

Pentecost 24B 2009

Proper 28

Texts: 1 Samuel 1: 4-20

1 Samuel 2:1-10

Hebrews 10: 11-14, (15-18), 19-25

Mark 13: 1-8

“ Let your servant find favor in your sight.” 1 Samuel 1:18

Earlier in the week when I was proofing the bulletin I noticed something I had never seen before. You will see that the Psalm appointed for the day isn't in the Psalter, but is an extension of our reading in 1 Samuel.

The readings entitle it “Hannah’s Response” or “Hannah’s Prayer.” That is partly correct. It is Hannah’s response to God hearing her petition and granting her the blessing of a child, her son, Samuel.

It really is not a prayer; that was said in the presence of Eli, the priest at Shiloh. It is rather a song of praise and worship. It is the song of the heart of a desperate and desolate woman that had come before God with faith that God would hear her plea. It is a song of thanksgiving that what she knew of God was true and just and compassionate.

God had heard the anguish of someone who was one of the lowest of people. He heard the cries of not just a woman, but also a barren woman. Of one that was seen by her culture and society as being far from God’s grace because she could not bear a child, the future, for her husband.

This story takes place at a time of great transition in Israel. Israel is still a loose federation of tribes. The tribes face threats from without, mostly from the Philistines, as well as from within; the priestly house of Eli, the keeper of the Ark and the sacred traditions was very corrupt.

Israel looked around the empires of the world at that time and decided that it really, really, wanted a king. Israel wanted to be brought together under one leader rather than to rely on judges. The story of Hannah giving birth to Samuel is a pivotal hinge on which this very important part of Hebrew history swings. It is Samuel that will anoint the first kings of Israel.

The first and second Books of Samuel, which were originally one book, were written at the end of the period of judges. It was a time of great moral, religious, political and social chaos. Nothing was sure or certain. The tribes just couldn't see how they could survive if each went its own way. The tribes were no match for the military powers surrounding them. So, as a way to try and insure their survival they decide that a king is necessary.

At this time we are told of a family made up of Elkanah and Hannah. Despite years of trying to conceive no child is born. As was the custom of the day, Elkanah takes another wife, Peninnah, to ensure his legacy. Immediately she starts having children. Peninnah may be wife number two but she is first in the baby-making department and this is something she never lets Hannah forget. The most painful part of Hannah's life is repeatedly put out in the public eye; Hannah was always reminded of her failure in the one area where women were honored in society.

Hannah's failure was in plain sight, just as all of Peninnah's children were in plain sight, running around the camp and playing. Was there ever a day that Hannah wasn't taunted and humiliated by Peninnah? Was there ever a day that, even if Peninnah said nothing, a knowing glance was not thrown Hannah's way? I doubt it. Hannah's pain was too raw, too deep, too overwhelming for the digs and humiliation to be anything other than a daily occurrence.

The ridicule was especially painful on the yearly trek to make sacrifices at the temple of Shiloh. The family would travel long, dusty roads to make their offerings and at the banquet each member of the family was given a portion the meats. Elkanah's heart was with Hannah and seeing her in distress at these times he would give her a double portion...what was meant to be an act of comfort really just emphasized how different she was and why.

Hannah leaves the banquet and goes to the temple to pray. She prays fervently and emotionally but silently. Eli, the priest, sees her and accuses her of having had too much to drink. Eli completely misreads the situation; as clergy have been know to do occasionally.

Hannah has had enough of being looked down upon. She speaks up for herself. She tells Eli that he is wrong. She tells Eli that he should not look down on her, a servant of the Lord, as she pours her heart out to God. She claims her “vexation” and “anxiety” and Eli sees that he is wrong and tells her that God will grant her petition. Eli doesn’t know what that petition was, but he asks that it be blessed.

Hannah rises from her position of supplication and goes back to camp to her husband. We are told she is no longer sad. Hannah has laid her pain at God’s feet, has come to God in her most vulnerable and humiliating state, and has left in the knowledge that her life is in God’s hands.

Hannah bears Samuel and keeps the promise she made to God if God would grant her a child; she brings him to the temple and gives him back to be consecrated into God’s service. How heart wrenching that must have been for her. How heart wrenching, how courageous and how grace-filled an act of love that was. She gave back to God what God had given her to be used in God’s service.

Hannah’s story is Israel’s story. Hannah’s redemption from barrenness to new life is Israel’s redemption as well. Israel’s monarchy is born out of what was believed to have been dead. Israel’s monarchy is born out of Hannah’s faithfulness to God, and God’s faithfulness to his chosen people.

There are two aspects to this story that really touch me. The first is that Hannah gives up her anguish and pain before she conceives. She does not know what will transpire, but having laid herself bare to God she has faith that God will use the situation as God needs to. She has faith that she is worthy of God’s grace and blessing. Others may look down on her but Hannah knows that God looks upon her with mercy and love.

Having given her pain up to God Hannah has done something else too; she has made room in her life for the grace she knows God will bestow on her. With God holding her pain she can dry her tears and go about her life with peace, open to the many blessings that are already hers as well as being open to those that are to be revealed. The space that her

pain once occupied in her heart has been opened to receive so much more grace than she could have anticipated.

The second thing that moves me is that she gives back to God, what God gave her, for God's service. God kept God's end of the bargain and now she keeps hers. Hannah dedicates what she loves most in her life, her son, to God's service and kingdom.

Hannah knows that God is the main character in the story of her life. God isn't on the periphery; God is at the center. But God isn't only in the center. God's love and influence run all through her life and all through the life of God's chosen.

Eugene Peterson is an Old Testament scholar and Presbyterian minister. He writes that the characters in this story lead large lives because they live in the largeness of God, that "God is the country where they live."¹

How many times do we believe that we are the main characters in the stories of our lives? How many times do we think that it is our life and we can do with it as we please? The truth of the matter is that faithful people know that their lives aren't about them, they are about God.²

God is not a part of our story, we are a part of God's story. It is not we who have made room for God in our hearts, but God who has made room for us in his. That is the grace we are promised in Jesus Christ.

And what is the appropriate response, what is the natural song we should sing when we recognize God's working in and through our life? It is the song of service. Our service to God is our thanksgiving and worship. Our service to God is our returning to God what God first gave us.

So often we argue about who is worthy of God's grace and who we want to share it with. So many times it becomes a numbers game of how many attend on a given Sunday, how many souls we save through our proclamation (and by the way we have absolutely no ability to save

¹ Praise the Holy One (Nov. 9-15, 2009) Kate Huey, www.ucc/worship/Samuel/November-15-2009.html

² *ibid*

anyone...that is God's job, not ours). The Church would be better off if we followed Hannah's example and in thanksgiving gave back to God the grace God gives us in the form of service to God.

In two weeks we begin the season of Advent; a season of waiting for another child to be born. Throughout those weeks we first will hear of the barrenness of another woman, Elizabeth, and the new life God gives her as she bares to the people of Israel, her son, John the Baptist.

We will also hear of the waiting of another woman and the birth of another son. Hannah gave birth to a prophet that would anoint Israel's kings. Elizabeth gives birth to the prophet that would announce the coming of the Messiah. Mary gives birth to the King, the Messiah, the Grace-giver, who anoints all humanity and claims all of us as his own forever.

For that gift of grace in our Savior let us turn away from self-interest and self-fulfillment and towards the fulfillment of God's kingdom. Let us rejoice in the fact that we are a part of God's on-going story of salvation. Let us rest in the peace of knowing that we are in God's heart. And let us in thanksgiving recommit ourselves to God's service.

Amen.

