

Leif McLellan

Sermon for 11/18/18

(P) The Holy Gospel according to Mark 13:1-8

(C) Glory to you O Lord

The Holy Gospel, Mark 13:1-8

13 As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” 2 Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” 3 When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, 4 “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” 5 Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. 6 Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ [a] and they will lead many astray. 7 When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. 8 For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against

kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.

(P) The Gospel of the Lord

(C) Praise to you, O Christ

## Prophets and Priests: God's Response to Sexual Abuse

Middle school Leif. Now he was a character. He was one of those “good kids,” definitely a rule follower and someone who excelled in school. For the most part. Sometimes his teenage desire for attention and lack of foresight got him in trouble.

One day on the bus ride home from school, a few of my friends were playing with one of those miniature pumpkins. Twelve-year-old me thought it would be really funny if I would lick this pumpkin. And it was funny, at least to all my twelve-year-old friends in the back of the bus. Innocent enough, right? The next day I am in class and I get called down to the school's sheriff's office. My heart starts racing and my thoughts start reeling. What could I possibly be in trouble for? The officer sits me down and informs me that a big, pumpkin-smelling mess had been made in the back of my bus. The officer had received a list of names responsible for the mess... And I was on it. I was deeply upset. All I had done was lick a pumpkin!

Later that day, my parents called me into the kitchen. They were sitting at the table looking very serious. They had received a call from the school. I sat there dumbstruck as my parents lectured me about my alleged misbehavior. I tried desperately to explain that I had nothing to do with the bus vandalism. I just licked a pumpkin for goodness sake! I got off the bus before my friends trashed it. But they didn't believe me. I was so frustrated that they couldn't understand; all I could do was plead for them to trust me. This little event has since become a kind of joke in my family—thankfully—but it helps me connect with Hannah in today's reading from 1 Samuel.

Just before the passage we read in 1 Samuel, we learn of a man named Elkanah who has two wives: Hannah and Peninnah. (Yes, biblical marriage can seem pretty foreign to us, but that's beside the point). Hannah is supposedly Elkanah's favorite. But there's one problem: Peninnah has children and Hannah doesn't. In fact, the story implies that Elkanah married Peninnah because Hannah was not bearing children. Peninnah literally means "second." She's his second wife.

Now we have to remember that in the ancient world, women's social status and security depended upon having male children. Male children assured the survival of the family and financial support after the death of her husband. This was the world women at this time had to navigate.

It's in this context we find Hannah and Peninnah. Elkanah loves and supports Hannah, but she isn't good enough for him. He needs a second wife to carry on the family. Peninnah has children; she has social capital; but she does not have Elkanah's favor. Do you see the tension? No wonder Peninnah taunts Hannah. Year after year. The family goes to pray at the house of the Lord, and Peninnah mocks Hannah because she still isn't able to bear children. I can't blame her, really. She's not first; she's second. But how awful for Hannah! She weeps. She won't touch her food. Her husband Elkanah seems to notice her grief, but he provides very cold comfort. He asks, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" You would think he might have a sense for what's wrong. Discord has

been brewing in this family for years. Elkanah expects to make up for the constant mockery Hannah has endured. Yet he doesn't deal at all with the root issue; he doesn't confront Peninnah. Hannah is in deep pain and her husband is no help.

Hannah cannot handle the shame she gets in her own household. So she goes to the house of God, but she is met with shame there too. In her deep sadness she weeps and prays silently. She promises that if God gives her a son, she will dedicate him to God. Eli the priest sees her and thinks she's drunk because she is praying silently (an uncommon practice in the ancient world). "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine," he says. Eli couldn't understand why she would be silent. But can't we understand? She must feel ashamed. She is not able to bear a child and she's been mocked non-stop about it by the wife her husband took *because* she couldn't bear children. That's what shame does. It bottles up those thoughts and emotions that we feel are too scary to reveal.

But finally, for the first time in the story, Hannah speaks out loud: “No, sir, I am a deeply troubled woman; I am not drunk, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. Do not regard your servant as worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation this whole time!” This is a woman in pain. Finally, she speaks out. She’s had enough of the insults, the empty comforts, and the dismissals. Eli does not take her seriously, so she pushes back.

Eli’s answer is remarkable. He actually believes Hannah. He takes her pain seriously, and he turns sharply from scorn to trust and blessing. It seems that, in Eli, God answers Hannah. He blesses her: “Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.” God listens to Hannah; she sleeps with her husband and “the Lord remembers her.” She has a son: Samuel, one of the great prophets of Israel. Samuel goes on to anoint the first king of Israel and then king David. More importantly, Hannah herself is considered a prophet. She speaks her truth for the cause of God’s justice. That’s what prophets do. If you go on to read chapter 2, and I encourage you to do so sometime this week,

you'll read Hannah's song of celebration for the justice that God enacts in this world. This song actually becomes the inspiration for Mary's song in the gospel of Luke.

God sent a woman in deep pain as a prophet to seek justice for herself, for Israel's future, and for the world. She went to the house of the Lord and would not be dismissed. She spoke her truth to power. And that powerful priest believed her. God was up to something in that exchange. There was a prophetic call for justice and a pastoral response of trust. I am wondering if God wasn't both in the call and the response.

Although we often think of prophets as just biblical characters, God still sends us prophets today. How many women—and even men—are crying out from the pain of sexual abuse. How many more are crying silent prayers to God in this community, in this country, in this world. Untold numbers of people are seeking justice and healing, either silently or aloud. And I cannot believe how many others respond like Eli does the first time to Hannah. How many claim these women are making a spectacle of themselves, just seeking attention? Yet God hears their

cries; God hears and understands all our pain. As God says to Samuel, “The Lord does not see as mortals see, they look on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart” (1Samuel 16:7). No one—no one is unworthy before God. We might be broken but we are not without love.

I hear all the stories of the abuse of my classmates and friends and fellow Americans. These stories weigh heavy in my heart. So many people are speaking out of a place of shame, looking for others to believe them. Yes God believes them. And God has liberated something in God’s prophets to speak their truth. What will be our response? How is God looking to use us? God has given each one of us in this community the gifts of faith and trust. God has entrusted us to use this trust to build up God’s church. That starts with trusting those who speak out of their pain. God has made us priests. God has made us priests so that we might learn to look into the hearts of others... to look until we see what God sees: a fellow human being, broken yet loved.