

+Porter Taylor
Convention Sermon--11/14/15
1 Samuel 1:4-20

Anne Lamont says there are three prayers worth praying:

“Help,” “Thanks,” “Oh Well.”

We give thanks for our blessings.

We ask the Almighty to come to our assistance.

And we embrace the surprises of life—some hard; some easy.

I used to think that these were three distinct categories.

But the truth is—the longer I live, the more they get mixed up with one another.

Because we don't live in a static world of melodrama—of good things and bad things.

We are pilgrims—walking in a strange land towards the New Jerusalem.

And our task is not to label our lives but to live our lives.

The things we give thanks for often make us pray HELP.

And those who started with HELP often end up with THANKS

And I end up praying OH WELL all the time.

Because we believe in an Incarnated God, wherever we are—the Word is Flesh

And dwells in that moment.

Which brings us to Hannah.

I have to say, I can't stay out of this story.

When I read it for this sermon, I first thought “I have lived this story.”

My wife, Jo, and I couldn't conceive children.

And like Hannah, we felt cursed.

For a long time I tried to figure out what I had done wrong.

Because I thought I knew how the world worked—

You behaved and got rewarded.

You misbehaved and got punished.

I had behaved---I had all kinds of academic diplomas on my wall.

And after all, I was an Episcopalian---the most proper denomination there is. Right?

I assumed that if you lived the right life,

you got to choose the Thanks prayer all the time.

But sooner or later, we all fall into the hands of a living God.

And we learn that there are three prayers—but you say them all at once.

As our Lord proclaimed: Blessed are the poor

Blessed are those who weep

Blessed are those who hunger—which sounds like “Thanks,” “Help,” “Oh Well.”

I thought I knew this story because of the years of wanting children

and not being able to have them

But Hannah taught me to go deeper—

and I think she teaches us about more than having children.

She teaches us how to be faithful in this confusing world

Because so many times in our lives look like dead ends.

She teaches us to say, “Thanks, Help, Oh Well”—all at once, all the time.

So first a refresher.

Hannah's husband, Elkanah has another wife---Peninnah

And of course Peninnah has a brood of sons.

She taunts Hannah--- constantly reminding Hannah of what she doesn't have.

This taunting is like living in the Presidential debates forever—

It's an endless cycle of blame and recrimination which leads nowhere.

Peninnah is convinced that it's Hannah's fault that Elkanah loves Hannah more.

And the community is convinced it's Hannah's fault that she has no children.

We want explanations for our pain, but life is always death and resurrection.

More than explanations, what we need is a faithful response.

Hannah shows us what a faithful response looks like.

The text says, "She made this vow: O Lord of hosts, remember me"

"Remember" —that is, to be connected. To be in communion.

To be part of God working God's purpose out.

I didn't know how to do this because like Hannah at the story's beginning, I felt alone.

What I disliked most about not having children was being at Christmas with my nieces and nephews.

I was afraid of becoming the Grinch because the unfairness isolated me in a bad place.

We all have our versions of this---

some event, some consequence that makes us think

that those other undeserving people are more fortunate than me.

And we feel like a wallflower or the Prodigal Son.

“O Lord of hosts, remember me.”

But of course, what happens is Hannah remembers God.

Which is our job. Our job is to remember God--God's job is to remember us.

Our faith is that God is always keeping God's end of the bargain.

Our problem is that we forget ours.

When Hannah remembers, she prays to God a prayer too soft to hear.

Probably it was “Help, Oh Well and Thanks.”

Because praying to God for Help is remembering.

Praying reminds us that God is God so we can say “OH WELL” and “Thanks”

At some point I stopped lamenting the life I thought I should have had
with sons that look like me and daughters that looked like Jo.

And in my early thirties, I said—“I'll focus on my work—my wonderful marriage—
and my return to the Church.”

Because when we call upon God, we may know what we want,

but we don't know what we need.

Remembering opens us up to discover that.

The success of prayer is an increase in our connection to God—

Not that we get what we ask for as we ask for it.

As our prayers are answered, however they are answered,

we give thanks by singing the song of hope for all people.

Hannah sings about more than Samuel her son

She sings “God raises up the poor from the dust.”

“God lifts the needy from the ash heap”

This isn't just because we think wider than our lives---although we should.

This isn't just because we are committed to justice—although we are.

This is because the world is changed as our vision gets changed.

Hannah no longer weeps; she no longer starves herself; her heart is no longer sad.

Her horizon is bigger—she is remembered to what God is doing for all creation.

So this is how my horizon grew.

On a cold February Monday morning Jo and I drove to the Atlanta United Way Office on Peachtree St.

Our caseworker had called us Sunday afternoon

and said we were to come at 3:00 on the next day and pick up our son.

Sunday night we went to J.C. Penny's and told the clerk—

“It's your lucky day. We need everything.”

But as we walked into the United Way building, it felt as if we had nothing to prepare us for this.

We went into a lime green room with two rockers and a crib against the wall.

My breaths were getting shorter and shorter.

Carol, our caseworker, led us to the crib.

We peered over the edge like we were at the rail of the Grand Canyon.

Carol whispered, "Say hello to your son."

He was so small. And Red. Five weeks old with an indentation in his head.

Carol said, "You can pick him up. In fact, it's the only way you'll get him home."

Jo reached in and in that motion we were all lifted up.

As Jo rocked this child---our son---

we were all rocked back in forth in the goodness of the Lord.

And in that moment, I could have sung Hannah's song.

I knew I was blessed. This was sheer grace but I also sensed it was bigger than us.

It was about the Goodness of the Lord for all God's children.

In that moment I knew that all our prayers get jumbled together

Because our lives are never straight lines—

and they are never just about us---and they never make sense.

They are just a jumble of "Help," "Thank you" and "Oh Well."