

1 Samuel 1:4-20
1 Samuel 2:1-10
Hebrews 10:11-14
Mark 13:1-8

Proper 28 B
St Barnabas, Bainbridge Island
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November 18, 2018

Love More

There will be wars and rumors of wars. Nations will rise up against nations. Earthquakes, fires, famine, the whole apocalyptic mess. Was Jesus predicting the future or was he simply reporting the news? He could have been speaking today. Israel, Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Columbia, Pakistan and our own country too. All experiencing days of distress and anguish, days of heartbreak and fear. There is a terrible litany of a world gone wrong out there. We have all felt the pain of our times so deeply.

But Jesus says something very strange in the face of our fear. He calls these things “the beginning of the birth pangs.” What can he possibly mean? It would seem to contradict everything we know about Jesus, to say that he was endorsing the violence and suffering of apocalypse as the means to some divine end. Ah, but that was not what he was saying. I think what Jesus was saying is that even in the bleakest of times, we should not be afraid. I think what he was saying is that the God of everything is bringing something wonderful to birth and though evil may do its worst, there is nothing that can stop this birth from happening. Remember whose you are, Jesus says. Do not despair when the storms come. Look for the places where God’s future is being born. Trust the promise.

God has been making the world new from forever. There was a whole new world about to be born in the ancient Hebrew Scriptures we read this morning, too. While the little bit we hear is the story of Hannah who begs for and finally births the baby boy she has wanted for so long, this little bit of Hannah’s story is an essential part of the big story of God’s people at another time. A time that felt strangely like our times. A time when their world seemed to be turning upside down too.

While this is a story about a woman named Hannah, a woman who was childless, humiliated and heartsick, this story holds within it the beginnings of the mighty Kingdom of Israel. While this is the story of a longed for and beloved baby boy, it is also a story of God’s prophet who would anoint Israel’s first kings. While this is a story about ordinary people in pretty ordinary circumstances, it is also a story about the way God uses those ordinary people and circumstances to bring about the extraordinary. Hannah’s story is a salvation story – a story where God turns barrenness, hopelessness and despair into new life, hope, thanksgiving and praise.

A lot happens along the road to thanksgiving and praise – and while the circumstances are different, that’s as true for us as it was for Hannah. Like most women of her time, Hannah’s worth to her family and her society was determined by her ability to have children – male children in particular. In her patriarchal world, childbearing was the only thing women could do

that men could not, and her failure to produce children was the source of great shame in that ancient honor shame culture, and horrible suffering too. Hannah's suffering was exacerbated by her particular circumstances. Real and regular people with real and regular character failings made up the cast of characters in her family, and those characters produced some pretty unpleasant family dynamics. And yet the very messy, human characters in this family all contributed to God's great story.

Hannah, the first wife, the wife who could not bear children and yet the most special and beloved wife lived with a heartache so big it could hardly be contained, a pain so profound that no one around her could ever begin to understand. How could they? Hannah was a faithful woman, a persistent and hopeful woman, yet no amount of positive thinking, self-affirmation, wishing or hoping or even praying seemed to take away the hurt inside of her because her self-worth was, according to the world around her, dependent on her ability to produce baby boys. And as long as she continued to define herself by the values of the culture around her, she would remain worthless.

And then there was Peninnah, the second wife, the wildly fertile wife, the wife who tormented Hannah not just by having babies too numerous to mention, but by taunting and teasing and shaming her because she had no children of her own. While I'm sure Peninnah had some redeeming qualities other than the ability to make babies, we're not told of them here. And finally there was Elkanah, Hannah and Peninnah's husband, the patriarch, who loved Hannah in some way that must have mattered to him but didn't make a lick of sense to her. Seriously, this man seems clueless:

"Hannah, why are you sad?"

"Well, I guess it's because I'm worthless as a person in this world."

Hmmmm. "Am I not more to you than 10 sons?"

Well, that only made bad matters worse.

I wish he had told her she was a treasure, worth more than all the sons she could not bear.

Year after year, this faithful family makes its pilgrimage to Shiloh, to offer sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving. And on this particular pilgrimage, at the point we enter into the story today, Hannah had had it! No longer content to accept her pitiful lot, she presented herself before the Lord, weeping and praying, and making her promise.

If you give me a baby boy, I promise to give him back to you.

The priest Eli couldn't take his eyes off of her, she seemed to be blathering on so. "Sober up" he cried "you're making a drunken spectacle of yourself." Oh but Hannah was far from drunk... in fact she'd never been more sober or serious in her life. And once he actually paid attention, the temple priest Eli recognized her prayerfulness and sent her away with a blessing. That blessing would be Samuel, the prophet who heralded great change, not just for Hannah's life, but for the whole future of God's people.

Thousands of years ago, and today too, God makes something extraordinary out of the ordinary. God did that with Hannah, and God will do that with us too. The only requirement is that we be just like her, willing to surrender and to give everything that matters back to God.

What would that look like for you?

I feel quite sure it wouldn't look for me like it did for Hannah. It probably doesn't look like it did for widow whose story we heard last Sunday. I don't imagine it looks like it did for the rich young man whom Jesus told to sell all of his possessions, either. Their sacrificial giving was their own, just as yours is. Just as mine is. There is no measuring in it at all. The widow's 2 cents were worth precisely the same as the rich young man's bags of money would have been, if he'd been able to give them to God. You see, when a gift is sacramental, when it is a recognition of the sacred and an act of worship, it is – well - priceless. That's the beauty of what Jesus was always teaching, and something the apostle Paul was always saying. In Christ there is no longer slave or free, Jew or Greek, male or female, rich or poor. In God's eyes, we are all precious and our gifts are too. As it turns out, a gift of \$10 is worth exactly the same as a gift of \$10,000 when both gifts are given sacrificially. Every sacrificial gift is the same by virtue of the fact that it is sacrificial. Every penny we put into the offering plate or into our pledge represents something we have given up and given back to God. That is a beautiful thing, and something every one of us can all experience great joy in.

Recognizing that everything, absolutely everything comes from God and actually belongs to God is not always easy, but we can learn from Hannah, who came to God in the depths of her sorrow, her heartache, and her brokenness just as she came to God in her unspeakable delight. She prayed passionately even to the point of looking like a drunkard or a prophet, trusting that God' grace was meant for her. She stopped listening to the voices of the people around her who had forgotten that God can do the impossible and believed in the bigger story God is always creating.

Hannah's story is profoundly countercultural. The world doesn't teach or even encourage us to surrender, to offer all that we are and all that we have, to God. The world thinks that strength is found in wealth and power, whether it's the personal self-assertion of individuals or the might of nations and armies. But Hannah prayed and said,
"My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail."

Hannah knew that worldly power is a tiny thing compared to the power of God's love. And while she thanked God as the source of her every blessing, she knew that God's love could only be born in her, that God could only act in and through her, if she were willing to come to God

honestly and transparently, boldly asking for everything and offering everything back. That's the way God's love gets born in the world... it has to be born in us. And when it is born in us, something unimaginable happens. We become part of the eternal flow of giving and receiving that is the life of the living God. When God's love is born in us, we really do begin to love as God loves.

Hannah's story is not about praying well enough or hard enough or even about asking God to give us what we want. Hannah's story, and our story, is about surrendering ourselves so completely that the God to whom all hearts are open, all desires known and from whom no secrets are hid, can bless us with more than we could ever desire or pray for ourselves. That's all God wants of us. Just everything. God wants us to give everything. Not just the precious things, but the shadowy and shady things too. Our petty indulgences. Our desire to get what's ours at the expense of people who have nothing or little. Our willingness to close our eyes to the need around us. Our willingness to exclude everyone who isn't like us. Yes. Everything.

You see, that's how the impossible happens. That's how God's love is born, how God's kingdom of blessing finds a place in this broken and barren world. And when that happens, those who were hungry will be fat with spoil, the poor will be made rich, the lowly exalted, the needy lifted from the ash heap where they will sit like the princes and princesses they are.

There will still be wars and rumors of wars, but don't be afraid. God's love is being born in the hearts of people everywhere. In Israel, Palestine, Syria, Yemen, Somalia, Columbia, Pakistan and right here, in our hearts too. God's impossibly expansive and radically inclusive love is being born everywhere. It's growing everywhere, bringing life and light and blessing. Don't be afraid, Jesus tells us. Love more. Amen.