

Christ Church + Washington Parish

The Rev. Cara Spaccarelli

The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year A, 1 Samuel 1:1-18

November 18, 2018¹

Another warm and fuzzy text from Mark this morning – the gospel of Mark was written around the time that the temple in Jerusalem is under threat by the Romans or it may have even been destroyed already. Regardless, the question is out there – what does it mean when God’s house, the center of our faith, the temple, is no longer? Jesus says in Mark that it is just one of many signs, it is just the beginning of the trials and tumult. The question then becomes as the text goes on - How do you remain faithful in these tumultuous times?

Which is also incidentally the question that we face in the reading from Samuel this morning. If Mark is kind of on the macro-level of trials and tumult, Samuel brings it to the microlevel, the personal – what happens when the tumultuous times are inside you or inside someone you care for? As a faithful person, what do you do when sadness or despair takes over and is resistant to every effort to rationalize it away or move it out?

This is no fairy tale story we have today. The story of Samuel opens with a strong assertion of place and person. Nine proper names dominate the opening sentence, three referring to places and six to persons. Two of whom become Samuel’s parents, Hannah and Elkanah. This is no once up on a time story; no timeless moral lesson here; we are firmly set down in a particular

¹ *Disclaimer: I do not read my sermons so actual wording of sermon may be different when preached. Lots of grace would be appreciated for grammatical errors as I both write for the ear and spend time on delivery rather than doing a thorough editing.*

place with four generations of history. The problem that faces them is as real today as it was back then; the dynamic tension between this husband and wife recognizable in any marriage and most relationships of any significance and longevity. Hannah – the one whose grief persists – and Elkanah – the one who can do nothing about it.

Hannah is not the first barren woman in Scripture and she won't be the last. While barrenness had societal implications about worth for a person in that time, that was not Hannah's problem. Hannah's husband, Elkanah, doesn't care that she can't have children. He's got kids with the other wife. He loves Hannah for who she is, and he does his best to show it. Yet Hannah doesn't feel better. Elkanah pleads with her, "Why are you weeping? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" Isn't my love for you, isn't my life with you enough to bring you joy?

Hannah doesn't answer.

We could try to think of other things Elkanah could have said that would have been better. In these times, there are far more things that you shouldn't say, then things that you clearly should, but all in all Elkanah doesn't do too badly. But for anyone who has dealt with the profound pain of infertility knows, all words are insufficient.

Hannah has an "unsettled ache" deep within. Her longing for something beautiful and life-giving is met month after month with the reminder that it isn't going to happen. And its absence and the longing left her with a deep unsettled ache that is resistant to the array of remedies we

throw at it. Positive thinking, wishing, hoping, praying, distractions, loving friends and spouses, nothing makes the ache go away. No matter how many things are going right, the ache for what is not there remains.²

Grief, persistent loneliness, depression can cause a similar unsettled ache. It impacts individuals and relationships. Last year we had a dinner for church couples who were celebrating momentous anniversaries and reflecting on life in long marriages. One couple shared that the most difficult year of their marriage was when the wife's mother died. It was a year that grief descended on her and she was present, but emotionally absent, from the family's life. No one to blame. Nothing to say that would fix it. The unsettled ache took up the spare bedroom in a way that touched everyone, and they knew that it couldn't be wished or discussed away. It just was there.

And it's not just marriages. Variations of this same conversation between Hannah and Elkanah can occur between close friends, between parent and child, whenever the unsettled ache becomes so strong that it cannot be ignored. Like an unwanted roommate who never leaves the house, it takes up space in your relationship, twinging every conversation, puncturing every silence. This ache that no one is capable of evicting. I can't imagine this is the first time Hannah and Elkanah have had this same conversation. He wishing that he could rationalize or cajole the ache away;

² The language of "unsettled ache" comes from Alphonetta Wines post, https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2618

Hannah deeply aware of the futility of such a gesture. Both of them face to face with the powerlessness to unload this burden.

How do they remain faithful in face of this tumult in themselves, in their relationship? They both go to God in this text. Separately. Year after year Elkanah makes double the sacrifices on Hannah's behalf at the altar in Shiloh, placing his gratitude and care for her on the altar. It is what he knows how to do. Hannah does something different on this year's pilgrimage to Shiloh. No doubt she has prayed to God in the past, but this time she pours out her soul. The normal way of prayer at that time was through ritual, sacrifice, incense, gatherings directed by the priest – somewhat similar to how we gather for prayer on Sunday mornings. Hannah shows up in the sanctuary outside all of that and prays without a script, privately, in her own words with only God to hear.

Eli, the priest in the temple, hears her. After a few mis-words himself, he wishes her peace and prays for her. She returns home and eats again with her husband. The ache still palpable but a healing of it has begun. A healing fueled by the comfort taken in a stranger's words and in the trust that, after pouring her heart out, God hears and sees and remembers. All is not solved, but the couple moves forward one meal at a time.

Even though she gets pregnant, the ache must have lived on in Hannah and Elkanah. They give their son Samuel away. Hannah leaves Samuel, a toddler just weaned, in the sanctuary at Shiloh,

safe in God's hands but far from her arms, to be raised by the priests there just as she had prayed she would in her prayer. Her heart must have ached for him for the rest of her life, but it seems, given her song that we read in place of the psalm today, that it is a settled ache. A settled ache that coexists with joy. An ache that does not feel as so raw, so pervasive, so life-defining as it once did. An ache that does not look to be settled by the changes and chances of this life. An ache that trusts that God is doing something with the suffering and loss to bring goodness and life out of it. Hannah trusts that God is going to use her son Samuel – and God does.

How do you remain faithful in face of tumultuous times? Whether it's the gospel of Mark or the book of Samuel, troubling times are part of every story – as individuals, in a marriage, in a community. From the story of Hannah and Elkanah, we see that staying faithful means loving even when it doesn't "change" anything. It means not ignoring the ache and the pain but accepting its presence as a part of what is right now. It means praying . We see two people in Hannah and Elkanah with their own relationship with God. They come to God in their own ways; they are honest with what they are feeling and what they desire. They keep coming to God until they can trust what they have always been told - that God hears, that God sees, that God remembers them and the concerns of their heart. The healing begins with that trust is felt deep within.

This is how we live faithfully when the foundation of our life quakes, when stones of the temple of the life we are building fall out, when a famine inspires a yearning to be fed - love one another, be honest about reality, pray. Repeat. God hears you. God sees you. God remembers you.