

Birth Pangs

Today's readings discuss similar things in completely different ways. Let's begin with Hannah's Prayer. Hannah was married to Elkanah who had two wives, the other being Peninnah. It is believed that Hannah was Elkanah's first wife and also his favourite. After remaining childless for ten years, Elkanah then took Peninnah as his wife and she bore him several children. How many she actually had is uncertain, although some sources claim she bore ten children or even more.

Peninnah knew Hannah was desperate to have children and she would taunt Hannah relentlessly. There is actually something called the "spirit of Peninnah". "The spirit of Peninah is that spirit of rejoicing at the misfortune of others. It's easy to have the spirit of Peninah especially when the misfortune of others has a tendency to make us look better." from www.times.co.sz

Hannah went to the temple at Shiloh, which was then the central holy city for early Israelites. Shiloh preceded Jerusalem as the central holy city. This was an annual pilgrimage that she, Elkanah and Peninnah would undertake. This particular year she was beside herself at still being childless, while Peninnah continued to bear child after child.

Utterly distraught, Hannah prayed ceaselessly and soundlessly at the temple. The high priest, Eli, thought her to be drunk and tried to chastise her. Hannah explained her plight and her prayer to God that she be blessed with a child. She further promised that if her first child was a son, he would be dedicated to God for a life of service in thanksgiving for answering Hannah's prayer. Eli joined Hannah in her petitions to God and in short order, Hannah gave birth to Samuel, which means, "God has heard".

The following year, Elkanah was preparing for the pilgrimage to Shiloh and when he asked Hannah if she was coming, she replied that she would remain with Samuel until he was weaned and then she would bring him to the temple, in keeping her promise.

It is believed that Samuel was about three years old when Hannah brought him to Eli. "When she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine." (1 Samuel 1.24, NRSV). An ephah of flour would weigh approximately 20 kilos or 44 lbs.

As Hannah presented three-year old Samuel to Eli at the temple she sang the song that is our first reading today. It is known as the Prayer or Song or Canticle of Hannah. If it seems vaguely familiar that's because the Magnificat, or Song of Mary was written in a similar format. Both are songs of thanksgiving for the wonderful things that God has done. God chose both women to bear sons that would be powerful and change the world, each in their own way.

Let's skip ahead to the Gospel. We are coming to the end of Jesus' teachings in Mark's gospel. Mark and the disciples have been with Jesus for a while now. They recently heard the story of the Widow's offering, also known as the widow's mite. The widow gave all that she had at the temple, and Jesus drew her example to the disciples. For years the widow's mite has been used as a way to bully others to give all they have to the church. Along the lines of the prosperity gospel, ie to those who have much, even more will be given.

The problem with this is, the widow gave everything she had, not from abundance, but from scarcity. She had to pay her temple tax and so gave everything she had, including money to heat her home and feed herself. The wealthy made a big show out of how much they were able to give and made sure everyone was watching. This is messed up. And Jesus knew it.

Jesus speaks next of the stones in the temple. This was the second temple, taking 46 years to build. These stones would have measured 38" x 18" x 12", weighing between two and five tons each. In short, these stones were huge and heavy. And with the flick of his hand Jesus asks the disciples "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." Mark 13.2, NRSV

All through his earthly ministry, Jesus has been dropping breadcrumbs about his short time on earth. Jesus knows that something awesome, in the truest sense of the word, is going to happen.

The temple will be flattened, what is up will be down, what is down will be up. What the disciples knew to be true will be questioned and one whom they considered incorruptible will indeed be corrupt (Judas) and another who was one of Jesus' largest champions will feign ignorance (Peter).

Jesus is trying to get the disciples to understand that it's going to get much worse before it gets better and they MUST pay attention. Jesus says, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, "I am he!" and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumours of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come." (Mark 13.5-7, NRSV)

If you notice, not once in scripture does Jesus say, Hey! Look at me! I'm the Messiah! I am the Son of God." Not once. If he's asked directly, he will answer, without exception, that they are not to tell anyone who he is. There were many itinerant preachers from across the lands, standing in the town squares and bellowing how they were the Messiah. All Jews would have known that they were waiting on the Messiah to save them from the horrid conditions they were living through under Roman rule.

So to anyone who claimed to be Messiah, they had an already captive and willing audience. Imagine living in terrific fear every day of your life. Imagine a fear so deep and gripping that it controlled every waking moment of your life? With every ounce of strength you pray fervently to God that your emancipation would come. That once and for all, you would be freed from the tyranny of the world in which you live. To anyone who gave hope, you would listen, hanging on every syllable. Only to be disappointed again. And again. And again. Jesus was telling his disciples to stay awake and pay attention because the world in which they lived would be topsy turvy and everything would change.

Contrasting Jesus' message with Hannah's Song..there would be birth pangs that would signal new life coming. No child is born without their mother experiencing a great deal of pain. Yet from what I'm told that pain fades with every grip of their tiny hand around her finger. Or their eyes gazing deeply into hers.

Hannah was willing to do whatever it took, including giving her first son, in order that God would bless her and give her that which she longed for most of all -- motherhood. She went through birth pangs to deliver a healthy baby boy and true to her word, she gave Samuel in service to the Church.

The birth pangs Jesus speaks of are different to Hannah's birth pangs. The average labour takes between four and eight hours. The birth of which Jesus speaks, is the end of the times as they are now, and the beginning of the new times, the new world.

In short, Jesus is speaking of the apocalypse or revelation of things to come. The old will be pushed aside to make room for the new. Complacency, corruption, greed, hatred, will all be pushed aside for the new way of engaging in relationship, love, joy, neighbour and community. Those who were considered of little importance i.e. widows, the elderly and children would be considered the seat of wisdom, joy, and hope. The last would be first. The meek would be powerful. The invisible would find their voice.

Those who made a lot of noise posturing about their deserving wealth would learn that with great wealth comes great responsibility. Topsy turvy. Those who simply got on with the nature of giving and doing good would be rewarded by not drawing attention to themselves. Doing good things, not for the reward, or the attention, but simply because it is the right thing to do.

Which brings us to today...

We continue to live in a liminal time of transition. We continue to live in a time of fear; of the unknown...of the pandemic...of the variants...of exposures, and so forth. We have been in a liminal state, between here and there for close to two years. It's been stressful. It's been frightening. And many of us are simply weary. We are ready for all this to be "over"

For a long time, at the beginning of all this I kept looking to the immediate future (a couple of weeks) and the timely future (next year), the "post-covid" time longingly.

“Surely this won't last that long”, I thought, as we shuttered the building doors and dared to be Church in a different way. And shortly, I became very jaded, anxious and frustrated that there didn't seem to be an end time to the pandemic.

So then I began to switch my thoughts from post-pandemic to living in a world with COVID. Not a “post-pandemic” time, but a “during pandemic” time. To live with less fear and more hope. To be careful, yet not dogmatic. Because I believe, my brothers and sisters, that we will not be completely COVID-free for a very long time, perhaps never.

We have been experiencing birth pangs as a Church for a long time. At first the pains were little aches in the back. A twinge here and there, but not enough to fret. Then as we moved into online only worship we began to develop a new routine. Church was emerging in a different way. Church began to look and feel different. Not better or worse, simply different. And the pangs increased.

We re-opened our doors and began to experiment with blended Worship. Then we had to close the doors to everyone but worship leadership and return to “online only” once again. Our breathing changed and the pains became more constant.

And still we longed for life, and our beloved Church to return to what it once was. But we are in another apocalypse, the world is changing. COP26 showed us that we cannot continue to do what we have always done and simply hope for the best...we are beyond that head in the sand mentality.

Knox United has taken the bold stand, as a steward of the building, in daring to dream a new life for the physical Church. They know that they are a Worshipping Community with or without a building. We have learned we can be, and are Church, with or without a building. The apocalypse is upon us.

We cannot go back to 1950, or 1980, or 2000, or 2019. We can only go forward. All this to say we learn from and continue to honour our treasured traditions. And we learn to do things in a new way.

Let's be honest, if left to our own devices, we would likely NOT be using technology in the way we currently are. It only took a global pandemic to bring us into imagining the Church and Worship in a different way.

And so, as we move through these birth pangs that continue to be more urgent let us remember to breathe, to put our faith in God, and to remember the lessons of Jesus. The lesson of knowing that with every cataclysmic change, things will never return to as they once were. Instead, we will be brought into something even more beautiful and useful than we could have ever imagined.

As we wind down our Christian year and begin the deliberate anticipatory time of Advent, let us remember that even though we may not be ready, that beloved baby boy will be born in a barn, only 2000+ years ago and 10,500 kms or 6,500 miles from here. In many ways it will be greatly different from last year and from years past. And in many ways it will be as it always has been.

So let us strive to speak from love and peace, instead of urgency and frustration. Let us act with kindness instead of anxiety. Let us live in giddy anticipation instead of fearful consummation. The apocalypse is not something to fear; rather, it is something to be excited about, as the world is about to reveal something incredibly awesome - awe-some in the truest sense of the word.

I'm excited. How about you?

AMEN

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Sermon for Pentecost 25 - 14 November 2021
1 Samuel 2.1-10, Mark 13.1-8