

First Scripture Reading 1 Samuel 1

Second Scripture Reading Mark 10:35-45

In the coming weeks leading up to Advent, we will be looking at the life of Samuel, the last of the judges, the first of the prophets, the man who began the monarchy of Israel, which would lead to the coming of the true king of Israel. We will meditate on the life of this man who is so crucial to God's history of salvation, which lead up to the birth, death and crucifixion of Christ, a man who is so often overlooked or we only see in glimpses over the course of the lectionary cycle.

Where we enter the story of the man who would become a hinge in the history of Israel, a chosen mechanism whom God would use in the fulfillment of the salvation of mankind, with a story so familiar to the family drama that is the history of Israel. We find the patriarch of a family, a certain man named Elkanah, a man who is not very extraordinary in any way, so we are only told where he is from. We find him with two wives, one with children and the other, the favorite wife, without. We find Hannah the beloved wife who is barren. The story of Samuel, who God would use as a crucial part of His salvation of mankind begins before he is even born. With some called by God, Scripture begins their stories at the moment they are called, breaking with the life they had before whether it be farmers, tax collectors, fisherman, but for Samuel we are tossed into the dysfunctional family of Elkanah, the tormented life of Hannah before he is even born. From this dysfunctional family, from this life filled with anxieties, God's purpose for Samuel, for His creation, is already being laid out.

We are told that each year Elkanah and his family would go to the Shiloh to worship and sacrifice to God. Like any family vacation, it is anything but a vacation. We are told that each

year, Elkanah would give to Peninnah and her children a portion of the offering, but to Hannah, he would give a double portion, because he loved her, even though she could not have children. She cannot escape this fact that her society would declare as a glaring inadequacy, even her worship is shaped by and a constant reminder of her barrenness, something completely out of her control. The text tells us that Elkanah did this because he loved her in spite of her barrenness, but for Hannah it probably felt more like pity, than love. And to make matters worse, we are told that each year Peninnah, would harass her, would provoke her severely because she was unable to have children. Each year Peninnah would throw it in her face just how worthless their society declared her to be, something she has no control over.

We all run into these people don't we, people who know exactly which buttons to push, but beyond that, those who know exactly what we do not like about ourselves, those who know exactly how to remind us of that part of ourselves in the most biting way possible. When I was in seminary, there was someone who tried that by telling me that I am not a scholar and that I do not look good in flannel. The second one did not have the stinging power that he hoped, but admittedly the first was something I struggled with going to Princeton. An inadequacy I believed I had, and tried to hide. These people always seem to find what we secretly hope people will never notice about us, that which we hide from the world, and guard like a wounded animal. They know exactly what makes us feel unwhole, exactly the part which feels like it is missing from ourselves, exactly what we are yearning for in our lives. For Hannah it is her inability to have children, the woman who would be the mother of Samuel, already feels so inadequate and for years Peninnah continually prods her, continues to make her feel like dirt. Year after year she is subjected to torments by someone the text calls her rival. She desperately wants to experience

wholeness in her life, to fulfill society's one hope for women, its one definition of meaning, to be loved for who she is, not in spite of something she cannot control.

Our inability to find true wholeness is something that plaques us just as it did poor Hannah. As Christians we are always left dealing with the tension between the way the world will be according to the promise, and the way the world is. With the tension of the way we are promised to be and the way that we are now. But this tension can be overbearing, no matter how many times we are reminded of this tension, it can leave us needing to be made whole. Everywhere we turn different programs promise to make us whole, make families whole, communities whole, the world whole, we are reminded just how much we want to be whole, even if whole is never really defined. The desire for wholeness becomes all-consuming because of overwhelming feelings of being fractured and torn apart. Torn by dreams of the future and ridiculed by failures of our past. Torn by the longing to get life right and the nagging suspicion that we are fatally flawed. Torn apart by the desire to be loved but terrified of being known for our brokenness. Hannah, like so many others, desperately wants to be whole, to fix the part of her life which she believes is broken, to no longer be tormented by her rival, and then maybe things would be ok. But God only promises to break in to our brokenness, He does not promise to paste our broken pieces back together. Our lives need to come under the healing of God, but that does not mean God's healing will fit into our yearnings to have our pain taken away. God is breaking into the broken life of Hannah, into the broken lives of all but not to paste the broken pieces together.

The text goes on to tell us poor broken Hannah, "wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah said to her, 'Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?'" Well the answer is clearly no, and who can blame her, she

has spent years having her worship of God disrupted by her rival. Each year her double portion feeling less like a symbol of love and more like a consolation prize for an unfulfilled life. For years her worship of God has forcibly focused on her brokenness, it has been on what she lacks, on the part of herself which is empty, the part of herself which is unwhole. But instead of it helping her come to God as the source of her healing, she comes to God as the one to fulfill her yearnings. She has spent years hoping that if only God will provide her with a child, a son preferably, she can be happy. For years she has contented herself, kept herself going by dreams of a future fulfilled by one small wish. Like so many others she makes way through life by always saying if only, if only. If only I were to find someone to love me and share my life with me, but once they begin to find that marriage is unfulfilling in the all consuming way they had hoped for, so they say if only I had a child to give my life meaning. But then those children begin to grow and learn to say “I hate you” either with their words or deeds, and parents look forward to having their kids move on, if only we can get our kids through school and out of the house. But soon it becomes if only my children would visit, if only our fractured relationship would heal before my health fades, if only I had enough life left to see my family whole again. This wasting away of life always saying if only, if only, is an all too real tragedy in the lives of too many. And it is something that we find too often in the Biblical narrative, the barren woman desperately trying to find meaning in her society, fulfillment in her own life.

The text goes on to tell us that Hannah went and presented herself before the Lord, alone without her husband, without her rival, without her double portion, and she began to weep and pray “if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch

his head.” If only you remember your servant, and give your servant a male child, I will set him apart, dedicated not to my fulfillment but to the fulfillment of your holy promise. In this moment of weakness, when Hannah has reached her breaking point, she does something remarkable, something nearly impossible. We could be cynical and say that she was bargaining with God, that she reached her lowest point and was reaching out for any bargaining chip she could have with God. But I do not think that is what is happening within this narrative, yes Hannah has been broken, tormented, had her brokenness shoved to the forefront of her marital life and spiritual life, and she has finally broken emotionally. She is beyond help from any word of comfort from her husband, no amount of talk about love or double portions will satisfy her, so in this moment which is so bitter and low, and hard she turns to God and pledges her child to the service of God. That the entire life of this unrealized man’s life would be devoted to God, from what entered his body to the hair on his head. He would be set apart, separated for devotion to God. This seems like an impossible promise to make, to pray the tragic prayer, if only, but then redefine it, to say if only you will give me a child, which I will offer up to you.

As Hannah is making her impassioned plea, Eli the old priest appears, believing this woman is drunk. He rebukes her for making a drunken spectacle of herself, and she says to him, “No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord”. When you need someone to tell you, I am deeply troubled, you’re doing pastoral care wrong. She has to tell the old man, “I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time”, and then without missing a beat Eli tells the woman “Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him”. As I read the text, the image that it paints is of a man so dumbfounded by this woman coming to God out of deep personal need, that once he realizes his own mistake calling her a drunken spectacle,

he sends her away with a canned comforting phrase. Eli, this old priest just tells her to go in peace, the Lord will grant your petition, because he does not know what it is, so he cannot be more specific than that in his platitude. The text leaves it ambiguous as to whether he was warmed by this encounter with a woman pouring out her soul to the Lord, or if he simply wanted her to leave, having already given the worst pastoral care ever. Whatever his motivations were, Hannah went away and was sad no longer.

Amazingly Hannah leaves and is able to go on with her life, she goes back and even finds the strength to eat something with the husband who has let her be tormented by her rival. Eli's canned answer, which sounds an awful like God will provide actually helps. As anyone who has ever grieved a loss can attest to, the platitudes which everyone says over and over again, grasping for something to say to those grieving, do not help at all. It does not fill the emptiness you feel, it does not give you the wholeness that you desperately want, so in this moment do these platitudes find redemption? Well, no. What happened in Hannah's sad tormented life was not the triumph of comforting sentences, but the triumph of God's healing. The triumph of God in the life of a woman who can never be whole no matter how many children she has, the triumph of God's healing which is able to hold the tension between God's promised future and our current disappointments. The triumph of God's healing in a world which comes to God in great anxiety and torment, praying if only, if only and redefines it, if only you look to God for your healing, you will have the peace you need. Your petition may not be filled, your married life may never give you the all-encompassing fulfillment, your children may not give your life the meaning you hoped for, your life will leave you feeling empty and in need of wholeness, but God will enter into that brokenness and give you peace.

In time Hannah had a son and named him Samuel. The text jumps over any joy, pomp or circumstance that accompanied the birth, it jumps from his birth to the family going back to Shiloh to worship God. Hannah tells her husband “As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, that he may appear in the presence of the Lord, and remain there forever; I will offer him as a nazirite for all time.” The text jumps right from Samuel’s birth to who he is dedicated to be for all time. He will forever be in the presence of the Lord, offered to the Lord by Hannah not as the double portion consolation prize given to her by her husband, but her son, whom she asked the Lord for. Samuel, the son that Hannah agonized and cried if only for, the son which could forever shut up her rival, the son who Elkanah probably did not think Hannah would truly give up, is to be dedicated not to Hannah’s fulfillment but the fulfillment of God’s promise. To the healing that only God can bring, the healing which broke into Hannah’s life, Samuel will forever be dedicated in all that he does. Elkanah told Hannah to do what seemed best to her, and once she had weaned him, Hannah took the child Samuel to Shiloh, to the old priest Eli.

By this time Eli has probably forgotten who Hannah ever was, but she reminds him saying, “I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the Lord. For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him”. This is the final moment when Hannah can change her mind, and take Samuel home, letting him be the short term fulfillment to her emptiness, but she tells Eli that as long as Samuel lives he is given to the Lord. As long as Samuel lives, he is not dedicated to my happiness to filling the emptiness in my life, the unwholeness I feel but is forever given to the Lord who has healed me, who is working towards the healing of the world. This is the story of Samuel, the one given to the empty woman, given to a nation in need, to be an instrument for God’s work in the world. Scripture could have easily skipped over this story, we have plenty of stories of barren women who miraculously give

birth, but it hands down to us through time the story of Samuel, who from before his birth was an offering to the God who allows us to live without wholeness, to stop looking for the temporary fixes to our emptiness which yearns for more, and instead turn to the God who breaks into our lives and fills them with His grace. The chapter ends by simply saying “She left him there for the Lord”. Let us leave our hopes for wholeness before God.