

SIMEON AND ANNA

Professional portrait photographers must master a mind-boggling number of details in order to take really fine pictures. They have technical issues related to their equipment, exposure, focus and lighting. They have to pose their subjects making sure people look their best. They arrange the setting to determine the mood of the picture.

One detail that is under-appreciated is background. The background provides context for the photo. It may be plain white for a high-key portrait or dark for Rembrandt lighting. It may be highly stylized or it may be something outside in nature. But in every case, background is critical. It draws attention to the main subject without drawing attention to itself. Busy, cluttered backgrounds detract from a good picture. Pleasing backgrounds make the subjects of the picture stand out.

The opening chapters of Luke's Gospel provide a stylized literary background for the main subject of the book: the ministry life and sacrificial death of Jesus. Luke begins by introducing us to the parents of John the Baptist. We witness the angel's announcement of John's birth. When John is born, we hear his father's song of praise. God's promise through the angel has come to pass. Liturgical churches call that song *The Benedictus*.

Then we get the back story of Mary's pregnancy. An angel reveals that she is God's choice to bear Messiah. She will become pregnant through the Holy Spirit. When she visits Elizabeth, John's mother, and hears Elizabeth speak of her as "the mother of my Lord," Mary praises God in another hymn we know as *The Magnificat*. Like *The Benedictus*, *The Magnificat* also celebrates the fulfillment of God's promise.

This is all background to the main subject. The birth narratives provide a context for Jesus' story that makes him stand out with greater clarity.

There is one more piece to this background trilogy. It takes place after Jesus' birth. Like the first two, it involves a promise from God that evokes a hymn when the promise is fulfilled, the *Nunc Dimittis*.

The story is set in the obedience of Joseph and Mary to God's laws under the Mosaic covenant regarding the birth of a firstborn male child. Turn with me to Luke 2:21-24.

Mary and Joseph are doing what God said to do when a baby born was born. The law said that a male child should be circumcised when he was eight days old. Circumcision was a mark in the flesh, a covenant sign indicating that he was part of God's covenant people.

After the circumcision, the parents had two other responsibilities. First, during the Exodus, God decreed that the firstborn male in every family was consecrated to him—firstborns belonged to God. Parents presented their boy in the temple and paid five shekels as a price of redemption for a firstborn male. Five shekels was about two ounces of silver, worth about thirty-five dollars today. This was a once-in-a-lifetime, token gift and represented the parents buying back from God the child that belonged to God in the first place.

And, about a month after the circumcision, the child's mother offered sacrifices for her purification. This seems very odd to us. Rituals for purification were part of the laws God established to impress upon his people their need for personal holiness.

Ritual cleanness had nothing to do with one's personal worth or spiritual condition. Ritually clean persons weren't spiritually better or more significant than those who were ritually

unclean. The issue was all about teaching Israel to distinguish the holy from the profane. By not allowing ritual uncleanness into the temple, Israel learned something about the holiness of God and keeping holy things special. Such things as bodily discharges, certain skin diseases, contact with blood or death and other similar things rendered a person ritually unclean. Under the old covenant, people who were unclean could not to go to the temple or to touch sacred items until they had been cleansed from their ritual defilement.

Childbirth was among those things under the law that created uncleanness. God had decreed that a woman, after childbirth, should offer simple sacrifices for her purification. The sacrifices indicated that she was clean from the after-effects of her delivery. Mary and Joseph were in the temple to offer either a pair of doves or two young pigeons. A wealthier family might offer a lamb. Joseph didn't have that kind of money.

So Jesus' parents were in the temple in obedience to the Law. They were also there on a divine appointment—v. 25-32.

Notice once again Luke's literary pattern. Simeon was given a promise by the Holy Spirit that he would not die until he had seen the Lord's Christ, God's promised Messiah. Seeing Jesus fulfilled that promise. So Simeon offers the hymn of praise we referred to earlier, the *Nunc Dimittas*. These Latin titles were taken from the first words of the old Latin translations.

Luke doesn't give us much information about Simeon. We don't know how old he is, although he seems to be an older person. When he says, "Dismiss your servant in peace," Simeon is saying that he is now ready to die. He has seen what God promised and he has lived long enough. It is a wish/prayer, offered in a hymn/poem context, but does indicate that he has seen his life's purpose fulfilled.

We don't know anything about his family, his occupation, or his social status—only his character. Simeon was righteous, devout and was anticipating the consolation of Israel. When Luke described him as righteous he meant that Simeon was an observant Jew, keeping all the laws prescribed through Moses.

He was devout. We might call him pious in the very best sense of that word. Simeon was careful about holy things, treating God and the things of God with deference and respect.

And he was "waiting for the consolation of Israel." Simeon knew God's promises through the prophets. He knew that God was sending a deliverer who would restore his people Israel. For instance, concerning the time of Messiah, Isaiah wrote: "Shout for joy, O heavens; rejoice, O earth; burst into song, O mountains! For the LORD comforts his people and will have compassion on his afflicted ones" (Isaiah 49:13). And again: "The LORD will surely comfort Zion and will look with compassion on all her ruins; he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the LORD. Joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the sound of singing" (Isaiah 51:3).

Messiah would bring these blessings and Simeon lived with that blessed hope. It was a hope further energized by a very special revelation from God's Spirit that he would see Messiah in his lifetime. God would send his Christ before Simeon died.

The day came when God's Spirit impressed upon Simeon the urgency of going into the temple. Have you ever had a word from God like that? It's a divine imperative you can't explain. You just follow it.

God was about to fulfill his promise to Simeon. As he wandered about the temple courts, a young family caught his eye. With mounting joy, Simeon approached them and asked if he might hold the child. Mary agreed and as Simeon took Jesus into his arms, God confirmed his

intuition: this was the child of promise.

Simeon's hymn was prophetic, anticipatory praise. He declared that through Jesus God would bring about salvation. Jesus would be a light: for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to...Israel. In the words of our carol: "...the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee, tonight."

And he had one more prophetic word—v. 33-35. Jesus would be the dividing line for Israel. Some would stumble and fall over his message. Others would be rescued and raised. Jesus' life and ministry would be a sign from God that would be slandered and rejected. And Mary herself would be pierced with the pain of her son's rejection.

At that moment another player stepped onto the stage. Anna was a prophetess, a woman through whom God spoke by his Spirit. She was a widow. Her husband died after only seven years of marriage, probably when Anna was in her very early twenties.

After her husband's death, Anna determined to devote herself to God, serving God in the temple daily with fasting and prayers.

Anna is now in her mid-eighties. As she witnessed the scene before her with Simeon, Mary and Joseph, and Jesus, the prophetic spirit within her leaped with thanksgiving and praise—v. 36-38.

Did you notice who she spoke to? "...all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem." "...the redemption of Jerusalem" is another way of describing "the consolation of Israel." It's the same hope. Messiah would comfort his people and liberate their capital. He would sit on David's throne and rule with God's character and authority.

Israel had had many Messiah-wanna-be's. These were men who led popular revolts against Rome. All of them were political or military leaders. Every time one appeared on the scene, the masses rallied their expectations and excitedly wondered if he was really the one. And then the revolt would be crushed by Rome, its leader killed and his followers cruelly executed. The people would be left with disappointment and disillusionment, again and again. Some just stopped believing.

But not all. There were a faithful few in Israel who clung stubbornly to the fierce hope that God would send his Christ; that he would set his people free.

Anna, after long years serving God in the temple, knew people like that, and she went to them to tell them about the infant Jesus and the prophecy of Simeon.

This is background against which Luke sets Jesus' story. Simeon and Anna represent the very best of God's people under the old covenant. They typify Israel as God hoped Israel might be: righteous, devout, hope-filled, expectant, eager to welcome Messiah.

As such, their testimony predisposes Luke's readers to pay attention to Jesus. Their witness anticipates Jesus' life and ministry. Jesus is, as Simeon said, the Lord's Christ, the salvation of God. These godly old saints pre-authenticated Jesus' life and ministry.

Simeon and Anna are background to the main subject, and like all good backgrounds, they don't draw attention to themselves. Even at Christmas, we rarely hear much about Simeon and Anna, or Zechariah and Elizabeth for that matter. In Luke's Gospel, they show up to prepare us to see Jesus more clearly.

Have you ever considered your life to be a background for God's good news about Jesus? Pleasing backgrounds make the subjects of the picture stand out. And the thing about backgrounds is that a master photographer can use almost anything for a background in the right context.

So can God. He can use people who are naturally bright and perky. He can use people who are melancholy. He can use people whose lives bear the patina of age and experience and he can use people who are young and full of energy.

Have you ever thought about your character and conduct, your kindness and generosity, your integrity and purity as a backdrop that draws attention to the message of Jesus, without so much drawing attention to yourself.

Our lives are to be such that they frame Jesus in the best possible light—they make Jesus outstanding. People who watch us get a good impression of Jesus so when they hear the story of Jesus, they are predisposed to give it a sympathetic hearing.

We need to use words to tell Jesus' story. People never guess at the gospel from seeing Christians act like Jesus any more than people can guess at the subject of a portrait by looking at the background. The gospel has specific content that must be spoken. But at the same time we need lives that make God's story credible. That's background. It's not the main thing people notice, but it makes the main thing so much more noticeable.

May God give us this grace at Christmas to be like Simeon and Anna—righteous, devout, hopeful—fitting backgrounds for God's centerpiece, Jesus Christ our Lord.