

Lent to the Lord

In the name of him who is the Light to the Gentiles and the Glory of God's people, Israel, dear friends in Christ: Today's Old Testament lesson takes us back to the days of the judges, what was surely one of the darkest periods in the history of Israel. It was a time, we are told, when "every man did what was right in his own eyes" – which is another way to say "anarchy". Throughout this entire period what Israel was experiencing was a leadership failure. The heads of families, clans, and tribes, who should have been doing the hard work of maintaining order, enforcing moral standards, and administering justice according to the Word of God, weren't doing their jobs. As a result, as we read through the history of this period, what we see are a series of cycles. First God's people wander away from the Lord into sin and idolatry. Because the leaders aren't doing their jobs to correct the wayward nation, the Lord steps in and brings discipline to his people in the form of oppression from some foreign power. After suffering for while under said oppression, the Israelites finally get the message and they cry out to the Lord for help – which he does. He raises up a special leader, a judge, who leads the armies of Israel against the oppressor and defeats them with miraculous help from above. God's people are free! There is a resurgence of faithfulness to the Lord ... that lasts about that long [holding up fingers that measure an inch]. And then we read "the next generation grew up not knowing the Lord". The cycle starts over again. Why? Because the leaders aren't doing their jobs.

By the time we get to today's reading from 1 Samuel, which takes place toward the end of the period of the judges, this problem of leadership is evident not only among the families, clans, and tribes, but in the house of God itself. The Tabernacle, that portable temple in which the Lord dwelt among his people during the 40 years of wilderness wanderings, had been permanently set up at a place called Shiloh, in what was roughly the geographical center of the Promised Land. Here the Lord God continued to dwell in the midst of his people. And here the Israelites came to offer the sacrifices by which the Lord forgave their sins. Eli, the aged high priest, was ostensibly in charge of the place; but most of the priestly work was being carried out by his two sons, Hophni and Phinehas. They were rotten to the core and everyone knew it. Their scandalous behavior made a mockery of the Lord's worship and called into question the validity of the sacrifices they treated with contempt. Eli was well aware of his sons' wickedness. He should have corrected them. But the best he could manage was to occasionally wave a feckless finger at them and wheeze, "Now, boys, you know what you're doing isn't right" – but that's as far as it would go. And with the men whom everyone looked to as holding the moral compass for the nation going astray, the people were sure to follow.

So the Lord in his wisdom decided that the time had come for him to raise up a different kind of leader: a mighty prophet, a man thoroughly dedicated to the Lord and to his service who would clean up the scandal in his house and get the nation back on the right track. The Lord wanted a man who would lead the people in his righteous ways. And to find him, he turned to a woman who desperately wanted a son. Her name was Hannah, which means grace or favor. But she didn't feel very favored. Though long married to a loving husband, Elkanah, she remained barren. And it broke her tender heart. She longed to hold a child of her own. Her empty arms ached for it. And disappointment after disappointment, year after year, brought her to the point where she was willing to make a mother's ultimate sacrifice.

It happened when she and her husband had gone up to Shiloh to worship and sacrifice to the Lord. It was for most faithful Israelites a joyous time of feasting and celebration. Hannah,

for her part, was in tears. While her husband and extended family feasted, she stood alone near the door of the Tabernacle and silently prayed. And as she prayed, she made a vow: “O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life”. It was a heartfelt prayer that pleased the Lord for two reasons. First because it made available the child who would grow into the leader he wanted, a child raised in the Lord’s house, a child who would grow up hearing the voice of the Lord in a time when those who should have been listening weren’t. But the prayer of Hannah offering to give up her son as a sort of living sacrifice also pleased the Lord because it reflected his own plan and purpose to one day offer up his Son to save his people, to rescue them from sin, and to lead them in his righteous ways. Thus in Hannah we see an image of God’s own heart.

But that’s not the way the high priest Eli understood it, at first anyway. When he saw Hannah praying, her lips moving but no audible sound coming out, he imagined her to be a worshipper who let her festive wining and dining exceed the limits of propriety. He thought she was drunk and tried to shoo her away from the Tabernacle lest she desecrate the place with her foolish antics – which is ironic, because he didn’t seem to mind that his sons were desecrating the place. Hannah protested, “No, I am a woman troubled in spirit ... speaking out my great anxiety and vexation.” When he saw that she was in fact quite sober and very earnest, Eli softened. He said, “Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition.” And she went away happy because she believed Eli’s words that the Lord would indeed grant her request.

And that, as you know, is what happened. A short while later Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son whom she appropriately named Samuel, which means “God hears”. Yes he does – which means he also heard Hannah’s promise concerning her son. I can’t imagine how difficult it would have been for her, how she must have regretted her words, and how Satan would have sorely tempted her to go back on them. You can sense her reluctance to let go, her declining to go up to worship at Shiloh until the child was weaned – as if she wanted to hold him as close as she could for as long as she could, not even wanting to see the place where she knew she had to take him ... and then let go ... turn him over in trust and hope to the God who had given him to her in the first place.

That day finally came. In those days children were typically weaned much later than is the custom in our time, usually at around three years old. I’m guessing that Hannah held out as long as she could, so we can anticipate that Samuel was on the order of three and a half to four when Hannah fulfilled her vow and brought him to Eli. “For this child I prayed” she told him. “The Lord gave him to me, and as I promised, I am giving him back to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is lent to the Lord.”

Thus Hannah kept her word, as difficult as it must have been for her. Samuel grew up to become that great that leader the Lord wanted. And as a reward for her great sacrifice, the Lord filled Hannah’s arms several times over with more children to love and to care for.

So what do we make of this text? We’ve covered the obvious: God hears and answers prayers. When you make a vow to the Lord you’d better keep it. And in Hannah’s sacrifice we see a glimpse of the heart of God in giving us his Son.

But let’s take it a little deeper. I find it fitting that we’re hearing this story today while we are gathered for worship at the Lutheran school. Why? Well, first because this place represents a sort of sacrifice. It takes all kinds of extra time, effort, leadership, and finances to keep the operation going. And we are pledged together to do it for one reason: we don’t want

our time to be like the days of the judges when each next generation grew up not knowing the Lord. We want our children to be steeped in God's Word. We want their educations to be shaped by it. We want to support and reinforce the religious instruction our children receive at home and in their churches. We want them to grow up like Samuel hearing the voice of the Lord, and for them to become faithful men and women who will in turn lead their families and their children to trust in Christ and to follow him in his righteous ways. Hannah made a sacrifice that was pleasing to the Lord. This place and its continuing operation is also a sacrifice. And I have to believe that the Lord is pleased by it. Not that it earns us any kind of righteous standing in God's eyes; that comes only by his grace through faith in Christ. But still, it's a sacrifice pleasing to God because it is for the good of our children.

But something else emerges in the text. It's this: we don't own our children. God does. He entrusts them to us for a few years to care for, to love, and to enjoy ... and yes, sometimes to cause us grief. But they are never ours to keep. The day comes when we have to let them go. For Hannah that day came earlier than she might have wanted; but in the end she didn't lose something that she could have kept. Young Samuel always belonged to the Lord. You might say that the Lord lent him to her for a while.

We should see our children the same way: as belonging to God and lent to us. Then we will see our duty and obligation to do what Hannah did: namely to present them to the Lord; not just once, drop them off at the Tabernacle and leave them, but every day. By taking them regularly to the services of God's house, in family devotions and prayers, and yes, by bringing them to this school where God's voice is heard we are giving them back to the Lord so that he can shape them into the men and women he wants them to be.

Furthermore, we should see ourselves in this way. You don't belong to you. You belong to the Lord. He created you. And he bought and paid for you with the blood of his only Son. Therefore offer yourself as a living sacrifice. In all that you think, say, and do consider yourself lent to the Lord all the days of your life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!