

A Juxtaposition of Joy

Mark 13:1-8 and I Samuel 2:1-10

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.

1 Samuel 2:1-10

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 God 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;
God brings down to Sheol and raises up.

The LORD makes poor and makes rich;
God brings low God also exalts.

God raises up the poor from the dust;
God 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 God has set the world.

“God will guard the feet of God's faithful ones,
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;
for not by might does one prevail.

The LORD! God's adversaries shall be shattered;
the Most High will thunder in heaven.

The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;
God will give strength to God's king,
and exalt the power of the anointed.”

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I.

Today is something of an exercise in attempting to put a square peg into a round hole. I'm feeling the desire to preach a more hope-filled sermon; I know I sure could use one, and my guess is all of you could as well. However, as we move quickly toward Advent the scripture readings from the lectionary are becoming increasingly apocalyptic. That is, they speak of a radical change in the world which will be heralded, first, by the birth of Christ and, then, the cross of Christ. As such, in the first of today's sermon texts we find Jesus foretelling of false prophets, wars and rumors of wars, of nations rising against nations and kingdoms pitted one against the other, of earthquakes and famines; not exactly the makings of a joyous or uplifting message. However, with a little guile and imagination and using our second text from I Samuel, we just might find our way to a juxtaposition of joy.

II.

Turning to Mark 13:1-8 we must remember that though we certainly benefit from these stories *about* Christ and words *of* Christ, they were in no way written *for* us. Let us be mindful that there is a purposefulness beyond the words which we would do well not to ignore or gloss over. In this particular instance, the Gospel of Mark is written for a decidedly Gentile audience; meaning they are new to the whole Messianic notion about which any Jew would be quite familiar. The earliest of Gospels, Mark was written between 66 and 70 CE; or, just as the first generation of believers was dying out and a new generation of neophyte adherents was discovering the Good News of Jesus Christ, coalescing into and constituting the emerging church.

III.

However, three decades after Christ's death and *purported* resurrection, he still has not returned as promised and foretold; and, so, the narrative about Jesus begins to change from an "*any day now*" kind of thing, to a "*it's going to happen but we just don't know when*" type of situation. Meaning, when Jesus says we aren't to worry as we begin to witness the signs of the times he foretold, and that these are just the beginning of the birth pangs, we need to

gird ourselves to accept that this is going to take longer than first imagined or hoped for; and, the image of the labor process is invoked. I very much doubt, however, that not even one soul of that generation, and certainly not the author of Mark, had any idea whatsoever that the birth of a new age ushered in by Christ's return would be 2000 years in the making...and counting.

IV.

It is a long and painful labor indeed and, so, we count the years, the passage of time and the rise and fall of each generation; as there is nothing about this we can change. Though we are shocked and saddened over and over again by the vitriol and violence that infuses our rhetoric, our politics, our populous and our entire planet, we should in no way be surprised that kingdoms still rise against kingdoms. There have been wars and rumors of war in every generation, and there always will be; wars of ideology, wars of identity, and wars of wealth and want.

Add to this the personal challenges and tragedies each individual must navigate in any given generation: childhood, the teenage years, education, marriage, divorce, death, sickness, familial economic booms and busts, accidents, fate, turmoil and tensions; exacerbated even more so during COVID. Given all of this, it seems somewhat difficult to lay claim to the words of Jesus when he says that we should not be alarmed by such things.

V.

As followers of Christ, however, we must endeavor not to allow such events to bring an ill consequence to our faith. These moments provide a great temptation to find meaning or resolution or necessity in some grand, divine plan of travail for the world as precursors to the second coming of Christ. Rather, let us be absolutely clear that hardship and evil bring us no closer to Christ's return, and we should in no way yield to such a notion; however ironically comforting in some ways it may be to do so.

While it is true we await a future where not one stone will be left here upon another and all will be thrown down, we always have a juxtaposition of joy in our present to serve as a counterweight and provide us the balance we all need to sustain ourselves through the apocalyptic times and signs so evident in this generation and in every generation.

VI.

This morning's second scripture reading, from I Samuel 2:1-10, mercifully provides such a juxtaposition of joy. Known as "The Song of Hannah" this passage sings of the promise of hope; a tune we must learn and hum along to each and every day. (*Read scripture passage.*). As it is such an unfortunate rarity, anytime a woman is named in the Bible it is important that we take note of her role in, and contribution to the story of our faith; as *her* story is also *our* story. Hannah lived in the 10th century BCE when Israel was a loose confederation of tribes ruled by Judges who served as both military and religious leaders.

One of the two wives of Elkhanah, and though unable to conceive a child, Hannah was the favorite even though the other wife, Peninnah, had already borne her husband several children. One day, Hannah went to the Tabernacle at Shiloh and prayed with great weeping asking God for a son and, in return, she vowed to give the son back to God promising he would remain a [Nazarite](#) all the days of his life (a Nazarite was one who was consecrated to the service of God). Eli, the high priest and second-to-last Judge of Israel, was sitting on a chair near the doorpost and witnessed her praying. Believing her to be drunk, Eli questioned her. However, after explaining her earnest desire, Eli blessed her and sent her home. Sometime later, Hannah conceived and bore a son, and named him Samuel, which literally means "*Heard by God.*" Eventually, Samuel would grow-up and, under the tutelage of Eli, become the last Judge of Israel, ushering in the rule of the Kings; anointing David as the first, and setting in motion a series of events which led to the birth of David's descendant, Jesus, who is Christ the King.

VII.

Owing to her story and great faith, Hanna is also considered a prophetess. As an earnest petitioner and grateful celebrant of divine glory, Hannah was an important figure for early English Protestantism, which emphasized the importance of private prayer. Professor of Hebrew Alexander Kirkpatrick, in writing about I Samuel for the commentary set [Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges](#) (published by Cambridge University beginning in 1882) said: Hannah is inspired "to discern in her own individual experience the universal laws of the divine economy, and to recognize its significance for the whole course of the Kingdom of God." Kirkpatrick also suggested that this song may be compared to the *Magnificat*, Mary's song of thanksgiving in Luke 1: "the

Magnificat should be carefully compared with Hannah's song," he said, of which it is an echo rather than an imitation."

VIII.

Modern day Hebrew scholar Walter Brueggemann suggests that the Song of Hannah paves the way for a major theme of the Book of Samuel, the "power and willingness of Yahweh to intrude, intervene and invert." Hannah's Song has for centuries, and right through to modern day, been read for Rosh Hashana, or Jewish New Year, as the *Haftarah* reading, or "parting" or "taking leave" reading. As such, Hannah's poignant message of hope and promise is the last thing one hears before beginning the new year.

I have delved into both the biblical and historical background of Hannah, as well as the use of her song of thanksgiving within modern-day Jewish tradition, just to let you know that, frankly, there isn't much there. A juxtaposition of joy is a hard thing to come by in any age, and what we do have to go on is often obscure and easily overlooked.

IX.

The responsibility, then, falls on us as a community of faith and as individuals, to do the work of recognizing, realizing and embracing the joy that is, in fact, present in our lives and in this world. No one will do this work for us and if we don't take up the task of juxtaposing joy to the woe, misery and misfortune in this life they will continue to breed injustice, corruption and wickedness.

It is too easy to get caught up and overwhelmed by the constant bombardment and bombast of wars and the rumors of wars. Instead, let us remember and celebrate, like Hannah, that there is no rock like our God, who breaks the bows of the mighty and girds the feeble with strength. Let us be wary of those who seek to lead us astray with proud talk and arrogant mouths and, instead, find shelter in knowing that ours is a God of knowledge, and by God all actions are weighed.

As we witness the relentless cycles of violence of nations rising against nations and would-be kings endangering the kingdom, let us holdfast to our conviction that the pillars of the earth are the Lord's and on them God has set the world. That God raises up the poor from the dust, lifts the needy from the

ash heap, and guards the feet of the faithful while the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail, but by the Lord who judges the ends of the earth.

X.

As people of faith, we understand that the signs and seasons of Christ's apocalyptic return must take place and that the end is still to come; but not yet, and not now. Finding ourselves, then, in the midst of these birth pangs, let us be mindful of the mantra I remember from when Linda was near her due date: "pain with a purpose." Certainly for the purpose of bringing God's divine plan for the cosmos to fullness and fruition, but also for the purpose of God's divine plan for juxtaposing joy each day with the fear and worry we inevitably endure. Today, as we draw near to the season of Advent, let us holdfast to the belief that as the Lord, the Most High, thunders in heaven, we shall yet find joy and wonder here on earth. Amen.