

26th Sunday after Pentecost

November 18, 2018

Church of the Advent

### **Hannah and the Temple**

Our readings today give us something to ponder on this next to the last Sunday after Pentecost with just one more week of Ordinary Time before Advent, and its shift to the time of preparation for the coming of the Christ, and our scriptural journey through his life, ministry and purpose on earth. This week, near the end of one cycle and the beginning of another, we are offered images of both birth and death.

First we have the story of Hannah, the mother of Samuel. Hannah is a wife of Elkanah, and we are told she was his favorite wife, even though she was barren and unable to give him a son--the first duty of a wife in the context of their ancient Hebrew culture. Elkanah went every year to the Temple to offer sacrifice to God, as he was supposed to do, and once the appropriate animal was burned on the altar of sacrifice, he fed the cooked meat to his family, after providing first for the priests in the Temple. The story tells us he saved the best portion for Hannah, his favorite, though she never felt deserving of this special treatment. Then as the story goes, Hannah went with sorrow and sense of personal failure to present herself in the Temple, in the place women were allowed to go, and poured out her heart to God, keeping her voice silent. Eli the priest watched her from a distance; mistaking her emotional prayer for a display of drunkenness. He gave her grief about it, but Hannah defended herself, and even though she did not reveal to Eli the nature of her prayer, she managed to touch some compassion within him. Eli told her to go in peace, that her prayer would be answered, not even knowing what Hannah's prayer was--not knowing that Hannah had prayed to God for a son whom she was willing to sacrifice back to God, just for the privilege of carrying and bearing him and loving him in his infancy. Then later when Hannah's prayer was answered, she conceived and delivered the son

she called Samuel. She kept him with her until she felt the boy was old enough for her to honor her promise to give him back to God by taking him to the priests in the Temple. There Eli raised him up as his own son for God's work, preparing him for his special call to prophesy.

Now in this day and age we would find it unthinkable for a woman to give up her young child to a community of old men, and I often wonder about Hannah's second thoughts on the bargain she struck with God; I wonder what it cost her in grief and heartache, though the scripture tells us that Hannah fulfilled her promise to God with a song of praise very similar to the song Mary sang when she was told she would carry the Son of God who would be named Jesus. Hannah later went on to have 5 more children. Samuel grew into a wise Judge of Israel, the one who was sent by God to call forth and anoint David, Israel's first king. In Hannah's story we see barrenness, prayer, restitution in the gift of birth, and then the re-gift of the gift back to God's purposes for the wider community.

The gospel reading today would at first seem to be more about death--very doomsday. Its apocalyptic message predicts the end of days and raises the anxiety level in a way that is not tied to any particular time in history. Jesus was prompted to offer a prophesy in the style of the book of Daniel in response to a comment by one of the disciples who seemed to be stunned at the vast size of the Temple building in Jerusalem. At about 90 feet long and 150 feet high The Temple was probably the largest structure he had ever seen. First built in the reign of Solomon, The Temple had absorbed vast resources of his kingdom to build it. It was destroyed during the Babylonian exile and rebuilt after the Israelites returned home, and then remodeled and embellished by Herod the Great. By the time of Jesus, the Temple had been under its reconstruction for over 45 years. The courtyards were as large as football fields surrounded by walls several stories high and connected by large gates. The stones which were so impressive to the disciple in the gospel were been large enough to weigh several tons each. The Temple was

destroyed by the Romans around 70 AD during an unsuccessful Jewish rebellion, leaving only the large wall standing on one side. Known as the Wailing Wall, it is a well visited site in Jerusalem where even today pilgrims tuck their prayers on paper into the cracks between the blocks.



As large and powerful as the Temple was at the time, it must have been frightening to hear what Jesus said about no stone being left standing, that all would be thrown down. All of this talk came soon before Jesus was killed, an event which would likely seem to the disciples as momentous as the falling down of the great Temple, which would be gone again in one generation. Yet even when speaking of war, famine and earthquake, Jesus told them not to be alarmed, not to be afraid. These calamities were likened to the pain of birth, which when finished would give way to life and joy, much as did the good news of the resurrection of Jesus.

Death led into life, and life to death in an endless cycle of life and death, rebirth and new life set into motion at the Dawn of Creation and continuing to this season, to this day. Destruction always eventually gives way to the birth of something new.

Where are our lessons here, from the story of the barrenness of Hannah and from the vision of the destruction of the most powerful symbol of life in Israel, the Temple? At this juncture of saying goodbye to Ordinary Time as we look forward to Advent and new beginnings?

The first lesson is that nothing we build in this world, not buildings, not careers, or reputations, or wealth, or security, or family, or health, or ambition or desire—nothing in this world is everlasting. Our vulnerability as humankind is as close as one super storm, one wildfire, one betrayal of relationship, one instant between life and death.

The second lesson is that we are not to be alarmed--not to be afraid-- because the Almighty God is as close and responsive to our prayers as he was to Hannah, who knelt on the hard cold floor of a public place and without a sound laid down her supplication from the heart of her barrenness. When we know this, our anxieties and fears about survival and loss, about tenuous power and the lack of it, about place and identity, all fall away--with no stone left standing--to be ultimately transformed into a song of rejoicing, of praise, and of thanksgiving. Life and death and rebirth to new life are all seen as gifts from God to be cherished, honored and returned to God by giving ourselves back to the world.

How can we take these lessons with us into the season of Advent, with its themes of becoming, of journey through darkness into light, of God doing something new in the world? What barrenness is God waiting to fill in our lives? What prayers do we bring to God with such longing that others might think us drunk with expectation? And when our prayers are answered and we are filled up with the joyful pangs of birth and new life in Christ, how are we being

called to nurture it? What are we being called to give back to the world out of the abundance of our blessings? These are questions to ponder this week as we seek the company and comfort of family and friends to practice giving thanks. May we keep them close and allow them to draw us into an Advent season filled with hope and blessing. Amen.