

The preaching text is from First Samuel 1:9-11, 19-20 and 2:1-10 — of course, reading the entirety of chapter one will provide helpful context.

Grace and peace be unto you from God our heavenly Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen.

A couple of weeks ago we sang as our closing song, *I Love to Tell the Story*. Of course, for us as Christians, we are talking about the story of Jesus and his love, as the hymn makes clear. And, as we know, stories have power. For us as Christians, our two favorite stories are told at Easter and at Christmas. Easter is the story of our salvation that God brings about by Jesus' death and resurrection while Christmas is the story about how our Jesus our Savior was born. Now I cannot say with certainty whether or not this is true for Jewish believers, but I have a feeling it would not be far off the mark to say that they also have two favorite stories. The first is the story of Moses and the Exodus, clearly that is regarded as the story of their salvation and it is celebrated every year at the Passover. And I believe that the second would be the story of King David.

Now the reason that I begin today in that way is because I was thinking about why is it that in our current series of readings, it would make any sense at all that we take such a huge leap from last week's reading from Exodus to today's reading from First Samuel. In my study bible at home, we skipped 270 pages from last week to this week! Of course today's reading does not mention David at all but as renowned Biblical scholar William Brueggeman says, "As the Samuel narrative unfolds, we discover that Israel is waiting for a king who will protect, defend, gather, liberate, and legitimate the community. Indeed, Israel is finally waiting for a quite particular king: for David! When David finally appears, Israel has the assurance that 'this is he'" (*Interpretation*, p. 10).

Yet like any good story, you build up to it and there's plenty of drama that unfolds well before you ever get to the climactic scenes. So with all of that, what do we make of the opening of the book of Samuel? In the brief portions of the first chapter that we read, we begin with "After *they* had eaten and drunk at Shiloh [*they* meaning Hannah and

her husband, Elkanah], Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord.” Now while Hannah’s name means “favored” or “gracious,” we learn from her prayer that at this point, she is not feeling favored in any way. From other portions of the chapter, we learn that Hannah is unable to have children while her husband Elkanah has another wife whose name is Peninnah. And her name just happens to mean “fertile” or “prolific” (which, of course, she was), so you can imagine how this only deepens the pain that Hannah is feeling. And while we are told that the priest Eli is there, “at the ready” to help, in Hannah’s pain and suffering, she makes her cries directly to God, much like those who were enslaved by Pharaoh, back in Exodus. We hear how Hannah “was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly.”

As a part of her prayer, she makes a solemn vow saying, “O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you.” In other words, she prays that should God answer her prayer, she will dedicate or consecrate the child to serve God.

Now in the portion of the chapter that falls between verses eleven and nineteen, the priest Eli does what men (myself included) often do, he opens his mouth and inserts his foot. What happens is Hannah is praying silently. But back then people spoke their prayers out loud. So, when Eli sees her lips moving but not speaking he thinks that she is drunk. And he tells her as much! Hannah has to explain to him, “I have been pouring out my soul to the Lord... for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.” Fortunately, for Eli (and for Hannah), he saves face by telling her, “Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.” And at this, Hannah responds, “Let your servant find favor in your sight.” This of course is a play on words with Hannah’s own name. And, as we will soon learn, the favored woman does indeed find favor not only with Eli, but much more crucially, with God. And with this you may

have also caught the connection with Mary, the mother of Jesus. Remember how she is greeted by the angel Gabriel? She is given the lofty title of “favored one” in Luke 1:28.

As we now return to the portion of the story that we read, we hear in verse nineteen how the pious husband and his wife “rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord.” And, when they later return home, they have sexual relations and we hear that the Lord remembered her and answered her prayer. “In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son.” Interestingly, we are told that “*She* named him Samuel,” normally that would be the role of the husband. But clearly, this is her story. And so when God answers Hannah’s prayer, the name that she gives her son, Samuel, translates as “I have asked of the Lord.”

At the end of chapter one, we hear how Hannah follows through on her vow saying, “For this child I prayed; and the Lord has granted me the petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord; as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord” (1:27-28). Now what I find particularly interesting about that is almost those same words could be spoken by God to those of us who are parents. Children are not truly *ours* but in an ultimate sense, they belong to God and God is lending them to us to be cared for and loved — as long as they live, they are a gift to us.

Turning then to the second portion of our reading, chapter two, we have Hannah responding to all that has happened in a song, in the form of a prayer. It is a song of praise which affirms that all of our human strength comes from God and is magnified or exalted in God. We might almost be able to picture Hannah dancing as she rejoices in the victory that God provided for her. She is celebrating God as the Holy One who has no true rival. She also stresses something that I feel many of those in high positions need to hear loudly and clearly, “Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.”

Now remember, while her name means favored, Hannah has experienced quite the contrary. But now this humble servant is experiencing a surprising reversal which

she sees as a foreshadowing of a whole bunch of other reversals. The strong become weak while the weak become strong. Hannah sings of God who does both negative and positive things. On the one hand God “kills,” “brings down to Sheol” (the place of death), and God “makes poor,” and “brings low.” On the other hand though, the list of positive things is longer: God “brings to life,” “raises up,” “makes rich,” “exalts,” “raises up the poor from the dust,” and “lifts the needy from the ash heap” to “sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.” And in and among all of this there’s a critical statement, not to be missed, “not by might does one prevail.”

Ultimately, all of our human ways to exert power will and do fall woefully short in comparison to God. Hannah ends her song with “The Lord” shattering his adversaries and judging the ends of the earth. If one who rules is to have any strength, it will be granted by God; it will not ever come by their own might.

And this of course is pointing toward David, as a future king. And it is none other than Samuel, this infant child of Hannah’s who grows up to be the one who anoints Israel’s first king (Saul) and their second king (David). And as the stories of Saul and David reveal, it was only as they followed God and saw themselves as servants under God that they had real power and things went well. Finally though, for us as Christians, we see Jesus as the true Son of David who becomes the ultimate King of Kings who fulfills those great reversals in his own life and ministry. So if you need to be brought to life, if you need raising up from the dust, or if you need to be lifted from the ash heap, allow Jesus to take you by the hand and know that he will do so according to his promise — a promise that he was willing to die for. Amen

Narrative.3 First Samuel 1:9-11, 19-20; 2:1-10 10/18/2020 Pastor Jonathan Zielske