

33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time

I Samuel 1:4-20; I Samuel 2:1-10; Mark 13:1-8; Hebrews 10:11-25

I Samuel 1:4-20 is the story of the woman Hannah's grief over being barren, her continuing praying to God to lift her shame by giving her a son, the priest Eli's response to her that God had heard her prayer, and her subsequent delivery of a male baby who would grow up to become Israel's greatest judge and prophet, Samuel. But the story is full of profound insights that need to be carefully considered.

First, the story is essentially about liberation. It introduces at its beginning three themes that occur throughout the book of I Samuel: (1) strife within an Israelite family (1:1-8; 2:12-17, 22-25; 8:1-3; 14:42-44; 20:30-34); (2) God acting to deal with that strife in a way that brings about both private and public transformation (1:20; 7:13; 23:27-28; 25:36-39; 26:12); and (3) God dealing with that strife by raising up the lowly and empowering them (1:20; 2:1-10; 3:1-4:1; 16:13). These themes are then picked up directly in the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts (I Sam. 1:3 and Luke 2:41; I Sam. 1:12-14 and Acts 2:13-15; I Sam. 2:1-10 and Luke 1:46-55).

Second, the story clearly parallels stories of liberation that appear both earlier and later in the Bible. As God intervened miraculously to heal barrenness and produce sons for Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Samson's mother (Gen. 17:16-19; 25:21-26; 29:31-30:24; Judges 13:2-5), so God will act to rescue both Hannah (I Sam. 1:4-20) and Elizabeth (Luke 1:5-25) from this ignominy. As God freed each of these earlier women from cultural condemnation, being undervalued and unappreciated and (in some cases) even outright persecuted, so God will liberate Hannah and Elizabeth. As God raised up from such ostracized women sons who would become transforming agents of humanity (Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Samson), so God would bring forth from Hannah Israel's greatest prophet-judge, Samuel and from Elizabeth, the one to announce the coming of the Christ – John the Baptist. It is precisely through the barren and ostracized that God brings forth Israel's next great liberator or redeemer. Such a phenomenon symbolizes both God's intent and action to raise up and vindicate the lowly.

Third, by opening Hannah's womb, God creates a man who will change the course of Israel. Samuel is the one clearly called by God to be a Nazarite (1:11), a priest (2:18-3:1), a prophet (3:2-4:1) and Israel's greatest judge (7:3-17). He is consecrated to God; he is one who brings Israel to God and intercedes on behalf of the people of Israel; he is one who calls the systems of Israel to accountability (and especially the king), and he is one who sits in judgment on Israel, seeking to keep them faithful to the Mosaic Law. Samuel's importance is symbolized by the reality that whereas Samuel is dead by the 25th chapter of I Samuel, and whereas David is clearly the main character in both I and II Samuel, it has been the tradition of the Jews to call by the name of Samuel the two books that tell about both men -- rather than naming the books "David"! This is an indication of both the importance and reverence in which Israel held Samuel for millennia!

This reality is captured by a most unique and clearly intentional play on words in I Samuel. In Hebrew, the name "Samuel" means "He who is from God", "He who is heard of God" or "He who has been given by God" (cf., "Hannah named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the Lord" - 1:20"). The consonants of that Hebrew name (sha'al) now translated "Samuel" is

identical to the Hebrew consonants for Saul's name (sha'ul). Ancient written Hebrew had no vowels – only consonants. Therefore, the names Samuel and Saul are identical in written Hebrew!

What is the significance of the author's highly intentional use of these names, especially in such close juxtaposition? Could it be that what he was suggesting was that even though the people never asked for Samuel to be their judge (he was appointed by God), they did ask for Saul to be their king (12:13)? Yet, it was Samuel and not Saul who was proved to be "he who is sent from God" and the one "given by God" to the people so that they could be liberated not only from external enemies but from their own internal enemies of oppression, exploitation and the need to dominate all around them. It is Samuel and not Saul who is the one truly sent by God to the people!

I Samuel 2:1-10. Not all the psalms that are in the Bible appear in the Psalter. That is the case for the psalm for the 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time.

Hannah's prayer, found in I Samuel 2:1-10, is a psalm of rejoicing. It rejoices, not primarily for what God has done for Hannah in giving this barren woman a son, but how God was at work (through the birthing of Samuel) to bring about the political, economic and spiritual transformation of Israel, and the liberation of its poor. This psalm is spoken in the light of the then-current situation in Israel of power centered in the tabernacle cult and of the dominance by the sons of Eli of the people for those sons' personal aggrandizement of them. Because Hannah is the first Israelite led by God to both call into accountability the abuse by the systems of Israel and to predict what would happen to them as the result of such abuse (unless they repented), this makes this woman the first authentic prophet of Israel!

The psalm begins with Hannah's personal response to God. "My heart exults in the Lord, my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies because I rejoice in my victory" (2:1). In this introduction to this psalm, Hannah proclaims God as the actor and herself as the respondent. What she is about to predict will not come about by the initiative of humans but by the action of God that will call forth response from those who seek to be faithful to Him.

Hannah then moves to the meat of her prophecy. She first begins by forcing those who would lead to look at reality. "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 his actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken; but the feeble gird on strength" (vss. 2-4).¹

"Don't think so highly of yourself", Hannah is in essence saying to the leaders of Israel. "You actually accomplish far less than you give yourself credit for achieving." It is easy for those who hold political, economic or even religious power to believe, "My power and the might of my hand have gotten me this wealth" (Deut. 8:17). There is a tendency in all of us, whether we hold considerable rank in society or simply play an ordinary role to radically overestimate our own importance. As a member of one of my churches put it to me when I became too impressed with myself, "Bob, this church was here before you were born, and it will still be here long after you

have left it"! So it is that Hannah reminds both the powerful and the peasant of Israel that the true power and authority of the nation lies in Yahweh and Yahweh's intentions for the nation, not in our actions. We may act from time to time. We may respond to significant issues. But it is God working through God's people (or, sometimes, in spite of them) to bring about God's intentions for the world!

Hannah continues her prophecy. "Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven (children), 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" (vss. 5-8).

There will come a great reversal, Hannah declares. The day will come when the first will be last and the last first, when the poor will be made rich and the powerful will be dismissed. Israel was faced at the time with the radical abuse of power on the part of those who kept the spiritual center of Israel – the tabernacle. Throughout the period of the Judges, there was no political or economic center of Israel (that's why the people eventually demanded a king). Each tribe "did what was right in its own eyes" (Judges 21:25), both politically and economically. The only center of Israel's life was its religious sanctuary – the tabernacle to which the people came both to worship God and to order their life together as a nation. It was at the tabernacle that law suits were settled and the law adjudicated. The nation was given direction and focus at its primary religious sanctuary. And now those leading the sanctuary (and, consequently, the nation), the sons of Eli, were abusing their position and building power for themselves in the face of the growing erosion of power and of the wealth of the people (see the commentary on I Samuel 3 on the 9th Sunday of Ordinary Time, Cycle B).

But God would not tolerate this situation for ever. God was about to act, Hannah tells us in this prophecy, to right the oppression and exploitation going on in Israel. And the result of God's action will be that He will "raise up the poor from the dust; he brings low, he also exalts". And this he will do through this miraculously born child, Samuel!

Hannah's psalm now reaches its conclusion. "God 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" (vss. 9-10).

Hannah's prayer now moves into the foretelling of the future. By the beginning of this final section of this prophecy, the question must be asked, "If God is going to overthrow the established order in a great reversal that empowers the poor and brings low the powerful, how will God do it?" Here, in these concluding words, Hannah tells us how. God will act in judgment to give to Israel a government ruled by a God-chosen king, and that king will be God's "anointed one" (Messiah) who will rule as God's vice-regent (God being the true king of Israel). God will change the political order, and in doing so, will profoundly change Israel.

Before one moves from an examination of this psalm, it is important to note the intriguing similarities between Hannah's prayer and the Magnificat of Mary (Luke 1:46-55). It is clear that the author of the Gospel of Luke directly uses I Samuel 2:1-10 to articulate Mary's praise of God in discovering that she is to be the mother of the Messiah. Consider these similarities:

First, both hymns begin in very similar ways. Hannah sings, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God" (2:1a). Mary begins, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior" (Luke 1:46).

Second, both women draw almost no attention to themselves, and do not dwell on the miracle wrought within them. The most Hannah says is "My mouth derides my enemies; because I rejoice in my victory" (verse 1b). This is a reference to Peninnah, the second wife of Hannah's husband, Elkanah. I Samuel 1:2 tells us "Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children" and then goes on to say, "Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb" (vs. 6). With these words in her psalm, Hannah has the opportunity to do a little gloating!

Mary is equally circumspect in her Magnificat in speaking about herself. All she says is, "God has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me" (Luke 1:48-49). If there is any miracle in what has happened, Mary is saying, it is all God's doing and not hers; she has only been "the handmaid of the Lord" (vs. 38), the receptacle for God's saving action.

But what is most startling are the significant similarities between Hannah's and Mary's respective descriptions of what God will do to restore justice to the earth. Hannah sings, "The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. 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" (vss. 4, 6-8). Mary declares, "The Lord has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty" (Luke 1:51-53). The commonality of themes, phrasing and even words is remarkable. Hannah was much more of a prophetess than she would credit herself in being, for Mary was obviously much influenced by her prayer uttered 1100 years before Mary was privileged to carry the Christ Child in her womb.

Mark 13:1-8. The Gospel of Mark presents Jesus as the "Radical Rabbi", the word "radical" coming from the Latin *radix*, which is the Latin word for "root". Jesus, in the Gospel of Mark, is getting at the root of the problem that besets Israel and all the nations of the world that keeps them in bondage to the "gods" of power, prestige, possessions and parochialism, rather than in allegiance to the Yahweh of justice, equitable distribution of wealth and relationship. That radical perspective of Jesus is most clearly given voice in our scripture for today.

Mark 13 deals with the inevitable consequences that face Israel as a nation obsessed by power, wealth and domination and, consequently, the choice that stands before followers of Jesus.

Those consequences are explored in three arenas: the coming destruction of Israel's systems (vv. 1-4); persecutions that await those who embrace a counter-cultural (Yahwist) understanding of society (vv. 5-25) and the kingdom response for which God seeks (vv. 26-37). To thoroughly understand Mark 13:1-8, we must look at the entirety of the message given here by Jesus.

First, Jesus predicts the coming destruction of Israel's systems (vv. 1-4). His disciples admire the beauty and grandeur of the Temple. Jesus replies, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another, all will be thrown down" (13:2).

What Jesus predicts will happen, indeed did happen. The Gospel of Mark was written between Israel's apparently successful rebellion against Rome (AD 65) and Rome's return to both retake Israel and to destroy the rebel force (AD 68-70). The gospel was written before the Roman invasion began. But a person of Mark's wisdom knew that would inevitably happen. Jerusalem was sacked by the Roman army commanded by Titus in 70 A.D., and the temple was razed to the ground. Most literally, "not one stone was left upon another"! Jesus was proven right.

The importance of this prophecy on Jesus' part, however, is that it's not simply about the temple. It is about Israel. The temple was the symbol to Israel of the entire political, economic and religious marriage of systems that shaped Israelite life. It was a system ostensibly built on the worship and service of God. But, in reality, it was a system designed to maintain the status quo with Rome and therefore maintain in positions of power and wealth the Jewish elite (priests, Pharisees, Sadducees, Herodian nobility and land-owners) who ran that system. By predicting that "not one stone will be left upon another" but that "all will be thrown down", Jesus was not simply predicting the destruction of the physical temple. He was predicted the collapse of the entire political, economic, religious and social system that held Israel together. This prediction, in reality, is Jesus' total repudiation of the structures and systems of Israel and their objective to maintain the status quo by maintaining themselves in control; it is a repudiation of Israel "as it is" in favor of what "it should be"!

The response of those who heard Jesus' prophecy was predictable. "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished" (13:4)? Jesus responds to this inevitable inquiry by talking about the end of the "age" or world (13:5-25), because, to the Jews, to speak of the collapse of Israel's systems (as personified in the temple) was to speak of the end of the world, as they knew it.

The question of the disciples to Jesus was, in essence, how they could discern that the end of society as they knew it was fast approaching. He responds by telling them that the signs of the approaching end will be many claiming to be saviors of society, repeated warfare and even escalating environmental disasters (vv. 6-8). As you followers of the Radical Rabbi live in such collapsing times, you will be tempted to join such causes. But instead, you must be willing to be betrayed, tried, persecuted and even killed (vv. 9-13), because "you will be hated by all because of my name" (vs. 13).

The second consequence that Jesus presents for those who await a counter-cultural understanding of society will be persecution by those who want to either maintain the status quo or overthrow it (vv. 5-25). In other words, what Jesus is saying is that those who follow him will be tempted to

join whatever is the dominant power in order to “right wrong”. Don’t do it, Jesus warns his followers. Don’t seize power to overthrow power. To do so is to use power unilaterally, and such use will only end up oppressing and exploiting the people. If you side with the establishment in power (the Romans and the current Jewish leaders), you will join with those using military power to crush opposition. And if you side with the rebels who have driven Rome out of Palestine, you will also be using military power to enforce your will upon Rome, the establishment and the people. You may succeed in keeping Rome out of Palestine, but to do so, you will substitute your own oppression for Roman oppression. And why? It is because it is inevitable that the oppressed, rising up and overthrowing the oppressors, always will become the new oppressors! Either way, you have illegitimately used power – to maintain yourself in power. You have not used power to set the people free!

Rather, what God calls Jesus’ followers to do is to seek an alternative way – a third way – a “radical” way that gets at the very root of how power can be used for good or ill (vss. 14-25). But seeking that third way will inevitably mean persecution by the powerful and revolutionaries alike!

Israel or the world will not be transformed into the kingdom of God by using power unilaterally to maintain the status quo (Rome and the Jewish leaders in collusive power) or to overthrow the status quo (the rebels gaining control of the nation). It’s not a matter of whose side is on top! Rather, the struggle that God’s people are caught up in is a spiritual struggle, a mythic struggle, a struggle of the very ways human beings understand the reality in which they live. Like those currently in power or like the rebels, does one see power as unilateral, dominating, controlling, and therefore resulting in the oppressing and exploiting of the people? Or like those who follow the Rabbi who gets to the “roots” of life, is power relational, and therefore committed to working for societies of political justice, economic equity, the elimination of poverty, and humanity living at peace with God and each other? The struggle to bring about the Rabbi’s kind of world will be like a “war in heaven”. It is as if “the sun will be darkened and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the powers in the heavens will be shaken” (vss. 24-25). The transformation of humanity will indeed happen – but will happen in God’s good time!

The third consequence is the kingdom response which God seeks from God’s people (vv. 26-37). Using a fig tree as an example of fruit coming in its own good but predictable time (vv. 26-31), Jesus teaches that the Son of God will bring to fruition the use of power by both God and God’s people in a way that will, indeed, get to the very roots of the domination of the systems and its leaders, and will transform them. When that will happen, or how long it will take, no body but God knows. But God’s people are to be engaged in practicing relational power both in their relationships with each other and in the public life of the politics, economics and religions of any culture in which Christians find themselves. Our objective is not to ignore, nor to seek to reform the systems of domination in the world, but to break them – to replace them with Jesus’ new radical society. Therefore, our task, as we seek to be faithful to the call given to us, is to “Keep awake” (vss. 35, 37) – to nonviolently resist the powers, holding in our imagination societal life as it is meant by God to be lived, and awaiting the coming of the One who is to bring into being such a kingdom – and awaiting his coming by working for his kingdom! “For you do not know when the master will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn. And what I say to you, I say to all, Keep awake” (13:35, 37)!

Hebrews 10:11-25 consists of two distinct and yet related thoughts, the first being 10:11-18 and the second being 10:19-25.

10:11-18 is essentially a recap of previous passages in Hebrews (4:12-16; 5:1-10; 7:23-28; 9:24-28) that stress that Jesus' sacrifice on the cross was a single sacrifice and a single offering to God for all time. Thus Christ has brought to completion full salvation for "those who are sanctified" or chosen by God and consequent "forgiveness of sins". To strengthen his argument, the author of Hebrews quotes twice from Jeremiah 31 (vss. 33 and 34) that state that this once-for-all sacrifice both internally transforms the believer (vs. 16) and provides forgiveness of sins (vs. 17). Thus, no further sacrifice by Christ, God or priest is necessary, for God has done it all through Christ.

10:19-25 follows with an exhortation for Christians to persevere, based upon the previous argument. As the temple curtain was torn at the death of Christ (Mark 15:38), so Jesus' flesh was torn on the cross (vs. 20) as our "great high priest" (vs. 21). Our response, in the face of such sacrifice, is to "hold fast to the confession of our *hope*," to remain *faithful* to the gospel" and thus "provoke one another to *love* and good deeds" (vs. 24). And such steadfastness means, "not neglecting to meet together" (vs. 25). In other words, what the author of Hebrews is calling the Christians to do is to act out the gospel in their public life.

In such an exhortation calling Christians to act out their faith, hope and love in their actions, why would the writer of Hebrews exhort them to "not neglect to meet together"? It seems irrelevant to acting out the gospel in public life. But the statement is actually an important statement regarding public life. "The habit of some" was *not* to meet together *in order to avoid persecution*. In other words, some Christians were skipping worship, not because they wanted to sleep in late, but because they didn't want to be identified as Christians! They didn't want to receive the public persecution by the systems or the ostracism by non-believers that inevitably followed disclosure that they were Christians. So they avoided all public contact with Christians. And by doing so, they were denying Christ and His Kingdom. So the author of Hebrews is both calling them to accountability and seeking to correct the situation.

The author of Hebrews, therefore, is making two important declarations. First, the church exists for mission. It exists to be engaged in the public life of the world – working for social reform, seeking the empowerment of the poor, working for economic and political transformation, and seeking the kingdom of God. But engagement in public life cannot happen if the church is not building its life together. Second, for the church to truly be a fellowship of radicals, it had to be committed to supporting and encouraging one another in each one's respective engagement of the world, planning action together, praying for one another and sustaining each other by sharing in the worship of God. Working for the transformation of the world cannot happen separated from the building of the church's life together. And authentic building of the interior life of the church will not happen unless that life together is being constantly tested and strengthened by those Christians' work for the kingdom of God in the kingdoms of man!

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