

Prophecying Daughters

Luke 2:36-38

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 seven years after her marriage, ³⁷ then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. ³⁸ At 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.

Acts 2:16-21

¹⁶ No, this is what was spoken through the prophet Joel:

¹⁷ “In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.

¹⁸ Even upon my slaves, both men and women, in those days I will pour out my Spirit; and they shall prophesy.

¹⁹ And I will show portents in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood, and fire, and smoky mist.

²⁰ The sun shall be turned to darkness and the moon to blood,

before the coming of the Lord’s great and glorious day.

²¹ Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved.”

Acts 21:8-9

⁸ The next day we left and came to Caesarea; and we went into the house of Philip the evangelist, one of the seven, and stayed with him. ⁹ He had four unmarried daughters who had the gift of prophecy.

Theme Statement

Challenged to examine how God called and empowered women to proclaim God’s message and to affirm contributions of godly women to the church’s mission, the church today advocates for greater recognition of God-called women in the church.

Exploring the Word

As a white male pastor, this writer feels that it would be presumptuous to be the only voice in exploring the first session focusing on the call of women to ministry. Fortunately, two colleagues have shared their insights and are quoted in this discussion of scripture.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) recently celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the ordination of women. Other denominations have different histories when it comes to recognizing women’s essential participation in the work of the gospel. This session gives some perspective from scripture on the inclusive nature of call that comes to God’s people across time.

Luke 2:36-38 Dedicated presence

The narrative of Anna’s praise in the temple when Jesus was presented is paired by Luke with Simeon’s prophetic

words (vv. 28-35). As explained below, Luke frequently portrays pairs of women and men as witnesses to God's salvific work. These pairs include Zechariah and Elizabeth (1:5-25, 39-45, 57-79), Mary and Joseph (1:26-38; 2:1-24, 41-51), the centurion's servant and the widow's son (7:2-17), and many others.

Pastor Jean McCartney reflects, "Anna, although a prophet, perhaps had led a fairly uneventful life. She is unknown other than in this passage. But she was eighty-four when God used her in this wildly public manner. As an older person, as a female, and as a widow, perhaps she was largely written off. After this public event, someone noticed enough to document her faithfulness (v. 37). Because of her faithfulness, she was right where she needed to be to praise God and proclaim the great news about the Christ child."

Seminarian Jill Harman shared her perspective with me. (I am summarizing her observations.) When Jesus was presented at the temple, there were two people who explained his greatness and told what he would accomplish: Simeon and Anna. Luke frequently balanced a prophetic utterance from a man with another from a woman. Both people in this narrative were deeply religious. Both were elderly. Both were called prophets. Seeing the child, both praised God and made declarations about Jesus. Simeon's words were included in the text, but Anna's were not. When Luke mentions that Anna is an older woman, he is telling us that God cares little about status in society, age, or education as qualifications to be a prophet. Jill noted that women were specifically mentioned and present at the beginning and the end of Jesus' life as well as throughout it. Women were clearly being called as prophets, teachers, and messengers in the story of Christ.

Acts 2:16-21 Committed presence

In this passage we find Luke connecting Joel 2:28-32 with the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, described earlier in Acts 2. At this time, many Jews believed that while God's Spirit had been active earlier, the Spirit was no longer acting. They believed the Spirit would return for the end times. Peter's use of the Joel passage suggests that the early followers of Jesus believed they were living in those end times.

From Pastor McCartney: "Whenever this time was or will be, it was/will be marked by full participation. The Holy Spirit will be poured out without regard to age, gender, or social standing."

Acts 21:8-9 Prophetic presence

This Philip is identified as "one of the seven" to distinguish him from the disciple of Jesus who is identified as "one of the twelve." It was not unusual in the early church for women to be included in leadership. Celibacy was often associated with that gift. (John the Baptist, Jesus, and Paul were all unmarried.)

Pastor McCartney says, "I wish we knew more about his daughters. This early deacon raised four prophets or perhaps preachers. Women in the church, in the role of proclamation, is not a new thing. It was not conceived of by feminists but was in place by the very power of God."

The Word Today

Keeping in mind the limited role of women in first-century Palestine and the Roman Empire, the call for women to be part of the salvation proclamation was countercultural.

Pastor McCartney says, "Later, Paul would write that God uses young and old, male and female . . . (Gal. 3:28). As a

female, I am so grateful that Paul wrote that. But to be sure, Paul's noticing of it was not what made it true. Just as people noticing Anna's faithfulness is not what made her faithful. It is not what put her in the right place and time to praise and proclaim. This is reminiscent too of the women at the tomb. They, who because of their faith, and not held back by gender, were the first to proclaim the risen Christ."

In 1992, the Reverend April Ulring Larson became the first woman bishop in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). As of June 2020, there were twenty-two female synodical bishops and one female presiding bishop, the Reverend Elizabeth A. Eaton. Of the 16,001 leaders on the ELCA roster in 2018, nearly 32 percent were women. About half of all people in ELCA seminaries preparing for ministry are women. These numbers do not reflect the thousands of faithful women who lead as laypeople in congregations. Their contributions include worship leadership, food-related ministries, neighborhood connections, health ministries, education and discipleship, and many, many more.

From Anna, the first woman to proclaim Jesus' ministry, to the pastor down the street or in the next town in our time, women have been and are faithful leaders in the church. Most have served without title or acknowledgment, furthering the spread of the gospel and fulfilling the Great Commission. Many have balanced public ministry with domestic ministry and provided care for families at the same time.

Maybe your congregation has someone like Sharon, who invests in the faith of young people through teaching confirmation. Or you may have a Nicki, who coordinates a health ministry for the senior adults. Your woman leader may be a Pastor Carolann, who builds on the congregation's

history and finds ways to take what is already good to the next level. No matter how God has blessed your congregation with women in ministry roles, give God thanks, and then thank the women.

Questions for Discussion

Beginnings

1. Who is the first woman who had an important place in your faith life?
2. As a group, name as many women who lead in your faith community as you can.

Exploring the Word

1. Why do you think Luke often pairs women and men in his gospel?
2. How does the call of a person work with or through Pastor McCartney's observation about "age, gender, or social standing"?
3. Imagine a women's ministry group called the "Daughters of Philip." Write a mission statement for such a group in our time based on what was learned in this session.

The Word Today

1. Read and research the "silent women" verses of 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:11-12. You can look up analysis for the verses at EnterTheBible.org. Why would silencing women in the church not work today?
2. How can and do local congregations and the larger church recognize and honor women in ministry in our own time?

Closing Prayer

In you, Father all-mighty, we have our preservation and our bliss. In you, Christ, we have our restoring and our saving. You are our mother, brother, and savior. In you, our Lord the Holy Spirit, is marvelous and plenteous grace. You are our clothing; for love you wrap us and embrace us. You are our maker, our lover, our keeper. Teach us to believe that by your grace all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well. Amen. (A prayer of Julian of Norwich, ELW, p. 87)

Further Study

Isaiah 43:5-21; those who are called and redeemed by God

Daily Readings

M. Luke 10:38-42

F. Luke 24:44-53

T. John 11:1-11

S. Luke 2:28-35

W. John 11:38-45

S. Luke 2:36-38;

T. Luke 24:5-10

Acts 2:16-21; 21:8-9

Memorization

Acts 2:17

In the last days it will be, God declares, that I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh, and your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, and your young men shall see visions, and your old men shall dream dreams.