



## **A Homily by The Right Reverend Susan J.A. Bell**

The 25<sup>th</sup> Sunday After Pentecost – November 14, 2021

Scripture Passages: 1 Samuel 1:4-20; Mark 13:1-8

*+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*

There's a phenomenon that's arisen in these pandemic times. Maybe you've heard about it – it's called The Great Resignation. I read about it in the Harvard Business Review – in an article from September. Apparently there have been a record-breaking 10.9 million resignations up to July 2021 – the number is probably higher now.

Seems folks are using this time when we've been forced back on ourselves in the great silence of lockdowns and quieted spaces to rethink our lives. Are we engaged in meaningful work, we ask? Are we building the kinds of lives we want to or are we caught up in some kind of economic machine that needs our labour but does not consider whether we are living a good life?

It's fascinating that we have been using this time characterized by existential anxiety to ask existential questions. Deep, life altering decisions are being made in a time of uncertainty – many seeking health and meaning and a good life.

Well, here's another existential question – everybody's asking them – why not us? Here it is:

Why do we come to church? Ever ask yourself that question? Well, I think a whole new generation – the Covid generation, let's call ourselves – are asking – have been asking themselves that question.

Let's just put that over here with a pin in it for a moment while we take a look at what the scriptures tell us this morning. They'll give us a clue to the answer – they always do.

First, we have the heart-rending story from 1 Samuel about Hannah and her longing, yearning, and aching for a child – sadly an experience that many women have – an overwhelming experience that is so often misunderstood.

A wonderful and compassionate commentator Dr. Alphonse Wines writes about this story:

Knowing that the Bible seldom highlights a woman's story, the reader is immediately put on notice that this is not business as usual. Hannah's barrenness puts the reader on notice that her [eventual] child will be a special blessing from God that will impact the story of Israel for generations to come.

She continues:

As if barrenness were not enough, Hannah withstood the affliction of being misunderstood. Like Job's friends who had no clue, Hannah's husband, Elkanah, just didn't get it. Thinking himself better than ten sons, his inept words of comfort made bad matters worse. Thinking herself better than Hannah, Peninnah's disdainful attitude and repeated boasts about her fertility left Hannah shattered beyond words. Adding injury to insult, Eli, an insensitive priest, accused her of being drunk.

Despite her pain, Hannah would not be like the barren women before her. She would not be like Sarah who insisted that Abraham evict Hagar so that Ishmael would have no part in Isaac's inheritance. She would not be like Rachel whose competition with her sister Leah to bear children for Jacob did not end until Rachel's self-fulfilling prophecy came true when she died giving birth to Benjamin.

Hannah chose another path. Unlike the barren women before her, she took her concerns to God, . . .

Although Hannah did not share the details of her situation, Eli eventually understood that hers was a heartfelt cry. Assured by Eli by God heard and would answer her prayer she went home, confident that God's answer would manifest itself. God's answer came when she gave birth to Samuel, Israel's last judge, the prophet who anointed Saul and David, Israel's first two kings.

Samuel was the judge who changed the course of Israel's history. And yet his story, and more significantly (for once) his mother's story begins as the painful, but altogether too common story shared by women across time.

And then we have the disciples in the Gospel of Mark who've entered Jerusalem with Jesus. First he's hailed as a king but pretty soon he's scrapping with all manner of folks and getting everybody's back up it seems.

And even though the disciples are on a literally epic journey with Jesus, the Son of God, the Messiah, the Saviour of the world, even though they have seen such healings and transformations and miracles that should have lifted their heads and penetrated their pedestrian understandings of who Jesus was and what he was there to do, all they can muster when after Jesus has spent what

sounds like a gruelling time disputing with the religious leaders inside the Temple on matters of salvation – literally life and death matters - AND after a beautiful illustration of giving sacrificially to God’s mission after watching an old woman give her all, they come outside and they say,

“Look at these big buildings, look at these big stones.”

Wait, what? After all they’d witnessed our Lord say and do – after the reception they’d witnessed, that’s what they say? On the one hand, I really should ease up on them - it’s just human nature to admire such things, to allow the spectacular to overwhelm the important. To choose strength over wisdom; to prefer the flash over the substance; to prefer the safe poverty of imagination over the exciting creativity of vision. I mean we do it all the time – we allow the distractions of life to pull us from what’s important. I suppose that’s why things like the Great Resignation are so novel – so noteworthy. Humanity taking time to think about what’s important in life? That’s a real thing. It’s a real thing because it’s not usually a real thing. Usually we are seduced by rampant and destructive capitalism – spurred on by a particularly empty myth of success.

On the other hand, well - on the other hand, God knows that about us. God is fully apprised of our rather venal nature – and loves us anyway. And Jesus knows how fickle, how threatened, how self-involved we are a lot of the time. Jesus’ journey to the cross revealed that true and proper. And what’s remarkable is that he sacrifices himself for us anyway – all the way to the cross he knew that about us and yet, does it anyway. “For God so loved this world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

It’s all done in love for us. Even when we don’t get it or are distracted by the manyness and muchness of our lives. Even when other things seem artificially important.

We go to church to remember that Jesus has the words of life – where else can we go? We go to remember that the extraordinary purposes of God are worked through the ordinariness of our lives. To remember that God loves us so much that God hears our cries – even when we’re misunderstood by those around us. In the words of another biblical commentator, we come to church to: realize and be honest about our limited attention span, our penchant for spectacle and preference for the outrageous, and then to realize a second thing, a more important thing: that God loves us anyway and just the way we are.

That God has not given up on us. That even as we marvel at things that just don’t matter and miss the ordinary and extraordinary sacrifices around us, yet God still comes... to us... always in love... always to save.

And so, we witness [to] what's going on in our lives, witness [to] how God continues to come to us, seeking us out that we may hear and know that we – all of us – are worthy of, and indeed have already received, God's love.

I'm so glad we come to church to do all that with each other.  
Thanks be to God.

*+In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.*