

**Sermon for Proper 28(B)
Year B**

[RCL] 1 Samuel 2:1-10; 1 Samuel 1:4-20 (as canticle); Hebrews 10:11-14; Mark 13:1-8

Today's lessons are a mixture of life struggles, miracles and prophecies.

The story of Hannah may resonate with numerous women in our own age. Infertility is a widespread challenge that women face, at times, silently.

Hannah's cultural context differs significantly from ours. In ancient Israel, motherhood was the epitome of accomplishments for women. Not being able to conceive was seen as a sign of punishment or God's displeasure. Nowadays, women of childbearing age in this country enjoy innumerable lifestyle choices and accomplishments are measured in a myriad of areas. However, the stigma, misunderstanding or lack of tact women of today may experience could be as insensitive and cruel as Hannah's was.

There is much we could learn from Hannah's strength of character, her persistence, resilience and ability to manage her emotional roller coaster, even in the midst of peer pressure. Not all stories have a happy ending. In this case, the Lord had compassion on Hannah and granted her the blessing of bearing a child, Samuel, who became a prominent figure in the history of the people of Israel.

Paradoxically, Hannah promised to return to God the exact thing for which she prayed. That selfless act may serve as a reminder to us that all things on earth and in heaven are God's gift to us. It is a reminder of the truth behind the phrase many congregations recite during the offertory "All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thy own we have given thee."

Hannah is blessed with the gift of life. She proclaims her gratitude in a song to her Lord. "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God." It is this song that Mary embraces when visited by the angel with the good news about the coming of Emmanuel.

This story may serve as a model for us of what it means to live faithfully in days and situations that may seem godforsaken. Hannah's faithfulness to God, resilience and perseverance serve as great inspiration for the Christian community in the world when we face challenges or tasks that, at first glance, seem overwhelming, such as the signs of the times, the decline in membership, the call to end hunger, violence, and to be fully present in a world in need of peace and reconciliation.

Jesus's conversation with the disciples points us to this very reality of a crumbling world, which we dare say, is an opportunity for rebuilding and hope. It is an opportunity for the faithful to embrace our commitment to fully participate in God's mission in a renewed and creative way.

The interaction narrated in today's gospel takes place towards the end of Jesus's ministry. The scenes preceding the text describe Jesus's teaching and cite particularly his warning about the destruction of the temple.

Impressed with the settings, the disciples expressed their sense of awe for the infrastructure in front of them. The masonry work in Jerusalem was indeed impressive and not comparable to that of Galilee. Jesus's response to the impressed disciple may seem dismissive at first glance. However, this is one of those Jesus-Teaching-Moments that would not only reveal to the disciples a powerful truth about

God's power and grace but also give us, believers of this century, an opportunity to revisit our perceptions, understanding and relationship with the physical spaces that host our gatherings as we continue with the apostles' teaching and the breaking of the bread.

Although the Gospel focuses on the end of times, the central point on buildings and signs may give us a perfect analogy to meditate on our current reality as we struggle with failing, demanding and impressive infrastructures that house our collective worship.

For decades, our buildings have been symbols of wealth and power. The Episcopal Church's red doors have been a sign of welcome and visibility in our communities. Yet, the signs of the times show us that the decline in church attendance or church life as we knew it is an evolving reality.

We run the risk of remaining in a state of awe, like the disciples, admiring our stain glass windows, wood, paintings, carvings, and stones or we could run the risk of remaining in denial and exclusively focused inward just like the man in Anthony de Melo's story:

A father knocks on his son's door "Jamie", he says, "wake up!" Jamie answers, "I do not want to get up, Papa." The father shouts, "Get up, you have to go to school!" Jamie says, "I do not want to go to school." "Why not?" asks his father. "Three reasons," says Jamie. "First, because it is so dull; second, the kids tease me; and third, I hate school." The father responds, "Well, I am going to give you three reasons you must go to school. First, because it is your duty. Second, because you are forty-five years old; and third, because you are the headmaster."

We may rather stay under the covers of denial about the state of our communities. The signs are visible. The world needs our commitment as disciples and apostles to engage in the mission of God in the communities where our buildings are located. Yes! The buildings are a means to an end, a receptacle of God's grace to facilitate God's mission. Our buildings are vessels to facilitate community and service.

Jesus's response today is to us an inspiration to focus on God's mission outwardly. The buildings we once treasured may be limiting us from engaging the world in meaningful and powerful ways.

This past summer a resolution presented to the General Convention of our church addressed the challenges we face with our physical spaces. The resolution highlighted the fact that our buildings are underutilized and constricted by habits, customs and mindsets that preclude us from using them as sacred spaces for the greater good. It emphasized that our worship services are one of many expressions of the holy use of buildings.

The resolution invited us to tap into our Anglican understanding of incarnation, so that it's not just formally religious things that are sacred, but other activities too can become sacred and sanctified, themselves benefitting from being present in church buildings. It is an invitation to be creative and to redefine our perceptions and relationship with the assets we have been blessed with.

A new outlook to our church's infrastructure can be life-giving and generative beyond our wildest imagination. It may require us to deconstruct our worship of building behaviors and build new practices and understanding of mission. Many Episcopal churches and of other denominations have discerned the signs of the time and have stepped out in audacious faith to bring Christ and Church to the world, from celebrating Eucharist in a corner store, in a park, or opening our sanctuaries to community gatherings.

Our buildings are holy ground, spaces where we find a sense of community, where we are fed and nourished. It is not only a space in which to dwell, but also a space to be formed, prepared and sent out into the world to bear witness of God's faithfulness and greatness.

May we develop a theology of sacredly inclusive use-of-space that is adaptive and generative both financially and spiritually. May we collaborate to re-envision the purpose of our buildings and be aware of the need of walking in faith outside of our walls to bring about reconciliation into the world. Amen.

Written by the Rev. Miguelina Howell

The Rev. Miguelina Howell is Dean-Elect of Christ Church Cathedral, Hartford. She currently serves as Vicar of the Cathedral. Miguelina serves as CREDO faculty and member of the Council of Advice for the Latino/Hispanic Missioner of the Episcopal Church. She is originally from the Dominican Republic and has served God's mission overseas, as member of the Episcopal Church Staff and as the 7th Rector of Church of the Epiphany in the Diocese of Newark.

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