

November 18, 2018 Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost
Pastor Carolyn Albert Donovan
Peace Lutheran Church – Austin, Texas

GOSPEL

Mark 13:1-8

The holy gospel, according to Saint Mark, the thirteenth chapter.
Glory to you, O Lord.

¹As [Jesus] came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” ²Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

³When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, ⁴“Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” ⁵Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. ⁶Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. ⁷When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. ⁸For 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.”

The gospel of the Lord.
Praise to you, O Christ.

Hannah’s story is one we may not know as well as some others. If you can place her name...it might be in relation to her son, Samuel, who would become the one to anoint David King of Israel...

But before that happened, Hannah was one of those people we shuffle by without making eye contact...or who we lower our voices around...or put on a smile we think might mask our judgmental pity. Hannah would have been looked on with pity, at best, or contempt, at worst. Unable to have children, she couldn’t fulfill what was seen as her most important purpose.

There were other women...including her husband’s other wife...who went about their days...and said and did things...maybe intentionally, maybe not... that re-opened Hannah’s wounds again and again. With an insensitive remark... “You must have so much free time...” “Can you believe I’m pregnant *again*?” How many everyday words stung...conversations can be a minefield...can feel like death by a thousand paper cuts.

Sometimes even an overheard kindness directed at someone else can feel like a slap.

I recently heard a father telling a story about his foster daughters...They hadn't shared a home until they became a part of his. So they were all learning to be family all at once. These girls were so hungry for love and affirmation... Once when their dad saw some artwork the older sister had done that day, he told her how much he loved it. And shortly after, the younger daughter broke down sobbing, without any discernible cause. Her dad asked what was wrong, and the younger daughter answered through tears... "That was such a mean thing you just said to me just now!" She had heard a kind word for her sister as an insult to her.

And while we may laugh at a moment like that...we have all been the younger sister. Have seen someone else's joy or success...and felt somehow hurt or diminished by it. Sometimes just feeling left out, or less, is painful...and it can feel like an intentional slight. I wonder how often Hannah felt like that...

And the men don't understand (in this story I mean)...Elkanah's "Why am I not good enough for you?"...and "Am I not better than ten sons?" is a pretty textbook example of how not to respond when someone you love is in grief...

No great love can erase a great tragedy. The world can hold both. It often does. Elkanah understands as little as that younger daughter...that just as the older sister's success didn't diminish her...neither did Hannah's love for her husband diminish her sense of loss of a hoped-for child.

Then Eli...the prophet...sees Hannah silently praying...not even daring to make the sound of her hope and prayer heard...as if she already feels like she is fading into nothing...as if she doesn't even feel like she has the right to take up the space of the sound of her voice. And Eli...the priest...sees her lips moving in silence...and asks if she's drunk.

She says, "I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord." She responds to his accusation: "Nothing is poured out for me in this world. I am poured out. I am full of nothing...I am becoming more and more empty. The story you are telling yourself about me is not the one I am living...I am not drunk. I am simply suffering in a language you do not know and do not bother to learn."

Something in her moves Eli...because he offers her the blessing of hope.

And Hannah does conceive a child. And when she does, she sings a song...a prequel to the song another woman will sing, generations later...a woman connected to her through the threads of a sacred lineage and story...a woman chosen for a sacred task far beyond her place in the world.

This young mother will sing in the same key as Hannah about how God lifts up the lowly and feeds the hungry and casts down the powerful and rich. She will sing her song in Nazareth, as the Life that will conquer death begins to grow in her.

The world doesn't see these women...and so many others like them...suffering in unknown, silent languages...hidden at the edges of things.

When Hannah lived, prayers were always prayed aloud...but there didn't seem to be room in the temple for her prayer...so she made a new way to pray...in silence. She invented a new way to speak to God...and the priest who was there didn't see her genius...he called her a drunk.

Hannah...Mary...and so many before, between, and since...are unlikely...unseemly...embarrassing choices for holy work. But God rejoices in them...and they rejoice in God. And they invent new ways to talk to God...while the rest of us act embarrassed.

We are easily distracted by the bright and shiny things.

When Jesus' followers look at the great buildings and marvel at the power of the world...Jesus tells them it is nothing...it will lead to nothing. That power like that will cannibalize itself. And only tenderness...which looks like weakness...which looks like women in the shadows writing new languages of prayer...will be shown to be of God. Entering whole-heartedly into the kind of struggle that bears new life into the world is the holiest work...and he tells his friends that *that* is what is coming.

What is coming? So many things...lists...and groceries...and shopping days...and crafts...and favorite songs...and the worst songs...and fancy clothes...and family fights...

The holidays are here. And we may spend a great deal of time trying to make these days perfect...or perhaps we are already bracing ourselves to watch in sad resignation...knowing we will fail before we even begin to try. Perfect families, perfect homes, perfectly set tables, smiles...Music, lights, love, and joy...

Remember where God has been, though, in our story today. Remember when it isn't perfect...when you are alone...when you don't measure up to the standards of others...or to your own...Remember...when it isn't perfect...that Jesus said that the things that looked perfect and grand weren't the things that would last. And remember that God chooses people no one thinks are perfect for holy purposes.

Remember that for yourself. Remember it for the imperfect, invisible people who become even more invisible in our mad dash for hollow ideals outlined in sparkling lights.

When someone else in this world seems strange...when your own heart is breaking...remember that you may be inventing a new language for prayer. Remember Hannah who prayed her prayers and sang her song...who was the mother of Samuel...who anointed King David...whose ancestors were immigrants from Moab...and from whose lineage would come a carpenter named Joseph whose young fiancée would also sing...would also become a mother...the mother of God.

Remember when you avoid eye contact or put on a false smile...that God chooses the ones we pity to give hope to the world. Remember that, if you are on the receiving end of that embarrassed pity. God is sitting with you, preparing a holy purpose. Your song is being written.

Get ready to sing.

Amen.