

Sunday, November 14, 2021

A Sermon offered by The Rev. Elizabeth Keeler

1 Samuel 1:4-20

1 Samuel 2:1-10

Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25

Mark 13:1-8

I've been in the sermon writing business for about 12 years now and today I'm going to attempt something that I have only tried a handful of times. So, as my father use to say - forewarned is forearmed! Please do trust that I warmly welcome your feedback on this sermon, as with any of my sermons. What I'd like for us to do this morning is to consider all of our lectionary readings together, as a whole, in total, and see if we can find an overarching theme about God and how God is speaking to us today through this collection of scripture passages.

One of my preaching mentors always had a litmus test for his sermons called the "parking lot test". What he meant by this was that parishioners meeting in the church parking lot or parish hall between Sunday services should be able to have this conversation: "Good morning Sharon, what was Elizabeth's sermon about today?" Sharon should be able to reply easily, "Good morning, Noel, today's sermon was about.... fill in the blank." Please know that my goal today is to pass the parking lot test as we unpack all four of our readings jointly!

It might actually help if you get out your bulletin inserts and as you do, you'll notice that both our Old Testament lesson (labeled First Reading), and the Psalm below that (which is really a Canticle), come from the same source – First Samuel. Now the books of First and Second Samuel tell the important story of the great leadership that arose during a critical time in ancient Israel's history. Three men came to power in this do-or-die period: Samuel, Saul and David. Our first two readings today deal with the birth of the first of those important leaders, Samuel.

Surprisingly, First Samuel opens not with an epic battle or a leadership power struggle, but with a very private family problem. It tells about two bitterly jealous wives who had a longstanding quarrel, one taunting the other because of her infertility. Hannah, the childless woman, turned to God in desperation, praying and promising to dedicate a son to God should she have one. The result of all of this was a little boy named Samuel. Hannah kept her vow to God and Samuel grew into one of the greatest leaders Israel had ever known.

As we look at these first two readings today our questions might include why? Why begin the telling of this vital period in Israel's history with Hannah – with her struggle and corresponding joy? It's a curious way to recount history, so as we move on to our New Testament readings, let's hold on to Hannah and her remarkable transformation. How her whole being moved from weeping to singing!

Next, turning the sheet over and casting our minds back, remember that we've been hearing from the Letter to the Hebrews since the first Sunday in October. Today's the last Sunday we'll hear from Hebrews, so there's no time like the present to dive in. Interestingly enough, Hebrews is one of the anonymous books of the Bible. We know neither who wrote this short letter or when it was written. What we do know is that the writer of Hebrews wants his readers to know for certain that what Christ accomplished by his death upon the cross was a once and for all sacrifice. In other words, Christ's sacrifice created a cosmic shift for all of humanity – one single offering defeating sin for all people for all of time. The questions we might take away from this second lesson are related to our earlier questions from the First Samuel readings. What does it mean to be a people for whom God does remarkable things?

Finally, we move to the Gospel reading from Mark. Two Sunday's ago, I mentioned that today is last time we'll hear Mark's voice in our Sunday lectionary until November 2024. In this final passage Jesus predicts the destruction of the Jerusalem temple, surely an unimaginable occurrence for the disciples. Yet, sitting calmly opposite the temple itself, Jesus offers an apocalyptic discourse about the signs that will accompany the ruin of the temple and the birth of something new. Our questions around this Gospel passage might include wonderings about what it means that even when it feels as if everything around us could, or even is, falling apart, how might God be working to make things new?

Well, we've finally arrived at the best part of this sermon. The time when we synthesize our readings looking for a common theme. For help here let's turn to our Collect. The Collect is, of course, that prayer we say at the beginning of our service, the one that literally collects and holds the themes of the day. I like to compare the Collect to the tiny red dot you sometimes see on maps that says "you are here". When we get lost in the readings, well then we have the collect to go back to and try to get oriented. Let's read today's collect together.

Holding a consideration of all of these readings here's where I think we are, friends: God initiates a new way, God initiates a new way. There's your parking lot answer. The reason we hear the story about seemingly insignificant Hannah at the opening of Samuel is because Hannah's story is ancient Israel's story, and ancient Israel's story, is our story. God transform our weeping into joy because God is always making things new – even when we can't see it.

The Hebrew letter likewise is an account of how God initiates a new way. In a nutshell, God uses the heartbreak of Christ's suffering and death (which humankind was responsible for), God takes that tragedy and transforms it into our salvation. In the Gospel, Jesus's conversation with his disciples is an account of how God will initiate a new way even when the temple collapses. And those birth pangs, are the beginning of the Christian faith we are inheritors of today.

Brothers and sisters, these four readings testify to God initiating new ways – new ways in the Biblical witness and new ways in our lives as well. And so even as we experience hardships, fear or sorrow, so too can we trust that God always has and God always will initiate a new way. That's the business God's in – the business of creation, new life, hope, redemption, peace, love, wholeness. God eternally making all things new, even as some things pass away. Amen.