

“The Miracle of Birth”

**First Presbyterian Church
Pastor Dave Carlson
December 16, 2018**

Old Testament Lesson: Mark 13:5-8

New Testament Lesson: 1 Samuel 1:12-20

Describing the scripture we just heard, the Rev. John Afman writes this:

“The twelve tribes have entered the Promised Land, but now what? A tribal way of life – close to family, close to God – is dying. What is coming? What will God do next? ...A birth is God’s answer. The birth of Samuel – to a woman who had been childless for so long she had become what the writer calls ‘bitter of soul.’ Finally Hannah prays, weeping, ‘If you will only look on my misery and not forget me and give me a son, Lord, I will give him back to you. He will be yours for his entire life.’ Out of the near death of Hannah’s soul comes a birth. The birth of a leader, and the birth of a new kind of nation with new hope and energy.”

Who among us does not desire new hope and new energy? This is the third Sunday of Advent. Let us take some time today thinking about the hope and new energy that is promised to us in the coming of Christmas, and where that hope and energy comes from. As we journey through this final Advent, let the story of Hannah guide you in your desires yet to be fulfilled and desires long since abandoned.

Hannah’s is a story of struggling with life as it is while maintaining hope for life as it could be. As the second wife of Elkanah, Hannah desired nothing more than to be a mother – to have a child – but she was unable to get pregnant. This went on for years and years, with Elkanah’s first wife teasing her and tormenting her, so that Hannah couldn’t even eat, she was so upset. Can you imagine? Have you ever been so upset that you lost your appetite. Or for others, they overeat when they’re upset, trying to feed the soul through the stomach.

Maybe it’s something life changing, like wanting a baby, but it’s not to be. Or needing a job when there isn’t any work and the bills keep piling up. Maybe it’s just plain meanness, like the kids at school teasing you and bullying you, calling you names. Or for some, it’s family dynamics – a child or sibling you don’t get along with, or a family member who can’t get a break, always struggling through life, and it weighs heavily on your soul.

Whether it’s this or some other unmet desire, hope or dream, the feeling you get inside is just like what Hannah suffered – pitifully little happiness in life and no hope for the future. But Hannah did have hope! It’s just that her hope came in its own time, not by her schedule.

Babies can be like that – unpredictable. Being a parent, you never know one day to the next how things might go. Oh, and if you have several children, well, they're all different, and with each child you're different, too.

With the first baby, you spend all day just gazing at the baby. With the second baby, you spend a bit of every day watching – the older child, to be sure he's not squeezing, poking or hitting the baby. Now after the third baby, you spend a little bit of every day hiding from all three children. No, I exaggerate. Children, your parents love you and couldn't imagine a world without you. They spend all day praying for you, no doubt.

In our Old Testament lesson, Hannah was praying, also. Hannah was praying silently at the Temple because she not only couldn't have a baby but she was teased and bullied because of it. And in comes Eli, the priest, seeing her lips moving silently. But instead of comforting her, he scolds her, saying, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself?" A drunken spectacle?!? She's praying, not drinking. Eli is not a very observant or helpful priest. Talk about adding insult to injury.

But instead of storming out of the Temple, Hannah pleads her case, saying, "No, my Lord, I am a woman deeply troubled.... I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord..., speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." Hannah was so troubled deep down in her soul that she went to her place of worship.

Where do we go when our soul is troubled, when your life feels empty, when your world is full of abuse and disregard, your deepest needs unmet or misunderstood? Where do you turn? Hannah went to her place of worship, and even a misguided priest wasn't going to get between her and the Lord. Hannah would not give up on God, no matter what.

And yet, how often do we see people give up on God, give up on their place of worship because it's not perfect? Heck, we have whole generations of people doing that. There are lots of people from every generation who have abandoned their church because the church members aren't perfect, the music isn't always what they want to hear, the committees and boards are too much work, and they feel they just don't need church to have a relationship with God.

Well, that may be true. You can have a relationship with God apart from the church. But church – in some form or fashion – is the best-if-not-only place to grow your relationship with God, to grow spiritually, by being an active part of your community of faith.

Nancy Ammerman is a sociologist of religion, someone who studies religion in everyday life. Looking at people who call themselves spiritual but not religious, Ammerman found that, for most people, organized religion and spirituality are not two separate things. Instead, they

are one. The people who were “most active in organized religion,” she discovered, “were also most committed to spiritual practices and a spiritual view of the world.”¹

That makes sense. Church is where we come to learn how to see the world through God’s eyes. This doesn’t mean our lives will be perfect, and it certainly doesn’t mean church will be perfect. But it does mean we have hope even amid our greatest unmet need and desire.

Hannah prays to the Lord and in due time she conceives and bears a son! The miracle of birth. Hannah becomes the mother of the Prophet Samuel. And Samuel becomes the one through whom God speaks to King David, ruler of Israel. Through Samuel, God builds and guides the nation according to God’s plan and purpose.

Image what plan or purpose God might have for your life? Where do you look for your sense of hope in the future, your desire for peace and prosperity, joy and happiness? Do you look to the past – to promises not kept, dreams not realized, hopes not fulfilled? Or do you look to the future, to the promise yet to come, the dream even now taking shape, a sense of hope that cannot die? There is only one place to find such certainty, such vision, such faithfulness, and that is in our Lord Jesus Christ. Hannah was given a son who would guide and secure the nation. And through that nation – through the lineage of David – God has given us a Son to guide and secure our future, Jesus the Christ.

As we enter this week of anticipation and waiting, with Christmas just around the corner, I encourage you to find ways to let your faith life guide your days and your nights. The Presbyterian Women have made available an Advent Blessings Calendar, through which we can bless the lives of others with thanksgiving.

Bonnie and I have put together a daily Advent devotional, through which you can dream and hope and rejoice and even plead to the Lord. These are available on the credenza. Or there are countless online or in-store resources available to you this week.

No matter what you do to have a faithful and holy fourth week of Advent, let it be a time for you of developing greater faith, encountering a deeper spirituality, and cultivation a closer relationship with God. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

¹ Penny Edgell, "Faith and spirituality among emerging adults," faithformationlearningexchange.net. Retrieved May 31, 2015.

Merciful Savior, the longings of our heart are deep and profound, and the season of Advent, like no other, makes us especially aware of our yearnings.

While we are surrounded by glittery tinsel and pretty packages, we are reminded that superficial things do not truly satisfy.

Our calendars are crammed with activities and events, leading us to believe that busyness offers meaning and purpose. The “to-do” list runs off the page, yet exhaustion, not joy, is too often the end result. We are surrounded by crowds but feel the emptiness of our connections to others.

What we genuinely desire is mystery, a sense of transcendence, a story that is bigger than life, yet one that enfolds our lives.

We need the Son of God become flesh, the baby born in a manger who brought shepherds to their knees and angels to their feet. We long for a liberating truth that cannot be contained in words, but must be sung by the heavenly hosts.

In short, we hunger for you. Come to us anew, we pray, to satisfy our restless hearts.

We pray, too, for those in need of your comforting presence, and especially all those battling cancer or other debilitating diseases or grieving the loss of a loved one.

We pray all this in the powerful name of your son, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors;
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.**