

“Remembering”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 15, 2009

Rev. John Wahl

I Samuel 2:1-10

I Samuel 1:1-20

I know God will not give me anything I can't handle. I just wish [God] didn't trust me so much. Mother Teresa, 20th century

As we approach the end of the Christian year, we also come nearer in scripture to the ultimate goal of the Christian year – which is giving thanks. We learn through the story and the people of the Bible that God is faithful at all times and in all circumstances: that the grace we find in God – revealed to us through Jesus Christ – is ours to receive, and to share.

In two weeks, we will enter the season of Advent: the time of preparation for the coming of our Lord. I say this not to remind you to go out and shop for a new set of purple candles for your Advent wreath (especially since you can make your own wreath after church on that Sunday), or to remind you to start counting down the number of shopping days that remain before Christmas. No, we are reminded this Lord's day that our faith journeys are not a simply annual cycles. They are journeys toward a defined destination: to grow deeper in our understanding of God's presence in our lives and to participate more fully in our God-given purposes: to proclaim and live out our thanksgiving for God's salvation; by grace, through faith.

Today we listened to the lengthy and detailed story of a faithful woman, Hannah, and the long-awaited birth of her son, Samuel. This was preceded by what follows, the song of Hannah: giving thanks and praise to God for hearing and remembering her heart-felt prayers of supplication – that a child may be born to her: a child that she dedicates to the purposes of God; a leader who would follow God's leading and bring God's people back into remembrance of God. Samuel will be the last of the judges who will guide the Israelites during a time when the people of God had been doing whatever they wanted, not what God wanted them to do. Through his faithfulness, Samuel will help the Israelites discover their first king: the one who will lead the people of God to fulfill their chosen purpose to worship God in the land that God has chosen for them; the long-awaited land which is flowing with milk and honey; the one promised to them after their deliverance from slavery in Egypt; the place where they will be free to embrace God's promise of being their God, and that they are God's people.

But, today's story focuses on Hannah, whose name, in Hebrew, means "grace." It is the story of her perseverance through a pain-filled and seemingly hopeless situation, and her faith in God through which we see God remembering her. Hannah's story is not unlike the story of numerous women in the Old Testament who were thought to be unable to bear children but, after a long period of anguish, eventually did. Through these most unlikely of women, the promise of God's blessing of new life came to pass, so that the story of God's people could move forward.

There is a connection also from Hannah's story not only with these improbable mothers of the past, but also with an unlikely mother in the future. Mary, the mother of Jesus, was not barren, but God also worked through her in a different, although similarly miraculous way. Out of common circumstances, God brings forth a divinely-inspired story of fulfillment; "great things seem to come from what looks like nothing, from humbleness, from what appears small or barren."¹ As with Hannah, Mary is inspired to sing a song of praise that God has remembered her and blessed her with a child that will be a blessing to others. Like Hannah, Mary recognized God working in her and through her to bring healing to the suffering, release to the captives, and salvation to the world.

Hannah was the beloved wife of her husband, Elkanah. Each year, they would make a pilgrimage to the holy city of Shiloh in order to make sacrifices and pray that God might bless them with children; but each year, they remained childless. Elkanah therefore took a second wife, Peninnah, who gave him both sons and daughters. For whatever reason (and we can imagine some of those reasons) Peninnah decides to make Hannah's life miserable. They become rivals for their husband's attention and affection, and the second wife never lets the first forget which one of them has met her obligations as a wife –which in those days meant to become a mother.

The tension mounts during each year's annual pilgrimage to Shiloh. It eats away at Hannah's spirit, to the point that she is literally unable to eat. Powerless as she feels to defend herself or change her situation, Hannah does the only thing she knows to do; she gets up and goes to the Temple to pray. Hannah is a descendant of "a praying people" who experience God as the center of their lives. And right at the center of their prayer life is the prayer of petition. "If you give me a son," Hannah promises to God, "then I will dedicate him to your service – he will be a nazirite – an unblemished sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving." Hannah may have felt as if she had nothing to give, but knew that anything she might be given would come to her from God, and to God it would be dedicated.

¹ Kate Huey, "Praise the Holy One" from *Weekly Seeds*, November, 2009.

To us, this may sound like bargaining, and who among us has not bargained with God in prayer? “Just get me through this day,” we plea, “and I will change.” And that is what Hannah does. Through prayer, her attitude and outlook change. No longer does she refuse the portion that her husband, Elkanah, offers to her; instead she returns home and eats. And we are told that “her countenance was sad no longer.” Although her situation has not yet changed, she has vowed to change. The taunting from Peninnah no longer matters, for she has found her strength in God. And in due time, we are told, God did remember her and she gave birth to a son, who she named Samuel and dedicated to God.

But to end the story there would be to ignore what happened to Hannah while she was at the Temple. Isn't this what we want to know – how it is that an encounter with God can change us, and how it is that the church can be that place where life-changing experiences can take place?

At the Temple, Hannah begins to weep and mumble her prayer to God. It may have felt awkward to her, and it certainly appeared out-of-the-ordinary to Eli, the priest, who asks her whether she has been drinking. If nothing else, his lack of understanding should serve as a needed reminder to clergy and other regular church-goers that much of what happens here does so in spite of – rather than because of – us. By appearance only, we cannot know the longings of the hearts of others, but should allow this holy place to remain holy; adding our blessing – as Eli does – to encourage worshippers to live out the changes that God brings about in their lives.

Eugene Peterson has described this beautifully: "To Eli, the normal way of prayer, is by means of ritual, incense, and animal sacrifice, a gathering of the community that is directed by a priest. And then Hannah shows up, without bringing a sacrifice, without asking directions from the priest, and simply prays, soaring past all the liturgical conventions of her age, boldly presenting her petition before her God without benefit of clergy. She uses her own words, her own voice, without intermediaries."²

The bedrock of our Christian and Reformed tradition is the priesthood of all believers. Each of us, like Hannah, can rise up from our present painful situations and seek God through prayer. When we are down, we can lift our eyes and our hearts to God. The priests of old used to make sacrifice after sacrifice, but never knew for sure whether the sacrifices were pleasing to God. In Christ, we know the one who has risen from the depths to glory – who has made the one, eternal sacrifice that is sufficient for us all. As have Christians throughout the ages, when we bring our brokenness and pain to God, we can be lifted. Sometimes, we are

² As quoted by Kate Huey

given the strength to literally get up and take the next step forward, other times we are provided with a new spirit and a new outlook on life. The gospel promise is that God remembers us; that we have been resurrected with Christ to a new life where the pain and the loss can be left behind. Like Hannah, we can rise up, first to enter into God's presence in prayer, and then to live our lives in praise and thanksgiving.

I will close with this quote from Canadian minister, Malcolm Sinclair:

At church, strange seeds are planted in the soul. As they germinate, their hosts begin to look forward, beyond one life span, beyond one set of preoccupations, beyond one political agenda, beyond personal laundry lists of hopes and fears. Promised children wait in the wings of tomorrow. They are pressing to be born. They will need witnesses, nurses and midwives. They will require protectors, singers of songs, keepers of their story, advocates to the broader community, and companions for the hills and valleys that are sure to come.³

Sisters and brothers, God remembers your prayers. In Christ, the sacrifice has already been made; through grace, by faith, we can claim and proclaim the promise that God gives life to those who place their trust in the Lord. And so, let us be the church, the body of Christ re-created on earth, the place where people rise up and come to and where people rise up from and move forward. AMEN.

³ G. Malcolm Sinclair in *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 4