Grace and peace to you this day.

One of the many things I love about Scripture is how God places certain people in certain places at certain times, and for a certain purpose, and then they are never heard from again. We often tend to focus on the “big names” of the Bible: Abraham, Moses, Peter, Mary, and so on. Nothing wrong with that, but there are so many people in the Biblical accounts who are only mentioned once yet play significant roles in the great love letter that is the book we call the Bible. This week, I’ll take a look at a handful of them and see what we can learn from them in the year 2023.

The first one I’d like to discuss is a woman named Anna. She is only mentioned once, in the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus as a child is brought to be “presented” at the temple, as was required by the Law. This is how Luke records the scene:

“There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:36-38).

The first thing we learn here is that Anna was from the “tribe of Asher.” Asher was one of the original twelve tribes of Israel and in mentioning this, Luke indicates that she was a devout and pious woman. Note also that she was married for only seven years before becoming a widow. Now at the age of 84, she no doubt had been a widow for 60 or more years, having “never left the temple, but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying.” This might be a bit of hyperbole on Luke’s part, but in any case, the point is this: Anna spent her years as a widow not in mourning, but in deep devotion, waiting for the “redemption of Israel,” meaning the Messiah.

No doubt she had seen many, many children cross her path as she waited in the temple for the promised Messiah. As a prophet, the Lord uses her to speak on His behalf. She had seen hundreds, and maybe thousands of children as she waited those many years for the promised Savior. She likely felt discouragement, disappointment, and dismay. Perhaps she even questioned God: “When, Lord, when? I’m an old woman.”

Finally, the day comes. Her devotion and faith are rewarded. And then, we never hear from or of Anna again.

What do we learn from Anna? I think the message is this: Human age is no obstacle to our eternal God. In fact, He can use it to His advantage…and to ours. Waiting upon the Lord, steadfast faith, and trust in His timing can be so very difficult, but as is the case with Anna, so very rewarding.
May 23
Grace and peace to you this day.

As I mentioned in yesterday's devotional, there are many characters in the Bible who appear briefly and then never again. Yet, they play a significant role in God's plan of redemption for humankind. Another such person is Noah's wife. This is how Genesis records it:

“Noah was six hundred years old when the floodwaters came on the earth. And Noah and his sons and his wife and his sons' wives entered the ark to escape the waters of the flood” (Genesis 7:6-7).

Talk about playing second chair, we never even learn Mrs. Noah's name. However, she must have been a devout woman of faith, given the task at hand.

No one really knows how long it took to build the ark, but it is safe to say that it took many, many years. The family finances must have been drained. Day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year. The job must have seemed like it would never end. Noah's neighbors must have thought he was completely off his rocker. Noah must have had doubts and worries and questions. And behind it all was a faithful wife who stood by him, and whose name is now lost to the mists of history.

Sometimes, our role as Christians is not front and center. Sometimes, it is in the background playing the role of the encourager, listening when needed, giving a nudge when needed, or perhaps just providing a safe space for someone when they are weary and burdened.

When we play that role, it may seem like as with "Mrs. Noah," the world doesn't even know our name. But this I promise you this: your name is surely "carved on [His] hands" (Isaiah 49:6).

IHS,
Pastor Lou
May 24

Grace and peace to you this day.

Nicodemus. A Pharisee. A revered teacher of the Law. Someone who was supposed to oppose Jesus. Someone who was supposed to hate Him. Someone who was supposed to “toe the party line” and help do away with Him. And yet…something tugs at him. The Holy Spirit gets a hold of him except that, he just can’t seem to get a hold of the Holy Spirit.

We first meet Nicodemus in the third chapter of the Gospel of John. Rather than include the verse here, instead I’ve included an excerpt where Jesus and Nicodemus meet (based on John 3) from one of my favorite scenes from “The Chosen.” (Spoiler alert: it gives rise to the most-often quoted verse in all of Scripture.)

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q1AyMDZNy9k

Later on, in the seventh chapter, Nicodemus tries to prevent the trial of Jesus. And then, we meet Nicodemus for a third, and final time:

“Later, Joseph of Arimathea asked Pilate for the body of Jesus. Now Joseph was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly because he feared the Jewish leaders. With Pilate’s permission, he came and took the body away. He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. Taking Jesus’ body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs” (John 19:39-42).

I wonder if Nicodemus lived a life of regret. I wonder if guilt clouded his days and haunted his nights. Perhaps we’ll never know. But this I do know: When the Holy Spirit grabs a hold of you, don’t be like Nicodemus. Grab a hold of Him, and never let go.

IHS,

Pastor Lou
May 25

Grace and peace to you this day.

“As they were coming out, they found a man of Cyrene named Simon, whom they compelled to carry His cross” (Matthew 27:32).

Imagine the scene. Crucifixions were quite the spectacle, and a gruesome one at that. On top of it, it was the Passover. Jews from all over the Middle East were in Jerusalem for the festival.

Street vendors selling their wares. Musicians, dancers, rabbis, teachers, all mixing among the crowds lining the streets and in the gathering places. And then along comes three condemned criminals. Two thieves, and the One they call Jesus. The supposed Messiah, King of the Jews. Scourged and beaten, they made a bloody procession through the streets to the place of their death.

Accompanied by the jeering Roman soldiers, no doubt the three condemned men stumbled and faltered along the way, laden with crosses, the instruments of their impending demise. And suddenly, a man named Simon, probably in town for the party, is plucked from obscurity and takes his place in Biblical history. While he is mentioned in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke (not in John), it is only once and never again.

Scripture records that he was from Cyrene, an ancient city in what is now Libya in northern Africa. Perhaps he stood out because of his dark skin. Or perhaps the Roman soldiers just wanted to hurry things along. Whatever the case, Scripture records that he was “compelled,” meaning that he was “forced,” to carry Jesus’s cross.

Many might think that Simon might simply have been in the wrong place at the wrong time. But that would be a misreading of Scripture, where nothing takes place by accident or happenstance. Simon was, in fact, in the right place at the right time, so that we can learn an important lesson:

Sometimes our role as Christians is to carry another’s burden. Sometimes our role is to be there when they stumble or falter, when they are weary and seemingly can go no further. And that role should “compel” us not out of obligation, but out of love. Because it was out of love that Jesus would then take the cross back from Simon, on a hill we call Golgotha, on a Friday we call “Good,” and as a gift we call grace.

IHS,

Pastor Lou
May 26

Grace and peace to you this day.

Here’s your musical devotional for the week. Turn up the volume and enjoy!

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YU9BObi1GVw

IHS,

Pastor Lou