

Beginning of the Birth Pangs

Lessons: I Samuel 1:4-20, 2:1-10, Mark 13:1-8

Scripture Lessons

I Samuel 1:4-20, 2:1-10

On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore 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?"

After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the LORD. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. She made this vow: "O LORD of hosts, 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."

As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." But Hannah answered, "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. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the LORD." ...

Hannah prayed and said,

"My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory.

"There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.

Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.

The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength.

Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are
fat with spoil.

The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn.

The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.
The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts.
He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.
For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's, and on them he has set the world.

“He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;
for not by might does one prevail.
The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven.
The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the
power of his anointed.”

Mark 13:1-8

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

Sermon

This morning, there is a lesson from the Old Testament, and a lesson from the New Testament, and there is a lesson from the birth pangs.

The Old Testament Lesson...

We misunderstand a lot of the Old Testament, and for a lot of reasons. First, not much of anything about their times and places are like ours. And not much about their politics and religions are like ours. And not much about their needs and prayers are really like ours. In fact, not much of their ideas about God are like ours. There is a good reason for that. We have a New Testament based on a new covenant that corrects their misunderstandings about God in the Old Covenant.

So, before we go seeing ourselves in the story of Hannah, let's admit that we really can't understand her at all – except of course for the part about turning to God with her hopes and desires and needs and prayers. She may have had some different ideas about God, but she sure turned in the right direction. That we can understand.

We cannot understand all the personal anguish, and religious judgment, and public shame that Hannah bore because she could not bear a child. She thought her barrenness was her fault – and God's fault. Hannah had every reason to think that God was a punisher, because so much of the

picture of God she saw in her worship was of divine vengeance on enemies and the need for atoning sacrifices to turn God's anger and plead for God's favor. Hannah becomes a heroine of faith for all the people of God – *not* because she begged until she got a baby, but because she found her hope and trust in God whether or not she got what she wanted. Somehow Hannah had faith in a God who was better than people told her.

This side of a New Covenant and a good bit better knowledge, we should know better than think God snaps divine fingers and things happen. Not having babies is not about God closing wombs. It is just a matter of biology. Thank God for medical procedures and adoption services that help give us chances to love that fulfill God's purposes for us.

We also know better about prayer. Prayer is blasphemy if we spend our time telling God what we want and expecting God to do it just because we won't stop asking. The prayer we are taught says "Your will be done on earth" – not, "God, you better do what I ask."

And this side of a cross and resurrection, and seeing a love that never lets go in the life of Jesus, we know that God's way with us has *nothing* to do with deserving. We cannot beg and plead, or work and earn our way into God's favor. We cannot do one thing to make God love us more; and nothing we do can make God love us less. God loves us! God loves you, no matter what! That is the good news. Why don't I repeat it so we can all open our hearts to joy and celebration and thanksgiving in the hearing of it. *We cannot do one thing to make God love us more; and nothing we do can make God love us less. God loves us! God loves you, no matter what!*

More than a few of us have had times in our lives where the only place we could turn for help was to a God who loves and listens. That is why beyond and beneath all the ways that we and Hannah are different, we are a lot like her. She trusted God for a long time before she felt the birth pangs. And she gives us testimony in her song that she would have kept her trust if they never came.

So the lesson from Hannah is cause to open our hearts to joy and celebration and thanksgiving. Whether or not we receive our yearnings, God listens and God never leaves us. God gives a love that never lets go, and a faith that never fails, and a hope that never disappoints – even in a world where love suffers, and faith goes unanswered, and hope looks disappoint straight in the face. We do not have to bargain with God for anything. Like the good book says, "In all things give thanks." In every circumstance – good and bad – there is reason for thanks. God is faithful! We are thank-full.

The New Testament Lesson...

We misunderstand the New Testament, and for a lot of reasons. First, not much of anything about their times and places are like ours. And not much about their politics and religions are like ours. And not much about their needs and prayers are really like ours, because not much of our lives are like theirs. But we have this better idea of God in common with them, and this understanding of love in the pattern and picture of Jesus that they gave us, and this commitment to follow that they lived. It makes us see beyond and beneath the difference in the circumstances from their times and places to the things that keep us true to a faithful Savior – like they were

true.

This part of Mark is like a chapter in a novel that is a break in the story. All of a sudden in the middle of this biography of Jesus' great deeds and miracles, the followers learning and experimenting with faithfulness, the gradual rise of opposition from the religious and the plotting of the powerful, we get these fantastic predictions of buildings being demolished and wars and rumors of wars, and earthquakes and famines. Jesus says the end of the era is coming. Where did all that come from?

It makes us think of that section of the New Testament we looked at last week, doesn't it? Revelation has all its fantastic imagery and imaginative fantasy and symbolic stretching to reach for assurance and hope. Well, both passages come from the same roots – the memory of the church in the middle of persecution, and suffering, and anguish, and dying – and yes, faithfulness.

Talk about different times and places from ours! Just remember what they were facing. From the religious temple and synagogue side, the too-long wait for a Messiah Savior had frozen the Jews in fear, so that they were afraid to do anything new until they were absolutely sure. A Messiah would have to prove it before they announced a new era. They were so frozen and fearful that they could not see the obvious wonders and miracles, or listen to the one who was the One. They wanted to be certain because they were afraid. The opposite of faith is not doubt. It is fear.

From the political palace and garrison side, there was no fear or freezing. Ironically, the Roman powers were much closer to recognizing the new future that Jesus was bringing, and they did not like what they saw. What they saw was *their* end! So, they focused all their forces to end the threat of new ways to their ways. They killed him, and when the movement did not die with him, they did what they knew to do and always did: they shed more blood – lots of innocent blood. The message from the side of the opposition to Jesus is that the old era does not go quietly into the night.

Thank God our time and place is not like theirs. Revelation is not a detailed prediction of a fixed future. It is a stretch by faithful followers to describe the suffering and pain of innocence when power turns to shedding blood. And these same followers remembered Jesus painting pictures about signs in the times: upheavals in nature, wars and rumors of war in palaces, and destruction in the demolition of religious temples and icons.

Faced with the signs in Revelation, we sometimes let fears get the best of us. We try to find the God who is more like the old god of the Old Testament, moving the pieces around and causing destruction and sacrifice. When we see signs of the times, we look for clues to figure everything out so we can be certain in our fears about destruction and war around us. Why do we look from fear more than trust? Why do we wait for certainty more than we “wait on the Lord.” What happens if we look at the signs of the times, the stones scattered and the wars raging, and ask what they mean to the faithful of a new covenant of love, and to a God who loves everyone, no matter what?

Jesus saw hope in the signs of the times. We can live in hope when we know God is working

in all the signs around us.

The Lesson from the Birth pangs...

Jesus told them that when they saw all those signs that they should see “the beginning of the birth pangs.”

Obviously, I’ve never had a birth pang. I remember one. Renee was two weeks overdue in the heat and humidity of a North Carolina summer. We have been back and forth to the doctor for several days with those false starts of fake labor. We were beginning to think strange things about the lack of cooperation we were getting from this baby, and she went to bed exhausted and uncomfortable again. About 1:00 a.m., she got my attention as she sat straight up. “This is it. Let’s go.”

“...the beginnings of birth pangs.” I remember it now as clearly as then, and I remember so many little details of everything that followed until I held Jenna in my arms for the first time.

But you know what I don’t remember so well? All those signs of discomfort and impatience and grumbling and yes, some fear and fuming over why the future was not so fixed and predictable to make things easier for us.

Once we knew the birth pangs had started, we were focused on more important things – like love that would never let go, and faith that never fails, and hope that never disappoints.

One time or another, with some event like a child birth or a new place to live or a change of job or life or something, you have been where the reality of finding yourself in the “new” changes the way you see all the signs around you. Do you see through fear, or through trust?

Jesus never felt birth pangs like Hannah did, but he and Hannah had something in common. They trusted a faithful God so much that they saw the signs of the times differently, and they lived with faith in God’s faithfulness more than in fear of the future.

What is the lesson for Brenham Presbyterian from Hannah and Jesus? Well, interim seasons are never interludes between more of the same. We are past the beginning of the birth pangs of the new life of the grace of a faithful Savior, and we have every reason to look forward to what God will bring us from the future of hope. Trust a faithful God so much that you see the signs of the times differently. And live with faith in God’s faithfulness more than in fear of the future.

What is the lesson for you in your life from Hannah and Jesus? You can trust a faithful God. You can live in a love that does not care about your deserving and loves you no matter what. You can have faith enough to be faithful to your Savior. You can have hope in what comes to you as a gift from God. Trust a faithful God so much that you see the signs of the times differently. And live with faith in God’s faithfulness more than in fear of the future.

You can live full of faith in a Lord and Savior who gets your attention in the dark of the world’s night or your personal trouble, and is always saying, “This is it. Let’s go.”

Prayers of the People...

It's a season for continuing thanksgiving. Give thanks to God for faithfulness to you, no matter what.

Give thanks to God for loving you, no matter what.

Give thanks to God for hoping in you, and giving you gifts for tomorrow – no matter what.

It's a spiritual life for unending thanksgiving. Give thanks to God for the faithfulness of witnesses and teachers like Hannah in this congregation's history and service that sees past circumstances and finds God's presence and grace.

Give thanks to God for blessings to all God's people gathered today in this place, for the love that overcomes differences and focuses us on what God has for us to do more than what anyone has done – good or bad.

Give thanks to God for birth pangs, for new life that is already with us, for signs and wonders of what Christ will do with us if we just see the signs differently and trust his way.

Pray for God's world, where it is too easy to see wars and rumors of wars, destruction and death, earthquakes and famines, that we may see the signs differently because we see the ways God is working to change them. Pray that we will find ways to work with God to change the signs.

And pray now – and always – not that God will do what you tell God to do, but instead pray the way Christ taught us...