

Sermon for November 14, 2021
Proper 28B
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Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

1 Samuel 1:4-20
1 Samuel 2:1-10
Hebrews 10:11-25
Mark 13:1-8

It is the worst of times. It is the best of times.

The Collect for the Day cautions us:

“Blessed Lord, who caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning: Grant us so to hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life...”

Those words reflect a sense of God’s grace to us - of our holding on and our letting go.

That sentiment is welded in the heart of Hannah.

Hannah was in a deep pain longing for a child. She believed God had closed her womb and she would never be a mother. Hannah was so wracked with agony that she left the feast and went to the temple to pray. She was so overwrought that Eli thought she was drunk.

Her deepest wish was for a child, and she prayed to make a bargain with God: give her a son and he would be dedicated to a life of service to the Lord. Eli was so taken by her pleadings that he prophesied she would bear a son. And it came to pass.

We joined her in her song of praise.

God gave Hannah what she most desired: a child to cherish. Her son will be named Samuel, so named because Hannah said: “I have asked him of the Lord.” Making the promise as part of a bargain with God is one thing, keeping that promise is quite another.

I cannot but feel that Hannah did have concerns about giving her son back to God, giving him over to be raised by Eli. She must have wanted to hold on to him, no matter what she said she would do.

How does a mother let go of her child?

When I graduated high school in 1966, I enlisted in the Air Force, which allowed me to avoid being drafted. It was the early days of the war in Vietnam. My mother did not want me to go. In fact, she told me later, she had contemplated going to the draft board and the recruiting officer and pleading that I be released from service because of my history of polio and other childhood diseases.

She decided to let me go, partly because she believed that I, as her first borne – her first fruit as it were, was destined to serve God, and she would allow God to govern my destiny.

Of course, it took another thirty years before that destiny would be fulfilled, and my mother lived to see me ordained a deacon, though she died before I was ordained to the priesthood. Personally, I believe she died so she could be present at my priesting because she was too ill to actually travel here physically.

My mother, like Hannah, gave her son's life over to God, as I have given myself and my life to the service of God's church.

Giving of ourselves and what we hold most dear is not easy, especially in the world today. God asks that we give of ourselves as an offering to the work of building the Kingdom of God here on earth, here in Los Alamos. It is a challenge.

We live in perilous times. What we once thought was certain can no longer be counted upon. Sometimes we seem on the edge of the Apocalypse.

That's Jesus' message in today's Gospel – which has been called Mark's "little Apocalypse." Jesus walks out of the temple with his disciples who notice the structure of the Temple.

"Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down."

The stones they were looking at were not the size of chairs or tables, but the size of walls. These were huge stones. So huge that architects and engineers still wonder how they were placed. And Jesus is telling them that not one stone will be left atop another.

He goes further: there will be wars and rumors of wars, famines, and earthquakes. He tells them that the very structure of their society will be shattered.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way – in short, the period was so far like the present period, that some of its noisiest authorities insisted on its being received, for good or for evil, in the superlative degree of comparison only.

That is the opening paragraph to Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*.

The story is about two men who are nearly doubles in appearance, and they love the same woman. In the end the Englishman takes the place of the Frenchman to face death in the Reign of Terror that followed the French Revolution.

It is interesting to note that the Revolution depicted in Dickens' tale began in 1789. It was that same year that the Constitution of the United States was signed, and it was in 1789 The Episcopal Church was born out of the Church of England, the church Dickens knew. His story of the two cities parallels the Gospel story of a man who gives up his life for others, and the story reflects Dickens' belief in the life eternal.

A friend of mine once wished for me: "May you always live as if you are immortal."

That's what we believe when we're young. We dare things. We do things. We step boldly where angels fear to tread.

I think it's good advice. We should live as if we are immortal. That's the promise given us through the Resurrection, and the reminder of the Collect of the Day Sunday *that we may embrace and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life.*

That is the very sentiment that closes the *Tale of Two Cities* as the main character reflects on his decision to forfeit his life, and the promise of a future in the life to come.

Do you think that it will seem long to me, while I wait for her in the better land where I trust both you and I will be mercifully sheltered?

And he sees further into a future that will rise from the chaos of revolution and terror.

I see a beautiful city and a brilliant people rising from this abyss, and, in their struggles to be truly free, in their triumphs and defeats, through long years to come, I see the evil of this time and of the previous time of which this is the natural birth, gradually making expiation for itself and wearing out.

And he envisions the benefits of the gift he is giving with his life, and that he will be remembered, his memory cherished, and the story of his sacrifice told to generations and descendants for countless ages.

I see the lives for which I lay down my life, peaceful, useful, prosperous and happy, in that England which I shall see no more.

I see that I hold a sanctuary in their hearts, and in the hearts of their descendants, generations hence. I see her, an old woman, weeping for me on the anniversary of this day. I see her and her husband, their course done, lying side by side in their last earthly bed, and I know that each was not more honoured and held sacred in the other's soul, than I was in the souls of both.

And yet he warns against returning to the way of life that warped and crushed the hopes of all the people under the heels of those in power, so that his sacrifice would not be in vain.

Crush humanity out of shape once more, under similar hammers, and it will twist itself into the same tortured forms. Sow the same seed of rapacious license and oppression over again, and it will surely yield the same fruit according to its kind.

It is the call of God to us that we build the beautiful city, the Kingdom of God in the here and now, a Kingdom in which every child is nourished and nurtured, cared for and loved, that we all can live our lives as God meant us to live.

We are called, we ourselves, to give of who we are and what we possess to provide the wherewithal for God to build a future on the foundations we lay in this age.

And Dickens closes his novel with that sentiment, with these words:

It is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known.

Amen.