



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Pentecost 26, Proper 28 – Year B
November 18, 2018

[RCL]: 1 Samuel 1:4-20; 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25; Mark 13:1-8

1 Samuel 1:4-20

The books of Samuel deal with the period that marked the emergence of prophecy and monarchy in ancient Israel. The First Book of Samuel opens with a recurring theme in Israel's history – God hears the cry of the marginalized and oppressed. In this case it is Hannah, the beloved wife of Elkanah, the man who will be the father of Samuel. She is unable to have children. Hannah is taunted for her lack of fecundity by Elkanah's other wife, Penninah.

This story, like so many others from the scriptures, illustrates how God finds a way into our lives in times of desperation and sadness. In fact, the biblical record indicates that God longs to be with us in the moments of trial and hurt; the Lord has a preference for those who are suffering. While God certainly does not design or plan hardship for us, it is through our wounds, through the crack in the heart, that God's light enters our lives.

Hannah represents all of us who have faced hopeless situations. Her story shows how God can transform even the most desperate situations into surprisingly wonderful futures. Above all, she teaches us the necessity of communicating our deepest longings to God, trusting in the Lord's power to turn darkness into light, even when we see no way to that dawn.

- Have you experienced the consoling presence of God in times of hardship? Does Hannah's story stand in solidarity with your own?
- Where/when in your life have you experienced God's transforming power (i.e., God's power to turn hopeless situations into a hope-filled future)?

1 Samuel 2:1-10

The author of Luke's gospel based his Magnificat text (Luke 1:46-55) on this Song of Hannah. The themes of Mary and Hannah are similar – joy at the birth of a child and praise of God's power. The Magnificat speaks of God's mercy, whereas Hannah extols God's justice. Both sing of God's casting down the rich and uplifting the poor. Hannah's words mention explicitly the defeat of God's (and her) enemies. What are

we to make of this rather strong language: “The bows of the mighty broken” and “the wicked shall be cut off in darkness”? While most mature adults do not plot or pray for the destruction of people they do not like, there are many negative forces we face in our lives; forces that perpetuate oppression; forces that only God can counter and transform. For example, we fall victim to self-loathing, depression, difficult family/marital issues, grudge-bearing and harbored hurt. These forces oppress us, keep us from being the people God calls us to be. And sometimes these powers can be so strong that it seems there is no way out. The song of Hannah, however, is a testimony to God’s ability to defeat even these seemingly insurmountable issues.

- Are there any words, phrases or images in the Song of Hannah that speak to you?
- How do Hannah’s words of the “great reversal” resonate with you (i.e., the hungry are fat with spoil, the barren has borne seven, etc.)?

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

In times of desolation, we might feel that we are unworthy to approach God. Perhaps we are overwhelmed by an instance or pattern of personal failure, a bout of melancholia, or we become conscious of our own distance from God due to neglecting our relationship with God. We might find it difficult to turn to God because we lack confidence in our worthiness to resume the relationship. While such feelings are not predominant in the spiritual life, they are real enough.

This passage from Hebrews tells us that Jesus has provided us irrevocable access to God. Like any favored son, Jesus may go right to his Father, even when it appears that the doors are closed. And Jesus takes us with him. So when we desire to approach God, there is no sin, no failing, no time or distance away from God that will prevent us. This is the compassion of God; Jesus’ love for all humankind, and faith in the will and vision of the Creator, even though it required that he pass through a torturous death, has shown us just how much God desires to be in the life of every person. Our text today teaches us that there are no barriers between us and God, only the ones we set up ourselves in our own minds and hearts.

- What are the barriers we erect that keep us from God? How does today’s passage from Hebrews speak to this concern for you?
- How does the verse “let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water” resonate with you?

Mark 13:1-8

The stones of the Western Wall of the Jerusalem Temple, which can still be seen standing today, were and are rather impressive. In fact, some are 30 feet long. These were surely the stones to which Jesus’ disciples were referring. Jesus uses their observation about the stones to springboard into a prophecy concerning the nation and people who were dear to him. This is appropriate in the context of his approaching execution. While modern Western people often speak of life “flashing before our eyes” before death, ancient Near

Eastern people believed that in the days before death one gained powers of prognostication. Jesus exhibits that here. What follows from Jesus is an example of apocalyptic thought and discourse. “Apocalyptic” was a literary form common in the biblical period (see, for example, the Book of Daniel and Revelation), but alien to those of us in the modern world. Apocalyptic literature uses certain vocabulary and imagery, in this case earthquakes, wars, famines, etc., to convey a larger truth. Jesus is telling us to beware and persevere in times of hardship and trial, because no power can prevail against the power of Almighty God.

- Where/how do you find spiritual comfort/nourishment in Jesus’ apocalyptic discourse in today’s gospel?
- How do you relate, from your own experience, to what Jesus says in verse 8, “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs”?

This Bible study, written by Brian Pinter, originally ran November 18, 2012.