And not only in human form, but in the form of a helpless and vulnerable child. That God chose to come not cloaked in splendor, but swaddled in a feeding trough.

Author Marilyn Robinson recently wrote a piece about the legacy of the Bible in literature. Of scripture, she says:

Moments of the highest import pass among people who are so marginal that conventional history would not have noticed them: aliens, the enslaved, people themselves utterly unaware that their lives would have consequence. The great assumption of literary realism is that ordinary lives are invested with a kind of significance that justifies, or requires, its

endless iterations of the commonplace... however minor these might seem in the world's eyes.³

As you, or your headache, or your drooping eyes surely know – today is New Years Day. I suppose today is a holiday, and of course liturgically we will be in Christmas until the 6th... but January 1st has always felt to me more like the end of holidays. The end of Christmas parties and December excuses; the beginning of the return to ordinary. The end of the remarkable days of Advent and candlelight and singing and fireworks and eating whatever I want. The first of three hundred and sixty-five ordinary days.⁴

Just as we meet Anna in the temple on an ordinary day in a more or less ordinary life, we meet one another this morning in our temple, on the beginning of another year of ordinary days, living our perhaps more or less ordinary lives. And perhaps you have wondered what many of historian Jill Lepore's listeners wondered aloud in the Q and A of her Jane Franklin Mecom presentation: who cares? Why should we care about this unremarkable Jane? Or this widow Anna? Or the other ordinary lives lost to history? Or maybe, on a bad day, you have wondered – what about my ordinary life? Who cares? Who *will* care, as the years unfold? As the clock turns and time marches inevitably on?

³ Marilyn Robinson, "The Book Of Books: What Literature Owes the Bible". *New York Times*, December 25, 2011. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/25/books/review/the-book-of-books-what-literature-owes-the-bible.html?pagewanted=all>

⁴ I found out after preaching this sermon that technically, 2012 brings us three hundred and sixty-six days.

The good news of the birth of Christ is this: in coming to our ordinary world, God makes it clear. God cares. Who we encounter may make us memorable; who Jane encountered, who Anna encountered may have made them worth mentioning in the history books. But that God chose to encounter us, in Christ, made them more than memorable: it made them matter. And it makes us matter. To God. And that means, to one another.

God chose to care about the ordinary. Scripture has the audacity to claim that ordinary lives matter. So we, too, should care about the ordinary. We, too, should have the audacity to claim that an ordinary life like Jane's or Anna's or yours or mine matters.

And not only matters, but is the stuff of God. The stuff that proclaims God with us. We should live with the audacity to thank God for the ordinary. We, like Anna, should live with the audacity to treat every day as a day worthy of prayer and fasting and thanksgiving. Thanksgiving for the ordinary lives and the ordinary days and the ordinary things – the weather, the casserole, the smile, the smell, the first day of a New Year.

Our Psalmist today calls upon all of the universe to praise God. "Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps... creeping things and flying birds, kings of the earth... princes and all rulers of the earth! Young men and women alike, old and young together!" Praise the Lord from the streets, normal

guy who fixes cars, woman who works at the check-out counter, kid who does only okay in math, retiree who lost a child! Let them praise the name of the Lord!

As we end 2011 with top ten list after top ten list; as we reflect upon celebrity marriages or great sports achievements or even remarkable lives lost, like Steve Jobs or Christopher Hitchens... it would be easy to overlook that ordinary guy who died in a nursing home, that average teenager who showed up down the street, that unremarkable woman who showed up for work. It would be easy to forget that normal day at the office, that unmemorable dinner, that usual commute. It would be easy to miss the opportunity to thank God for all of those ordinary things that happened to ordinary lives in 2011, just as it would have been easy for Anna or Simeon to miss the opportunity to hold that seemingly ordinary baby boy-child of Mary that day in the temple.

Lepore threw away the first two hundred pages she wrote about Jane Mecom's flatline life. But after an op-ed in the New York Times about Jane elicited an outpouring of response, she set to writing again.

Thank God for extraordinary people writing about ordinary lives. Thank God for ordinary people who lived average 2011's. And may God bless your 2012 with all the joys of 365 mostly ordinary days.

Amen.