

HOPE IN THE FACE OF HOPELESSNESS

Rev. Jason Santalucia

A sermon preached at Valley Presbyterian Church
in Brookfield, Connecticut
on November 17, 2024

Texts: 1 Samuel 1:4-20 & Mark 13:1-8

1 Samuel 1:4-20

On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb. Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore, Hannah wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. She made this vow: "O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head." As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore, Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the Lord."

Mark 13:1-8

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "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."

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" Then Jesus began to say to them, "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 rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. 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."

The question came up in the Tuesday Bible study this week, What do these two readings have in common? What's the connection between them? I think what they have in common is hope—hope in the face of situations that seem impossible to do anything about; hope in the face of realities that seem beyond anyone's control; hope in the face of hopelessness.

In the first reading, Hannah desperately wants a child, but she's unable to conceive. In the second reading, Jesus tells the disciples about a coming cataclysm that will destroy the whole temple complex in Jerusalem. These are things that would be devastating for anyone, and we see that in both readings. We see the pain and the fear and the struggle.

What we don't see, however, is people losing hope. Hannah keeps praying; she never stops trusting in God. And the disciples keep following Jesus; they don't go live in a cave and wait for the end to come. So how can we be more like them? How can we be hopeful, even when life is scary and hard? For that, I think the second reading is especially helpful.

The entire thirteenth chapter of Mark's gospel is an example of what's called apocalyptic writing. The word apocalypse is often misunderstood. It simply means an unveiling or uncovering of what was previously unknown or hidden. Apocalyptic writing tends to emerge during tumultuous times—times of change and uncertainty, times of upheaval and dislocation. And despite all the bizarre visions and strange symbolism, it's really just meant to give hope to its readers. It's meant to keep our eyes focused on God and God's presence in the grand sweep of human history. It's meant to reassure us that despite appearances to the contrary, God is still God, and the future is still in God's hands.

The central theme of apocalyptic writing is the coming of a new day. From the very

beginning, the faith of God's people, Israel, was oriented toward the future. Israel believed that God's work in history is purposeful, and events are pressing toward the realization of the divine goal for all of creation. History is not spinning in circles or repeating itself like the cycle of the seasons; and it's not governed by blind fate or chance either. Israel thought that history was part of a great divine drama, which, under the direction of God, is moving toward a final consummation.

That final consummation is what Jesus called "the kingdom of God," and in the first eight verses of chapter thirteen, we hear the beginning of Jesus' description of the events that'll lead up to the coming of the kingdom in all of its fullness.

Naturally, when they hear what's coming, the disciples are a little bit alarmed. They take Jesus aside and try to get more information out of him. "When is all this going to happen," they ask, "and how will we know when the time is getting near?" But Jesus doesn't tell them what they want to know. Instead, he tells them to be faithful, not fearful. He tells them to set their minds on trusting and being alert, rather than trying to get ahead of the curve. He's trying to put an end to speculation about what God's ultimate plan is because that's not ours to know. But that doesn't mean there aren't things we can know, things we can learn from this reading to help us remain hopeful even in tumultuous times.

Think of them as hoping skills, and let's go through them one by one.

The first hoping skill is to keep the big picture in mind—the view of the future that Israel had. God is at work in the world, bringing everything to completion according to God's purposes, even though we can't always see it. All is subject, in time, to God's will, even though it doesn't always seem that way to us. God is bringing a whole new reality into existence, even though we're still stuck in the old one, at least for now.

If we can hang on to that perspective, if we can keep it right in front of us, it'll help us see past whatever we're dealing with in the moment. And how do we do that? That's where the second hoping skill comes in.

The second hoping skill is to get to know scripture. Scripture is our primary source for knowing who God is and what God has promised; and when Jesus warns the disciples about false teachers leading them astray, what he's really doing is telling them to make scripture the lens through which they see the world and their place in it—because that lens is never distorted; it's always true.

And he's not just talking about memorizing a few favorite verses. He's talking about seeing the whole arc of the story—the overarching themes and concerns. He's talking about the self-giving love that continually reaches out to humankind and ultimately came to us in person, to teach us and heal us and show us the way. If we can hang on to that love, we'll never feel alone or forgotten.

That brings us to the third and final hoping skill, which is to expect trouble, but to expect Jesus even more. Being faithful sometimes has consequences. Following the way Jesus showed us sometimes puts us at odds with the ways of the world. So, we should expect that there are going to be moments of tension, and we should expect that there are going to be moments of discomfort.

But in those moments, we should expect Jesus even more. We should expect that he'll be with us just like he said he would. We should expect him to appear in the midst of our struggles and hardships, to comfort us and encourage us and help us get through. "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars," Jesus tells the disciples, "do not be alarmed. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs." That's an interesting metaphor he chooses. If you've never been in the room when a baby is born, I can assure you, there's some tension, and there's some discomfort. But at

the end of it all, there's a brand-new life. We should expect that Jesus will be with us through all the waiting and all the labor, as God's kingdom is being born.

Now, I won't lie to you. None of this is easy, and I speak from experience. By nature, I tend to be a worrier, I tend to be glass-half-empty kind of guy, especially when it comes to money. So, I look back on periods of my life when our family finances were tight, and I wish I had had these skills. Because worrying never changed anything. It just kept me from enjoying what I had—especially my kids when they were little. What I wouldn't give to go back and have one day with them when I'm fully present and not thinking about how we're going to get through the end of the month.

Unfortunately, I can't go back. What's done is done. All I can do is try to learn and grow so I don't make the same mistake in the future. This reading helps me do that. It helps me be more hopeful. It deepens that capacity within me. And it can do the same for all of us. Amen.