

**This photo is available in
the print version of Aging.**

**This tender occasion in Luke's gospel challenges us
to reevaluate how older adults in our lives might offer
prophetic words of insight and encouragement.**

Ambrogio Lorenzetti (c. 1290-1348), THE PRESENTATION IN THE TEMPLE, signed and dated 1342. Panel, 8' 5 1/8" x 5' 6 1/8". Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence. Commissioned for the Opera del Duomo for the Cathedral of Siena. With permission from the Ministero dei Beni e le Attività Culturali.

Sharing Wisdom

BY HEIDI J. HORNICK

When young parents face the task of raising their children, they may draw from their personal experience, reflect on the words of their own parents, and read the current literature on child-rearing. The Holy Family learned in a similar fashion. Two aged prophets, Anna and Simeon, shared their wisdom and revelation with Mary and Joseph (Luke 2:22-38). These prophets lived long lives that were not, and could not be, finished on earth without the encounter with God's Messiah. Ambrogio Lorenzetti allows us to witness this long-anticipated moment.[†]

On the right side of the painted panel, we see that alongside Anna, Simeon is holding the Christ Child. Mary, blanket in hand, waits to comfort her baby after he is circumcised. Simeon advises Mary through the spoken word while Anna holds a scroll in her hands.

This story of Simeon, a righteous and devout prophet who lived in Jerusalem, is told only in Luke's gospel. The Holy Spirit, who had revealed to him "that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah" (Luke 2:26), guided Simeon to the temple. Lorenzetti paints the moment described so precisely in Luke: "Simeon took him in his arms 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'" (2:28-32).

Simeon, adopting the tone used by parents and older friends and family as they "advise" young parents, looked to Mary and explained, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too" (2:34-35). Mary's reaction is not recorded for us in the biblical account, but we must assume that she received it as one more piece of information that would contribute to the understanding of her role as the mother of Christ. As was the case in the Annunciation, Mary would "treasure all these words and ponder them in her heart" (Luke 2:19).

The second prophet, Anna, plays a prominent role at the end of the story, as she offers another insight about Mary's son. (In visual art, on the other hand, the figure of Anna is not always depicted, and seldom occurs

in art of northern Italy.) Like Mary and Joseph, she is pious: “She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day” (2:37). Usually, though not always, Anna is portrayed as an elderly woman, for Luke gives the detail that “She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four” (2:36-37). Lorenzetti employs the symbol characteristic of her prophetic role, the scroll, on which we can read her prophecy of Jesus “to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (2:38). The banderole presents the message of redemption that Anna had waited so long to proclaim. With that message of good news held securely in her left hand, she raises her right hand and points to the child who is the fulfillment of that long-anticipated redemption.

The Presentation in the Temple captures a tender occasion when Mary listens to the wisdom of experience from older adults. In our culture, advice from parents, older friends, or family members often is not welcome. Luke’s gospel, by featuring this story, also challenges us to reevaluate this attitude toward the older adults in our lives, who might offer prophetic words of insight and encouragement.

NOTE

† For further discussion of this painting and its relationship to the gospel of Luke, see Heidi J. Hornik and Mikeal C. Parsons, *Illuminating Luke: The Infancy Narrative in Italian Renaissance Painting* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity International Press, November 2003).



HEIDI J. HORNIK

is Associate Professor of Art History at Baylor University in Waco, Texas.