

You don't hear about Anna and Joachim much in the Episcopal church. We give them a feast day, but not much attention beyond that. And it's no mystery: they don't show up in scripture, but they are honored in the Orthodox, Roman and Anglican churches as the parents of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

We have to rely on early church tradition to supply the essential story, the mythology, that we celebrate this evening. Whether there is historical truth in the story or not, we appreciate the theological truth the stories preserve. And so, we remember Mary's parents as devout Jews who lived in the town of Sepphoris, called Zippori in Hebrew scripture. Sepphoris sits on a hilltop in the Lower Galilee, midway between the Mediterranean and Sea of Galilee, just four miles from Nazareth. The city, only recently excavated, was a major Roman and Byzantine city and you can still see the remains of paved colonnaded streets and majestic homes, synagogues and churches.

Sometime around the year 145 C.E., one of our ancestors in the faith captured an account of Mary's family and her birth to satisfy early Christian curiosity about her. The result is an apocryphal Gospel – one not contained in our Bibles – a writing that goes by several names: among them, the Proto-evangelium (or “pre-Gospel”) of James, the Gospel of James, the Infancy Gospel, the Nativity of Mary. The author expands the infancy stories from Matthew and Luke backward in time to include legends of Mary's parents, Joachim and Anna.

The author built these legends from traditions about the birth of John the Baptist and from Hebrew scripture narratives of the births of Isaac and of Samuel (whose mother's name, Hannah, is the original form of Anna). In these stories, Joachim and Anna are a childless, elderly couple who grieved that they would have no posterity. But after years of waiting for a child, an angel appeared to Joachim and Anna separately with the good news that their desire for a child would be fulfilled.

The story says that Joachim remembered how God gave Abraham a son, Isaac. In his sadness, Joachim left Anna to go to the desert where he pitched a tent, and fasted for forty days and nights. Medieval Orthodox tradition says that Joachim went to a cave called Wâdî Qilt, located in the desert between Jerusalem and Jericho. This is the cave where the prophet Elijah hid and was fed by ravens in First Kings. There, an angel came to Joachim and sent him home with the promise that Anna would conceive.

In the meantime, Anna struggled through her own experience of feeling abandoned. The story says that Anna was lamenting and looking toward heaven, when she saw a sparrow's nest. Then, an angel appeared to her and announced that she would conceive and that her child would be spoken of in all the world. Anna promised that, whether the child was male or female, she would

give the child as a gift to God, and the child would minister to God in holy things all the days of its life.

In time, Joachim and Anna, of course, did conceive a child. And local Bedouins and shepherds claim that Anna thanked God at the entrance of the cave at Wâdî Qilt where Joachim had been. The locals named the area “Dair al-Banat,” which means Cloister of Virgins.

Anna’s promise to dedicate this child to God is reminiscent of the way that Hannah dedicated Samuel in First Kings. When the baby girl was delivered, Anna – so the legend goes – said: “My soul has been magnified this day.” According to pious tradition, Anna gave birth to Mary in a cave near the Bethesda Pool in Jerusalem where Jesus would one day perform miracles.

Now, some parts of the Catholic Church insist that Mary was born sinless and conceived without original sin, which is what we mean when we talk about the “immaculate conception.” The idea of Mary being conceived free from original sin is often confused with the idea of the virginal conception of her son, Jesus. Reformation theologians insisted that Mary was born, fully human and with original sin like the rest of us, but that the Holy Spirit purified her so that Jesus was born *of* flesh and blood, but not with *sinful* flesh and blood.

Anglicanism does not require its people to hold Mary's immaculate conception as doctrine, although there are many Anglo-Catholics who believe it to be true. Personally, I don't require anything beyond trusting that God made Mary the perfect vessel to bring Jesus into the world. (We'll talk about that virgin birth another time, but you do have to wonder: if Jesus was born a boy, where did he get that Y-chromosome?)

But back to Joachim and Anna: The legend situates Mary's birth in Jerusalem so that her parent's home would be close to the temple when it came time to present her. When Mary was three years old, Joachim and Anna took her to the temple priest who received her, kissed her and blessed her and said to Mary: “The Lord has magnified your name in all generations. In you, on the last of the days, the Lord will manifest His redemption to the sons of Israel.” And he set her down on the third step of the altar, where God sent grace upon her. Mary danced and, as the story goes: “...and all the house of Israel loved her.”

Tradition says that Joachim died when Mary was six years old and Anna when Mary was eight. And so, Jesus would not have met his grandparents. Still, in some parts of the world, parishes celebrate the feast of Anna and Joachim as Grandparents' Day.

A couple of years ago, Pope Francis was in Rio de Janeiro for World Youth Day on the feast of Joachim and Anna. Here's what he said: “Mary grew up in the home of Joachim and Anne; she was surrounded by their love and faith: in their home she learned to listen to the Lord and to follow his will. Saints Joachim and Anne were part of a long chain of people who had transmitted their faith and love

for God, expressed in the warmth and love of family life, down to Mary, who received the Son of God in her womb and who gave him to the world, to us. How precious is the family as the privileged place for transmitting the faith!”

And given that families come in all kinds of configurations with all kinds of blessings and burdens, this feast day is a good opportunity to reflect on the people and stories and events from our childhood that have profoundly influenced who we are. This feast day is a good opportunity to forgive or to appreciate or to mourn and, in time, to thank God for them all.