

WGUMC December 30, 2012 "Anna's Story"
Matthew 2:13-18 and Luke 2:22-38

[Have you ever wanted to rewrite a Bible story? Some stories are harder to read than others. Take the one in Luke often referred to as "the slaughter of the innocents." This is the dark side of the Christmas story when Herod finds out that the magi are not going to reveal the new king's location. I've always wished this story had a different ending, so I've written one. In light of the recent school shootings in Newtown, Connecticut, I was thinking that how we respond in love and faithfulness can write new and more grace-filled endings to the most horrific of tragedies. At the end of the service, we blessed 30 prayer shawls to go to the United Methodist Church in Newtown for distribution to first responders who are having difficulty dealing with the trauma.]

[Background Notes: Anna is the prophetess named in Scripture. Eliana is a fictional character, but everything else I say about Herod's household is mentioned in the Works of Josephus. Miriam is the Hebrew name for Mary; Yosef is Joseph; Yeshua is Jesus.]

I am Anna. I live in Jerusalem. I am 84 years old, widowed long ago. I spend most of my time here in the temple. The people call me a prophetess. I only know that I am under an

extraordinary obligation. Sometimes I am compelled to speak, even when it would be much easier to remain silent. In those times, my words are not my own and the meanings are not mine to give. Sometimes, I don't understand what I've said until events I unknowingly foretold begin to unfold. Like the time the niece of old King Herod paid me a visit by night.

Her name was Eliana, the daughter of Herod's sister, Salome. Her uncle the king was an Idumean, not a Hasmonean, and therefore not a member of the Jewish royal line. But Herod had won the favor of Caesar, and so a Roman army of occupation installed him by force as the puppet king of Israel. For that reason, the Jews never trusted him. Members of his own family challenged him. Fears of losing his power daily haunted him.

And that is why Eliana despised her uncle. He was certain that someone was plotting against him at all times. And he never hesitated to eliminate potential enemies. He even had his

own wife executed, though he had loved her. Eliana's two brothers were murdered, too. And so she detested Herod, even though he provided well for her.

Eliana well knew that she was just a no-account woman trapped in a household of powerful men with very powerful ambitions. But she wanted nothing of their political intrigues. Her only ambition in life was to be a mother, to bring a life into the world and into a family that had known and caused far too much death. But Eliana had been married for five years, and still no child. Typically, her husband began to ignore her, her family to shun her, her friends to whisper about her.

Life is not very kind to women who can't produce children. And Eliana, driven to distraction, decided to take desperate measures. Someone had told her the story of Hannah, the mother of the Prophet Samuel, how she once prayed for a child, and old Eli assured her that God would grant her request. And God did. Hearing that story gave Eliana a glimmer of hope and

also a game plan. So she came to the temple one starry night, looking for the wise old woman who speaks words not her own.

She found me in the court of the temple, praying. She crept up behind me and startled me. I turned around quickly. At first she jumped back, then fell face down at my feet. She grabbed the hem of my robe and began sobbing. In short bursts, she told me that with no child she had no reason to live, that if God couldn't give her a son, or even a daughter, she wanted to end it all.

I let her go on like that for some time. I didn't look at her. I didn't make a sound. Eventually, the room was quiet. I could only hear ragged breathing. I bent down, reached out for her hands and beckoned her to her feet. I looked hard into her eyes, and then the words came: "The child you are seeking is not your own; find him and your heart is home."

Eliana looked strangely at me. She started to say something, to ask me a question, but I turned away because I

had nothing more to say. She stood there waiting for me to explain. I wished I could have given her the assurance she was looking for. All I could do was wave her away. Reluctantly, she left me and walked out into the strange light of a new star on the horizon. I hoped against hope that God would hear her prayer and that a new star would arise on her horizon. But I've seen so many women who come here. And very few of their stories end as happily as Hannah's.

Eliana returned to the palace, and spent the following day in seclusion, refusing to speak to anyone. Finally, she called for food around nightfall. The servants who brought her meal were abuzz with palace gossip. It seemed that there were strange visitors that day. They had traveled from a far distant land. They had seen the new star and wondered what royal birth had occasioned its rising. They followed it here and asked for an audience with Herod. They wanted to know where the new king had been born.

Needless to say, the sick, old king was not pleased by their questions. He summoned his priests. They consulted their scrolls. They told him the one who would sit on the throne of David and rule the house of Israel forever, the Messiah, would be born in the city of David, Bethlehem. Now Herod put no great store in scribblings on scrolls or the mutterings of prophets, but he never was one to take chances. So he enlisted the wise men as his spies and sent them out with orders to find the child and report back to him.

The servants reported everything to Eliana who suddenly came out of her melancholy and demanded to know every detail. If there was a miraculous birth taking place anywhere, she surely wanted to know about it. If the Lord was bringing babies to Bethlehem, then she wasn't going to miss out on it. Hastily, she made plans to leave that very night. She would pretend that she was going to visit a sick aunt and offer to guide the wise men to Bethlehem.

It was a short trip. They arrived just about midnight. The town was crowded because of the census. No one had seen or heard of a baby being born. After a futile search, the stargazers were set to take leave of the town, when Eiliana noticed a small band of shepherds heading in from the hills. The shepherds knew of a baby born in Bethlehem and they were only too glad to tell of it. So the shepherds guided Eliana, who guided the stargazers, to a small shed built into a cave in the rocks on the outskirts of town.

They found a man, a woman, and a newborn, taking shelter there. The man—his name was Yosef—met them at the doorway. He seemed bewildered by their arrival. But when the foreigners convinced him that they only wanted to see the child, he moved aside and let them pass. The shepherds crowded in, too, but Eiliana stayed outside with the sheep.

This is not how she had imagined it. This is not at all what she had hoped for. After all, she was a member of the royal

household. She knew how princes were born. First of all, not to a peasant girl, and certainly not in a barn. She remembered my words: “The child you are seeking is not your own. Find him and your heart is home.” But this couldn’t be the child she was seeking, so she decided it was time for her to go home.

She waited until the stargazers reappeared, and bid them good-bye. She advised them not to return to Jerusalem. Old Herod was sick and insecure and wouldn’t hesitate to harm even such an unlikely threat to his throne as a baby born in a barn in Bethlehem. One of them thanked her and said to her, “The mother Miriam sends her blessings and asked us to tell you that on this night, dear lady, every woman is a mother of life.”

Eliana bowed low to hide her tears. She waited until they had mounted their camels and gone. Then she headed back to Jerusalem alone. In the days and weeks that followed, she tried to forget her visit to the temple, her midnight sojourn to

Bethlehem. But before the month was out, Herod brought it all back to her. The king had flown into a fit of rage. He realized that his spies had betrayed him. They hadn't returned. They hadn't sent word. At dinner, Herod handed a decree to his royal messenger. He would order his captain of the guard to slaughter every infant boy in and around the town of Bethlehem.

Eliana, sitting at the far end of a long table, stiffened. She began to cough and excused herself from the banquet hall. She hurried to her apartment, grabbed all the gold she had, and made haste to the garrison. Fortunately, it wasn't difficult to bribe Herod's soldiers. For a hefty sum, the captain would wait until morning before executing Herod's orders. Eliana quickly donned a cloak, saddled a donkey, and set out for Bethlehem once more.

When she got there, she gathered the town elders. She told them of Herod's plans and how she could help them. They

must spirit away all the infant boys, toddlers too, just to be safe. They could hide them in the caves that dotted the hills. The shepherds would guard them. The goats would give milk. In two weeks time, she would come for them, all of them. And she would find a safe haven for them. She would keep them and provide for them until they could safely return home.

Eliana stayed through the night in Bethlehem to help with the evacuation. She gave her solemn promise and a gold coin to each tearful mother. At last, she came to the little shed on the outskirts of town, but alas, it was empty. She asked all the mothers. She questioned all the fathers. No. No one knew anything about a birth in a barn barely a month ago.

When morning came, the captain arrived with his uniformed assassins. They searched every house and found no male babies. At the end of the day, the good captain counted his gold and then reported to Herod that there was not a boy under 2 years of age left alive in the entire town.

The following day, Eliana found me in the temple just finishing morning prayer. She looked exhausted, and more than a little worried. She didn't give me a choice but to stay and listen to her story. She told me about the visitors from afar, following a star. She told me about Yosef and Miriam and the baby in the barn. She told me about Herod and how she hoped to save the children. She told me how she searched but couldn't find the little one, the child who was not her own, but still so desperately needing a safe home. She pleaded with me, "Please tell me what you know about this child. Please tell me where I can find this child."

I told her, "Eliana, your name means: 'God has answered me.'" Before she could ask me what that was supposed to mean, a man carrying a pair of turtledoves and a woman carrying a baby, came into the temple for the presentation that is customary among our people. Eliana knew the man right away. It was Yosef. The woman must be Miriam. And her baby?

“Yeshua,” Miriam said.

Old Simeon was also in the temple for prayer that day. The Holy Spirit had revealed to him that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Messiah. Full of the Spirit, then, he approached Miriam and held out his arms for the child.

Simeon raised up Yeshua and praised God, saying: “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, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.”

And Yosef and Miriam and Eliana were dumbfounded by his words. And I, Anna, was inspired by them. And so I began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem: “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually,

and there shall be endless peace for the throne of David and his kingdom. He will establish and uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.”

The room flooded with morning light. And now Eliana understood my words. The Child she was seeking was found. And her heart had finally come home. With great joy, she bid good-bye to Yosef, Miriam, and Yeshua, to Simeon and to me. And she went out to her work. She was true to her word. She found nursemaids for all the children. She brought them to her large house in Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem. For several months, she visited them daily, bringing them treats and games to play. She saw their first steps. She heard their first words. She gave them all pet names. They would call her, Ima, “mommy.” And in the face of every one of them, she saw the love of that little baby born in a barn in Bethlehem.

She would smile and think of that night on the outskirts of town, and also the morning in the temple. She would ponder

my words. They meant something different to her now. For her, every child brought her the Child she was seeking. And in finding homes for these children, she had found her home. Eliana never did see Yeshua again, but she kept seeing him. She never did bear her own child into the world, but just as Miriam had said, she became a mother of life.

Six months later, old King Herod died, and the children went home to Bethlehem. And when Eliana's husband divorced her to marry someone else, she left the palace to live there, to be near her children, to be for that town, a true mother of life.

I, Anna, tell this story to you so that you may also be a mother or father of life, so that you may find the Child you are seeking in the faces of children and in the hearts of your sisters and brothers. I tell you this now, because I too will soon depart in peace, my old eyes having at last seen the salvation of God, prepared for all peoples. Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace, goodwill among us. Amen.