

October 13, 2024

21<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

“Go to God Fervently”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: 1 Samuel 1:9-11; 19-20; 2-10

There’s another song quite like Hannah’s in the Bible—the song of Mary. Mary sang it just after the angel announced to her the news of Jesus’ coming birth. We don’t quite know what Mary was feeling or experiencing ahead of that announcement. But we do know that the world itself faced just as much upheaval in her time, as in ours: empire, war, famines, and so on. When Mary sang her praise of God, it sounded just like Hannah’s. It was not about Mary herself or just about the coming birth. It was about what God can do and what God has done for those most in need: lifting up the lowly, filling the hungry, remembering God’s people, showing them mercy. When we go to God in times of trial, there we find grace. Love. Good news. Comfort. We find that the answer to despair can look like the power of God, all wrapped up in the meekness of human flesh.

After I read the book about Barth, I was both comforted and unsettled. The things I already do—trying hard to preach the word of God faithfully, sticking close to the scripture and what we hear there—seem to be the only answers, when it comes to preaching in the face of fear, despair, sorrow. That task is unique to preachers, of course. But we all have to figure out how to respond to the fear, despair, and sorrow that finds all of us, at some point. And I think that answer is the same for all of us: come closer to God. Pray fervently with our words and our hearts, and sometimes with our feet and hands. Study God’s promises in scripture, so we are reminded that God is always working for good in the midst of our mess. As Barth said, “the challenge of our day is not to stand in opposition to life or its details but to orient nothing less than our *entire* lives toward God.”<sup>3</sup>

So when we see the words that Hannah, and also Mary, used to praise God, maybe we get a clue, after all, about how God answers our fervent prayers. God often answers through unexpected people, like a shepherd boy named David or a baby laid in a manger. God comes to be with us in our sorrow, rarely making it all better, but present to us through the Spirit of a crucified and risen savior, who holds us close and points the way through.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.

There have been some points this year when, I looked out at the world, I felt something close to despair. Last week marked one year since the October 7 attacks in Israel which killed some 1200 people. And in the 12 months since, we have grieved the deaths of about 41,000 people in Gaza, with growing numbers in Lebanon, as well. We don’t hear much about it, but there is a famine in Sudan where over half a million people are facing starvation. Around the world, there’s a rise in dictators and authoritarian regimes. The stress of a big election year in our own country often makes me turn off the news because I just can’t listen to any more about it. And the recent hurricanes and flooding have only added to my own sense of sorrow, concern, and sometimes fear.

In the middle of those feelings, I picked up a book this summer about the teachings of Karl Barth. Barth is one of the great, more recent theologians in the Reformed tradition, of which Presbyterians are a part. Barth was born in Switzerland, served as a church pastor for a time, and then as a professor during the earlier part of the twentieth century. He was teaching in Germany as the Nazi party rose to power there during the early 1930s. While he had to be very careful about what he taught in this period, Barth used a class about preaching to teach his students how to interact with the dangerous, alarming world around them. The book I read, by Angela Dienhart Hancock, traces how Barth instructed his students to preach in the face of all that.

With my own worries close at hand, I hoped Barth would offer me clear direction. What did he tell preachers to say when they were feeling despair about the world around them? What were the special tools he thought indispensable for this most challenging and vulnerable task of standing up to proclaim good news in the midst of so much bad? Today, we might say, I was looking for some good hacks. Tips and tricks that could help me share a good and faithful word with you, when the despair of the world feels like it’s creeping in.

1 Angela Dienhart Hancock, *Karl Barth’s Emergency Homiletic 1932-1933: A Summons to Prophetic Witness at the Dawn of the Third Reich* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 134.

2 Roger Nam, “Commentary on 1 Samuel 1:9-11; 19-20; 2:1-10,” *Working Preacher*, October 4, 2012, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/narrative-lectionary/samuel/commentary-on-1-samuel-19-11-19-20-21-10-2>

3 Qtd. in Angela Dienhart Hancock, *Karl Barth’s Emergency Homiletic 1932-1933: A Summons to Prophetic Witness at the Dawn of the Third Reich* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 56.

So I was most astonished when I reached the end of the book and I had not learned one, new tip for preaching. Which is not to say I knew everything or am some kind of perfect preacher. I don't and I'm not. But what Barth said was, in the face of despair, in the face of danger or fear, cling to God. Stick so closely to the word of God that nothing can sway you from it. Read the scripture; preach the scripture. Be true to the God who breathes through every word. Or, as Hancock writes, "do theology 'as if nothing had happened.'"<sup>1</sup> He didn't mean to ignore the problems. Barth was telling people to be aware of all dire situations in the world, but in the face of them, the only way to resist them or change them was for Christians to do what we always do: worship, pray, preach, hold on to faith, staying true to the God of Jesus Christ we meet in scripture. That was the way to challenge the chilling narratives around him. It was the only way he saw through. Maybe clinging so closely to God is the only way through for us, too.

Praying fervently to God was the way Hannah faced her despair. Her sorrow was personal, and it had major implications for the people of God. Hannah had not been able to have a child. We know this is a kind of sorrow modern people face as well; one that is rarely remedied in the way Hannah's was. But in Hannah's time, motherhood was deemed a crucial part of a woman's identity, and having no children had a negative impact on women's social standing and well-being. People believed it was always the woman's fault and they thought God could simply give and take away fertility. Some of these ideas we still relate to, and some we now know are not the way the world works. Hannah's husband suggested that he loved her regardless. In the verses just before what we read, Elkanah asked 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?" But Elkanah was not enough to make her happy. And besides, he had another wife, Penninah, with whom he had lots of children. And awful as it must have been, Penninah provoked Hannah about her lack of children, which only increased her despair.

She had nowhere else to turn. Hannah could only turn to God. So she went to the temple and presented herself to God. She prayed to the Lord a desperate prayer. She asked for help and promised to respond with gratitude. If she was given a child, when he was a few years old, she would dedicate him to serve God in the temple, in a special and holy way. She would give up the joy of having that hoped for child near her, in order to thank God for what she hoped God would do.

Like Barth advised preachers millenia later, Hannah had already demonstrated for all people of faith. She clung to the God she knew. She approached God in faith. She refused to be moved or goaded into any other

response, even when the priest Eli accused Hannah of being drunk, when she was fervently praying. When we meet real despair, when we are not sure how to fix the brokenness, when we have done all we can do and still the problems remain, we look to God. We pray fervently. We do not stray from the good news, from the hope, or from the promises that God gives and always keeps.

Hannah's prayer was answered. She had a son named Samuel. And when he was something like four years old, she took him to the temple and gave him into God's service, to be raised by the priests who worked there.

All week I have been wrestling with God's response to her prayer. I have been trying to coax out of this passage the answer to the question "what happens when our fervent prayers are not answered? What do we do when the brokenness or sorrow remains? What if the result of our sticking with God does not end with rejoicing like it did for Hannah?" But I've come to realize that this passage unfortunately does not answer that question, even as much as we want it to. Rather, this passage is a model for us; it shows us how we can bring our whole selves to God in the face of despair. But the question Hannah's story answers is a different one. It answers the specific question of how God was at work among the people of Israel, leading them out of their brokenness and despair. Samuel, the child born to Hannah, was going to be the starting point for the monarchy in Israel that would eventually include King David. Samuel would listen closely for God. And then he would anoint Saul as the first king, and then later David. Hannah invites us into the story of how God would eventually call David, the youngest, smallest brother; how God would choose a child, leading sheep out in the fields, to be the king. And this story could be told because Hannah went to God, stuck with God, and trusted God alone in her hardest hour.

After Samuel was born, Hannah nursed him and raised him for several years. And then she took him to the temple, saying "as long as he lives, he is given to the Lord." God had showered her with grace. She responded with gratitude and sacrifice. And then, she sang. She praised God in a doxology—a song of praise. "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," she might as well have sung. We might assume her song celebrated the gift God gave her. But her song never mentions the child at all. Her song, as Roger Nam writes, "becomes the anthem for everyone who finds themselves in despair and hopelessness."<sup>2</sup> She celebrated the way God cares for the feeble, the hungry, the barren, the poor, the low, and the needy. Those who are in deepest need can trust God. And as Nam continues, "By singing this prayer, we join a community of people throughout history who have seen despair, only to be lifted by God."