

I Samuel 1: 4-20

I Samuel 2: 1-10

Hebrews 10: 11-14 (15-18), 19-25

St. Mark 13: 1-8

Pentecost 26 2024

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“Then I will set aside [this child] as a Nazarite until the day of his death.”

I Samuel 1: 11a

Today’s first reading begins as a sad one. Hannah, one of the 2 wives of Elkanah, a devout Jew, would like to have a child – but she is unable to conceive. The other wife of Elkanah, Penninah, *has* conceived children, and Penninah mocks Hannah, which just makes things worse...

Of course, there were no fertility clinics in the ancient world. Hannah does the only thing she knows, in hopes of conceiving: She goes to the place of worship, and prays to the Lord God, asking for the gift of a child...

In this congregation, like most congregations, we come from a variety of backgrounds. Some of us are married. Many have children; some have grandchildren... But there are also some among us who have not found a life partner – or perhaps, we feel we are being called to the single life... But for those of us who would like to have children, but who struggle to conceive; or for those who would like a life partner, but cannot find someone suitable – or, for those who have experienced the painful breakdown in a marital relationship – regardless, I want everyone to know that you are welcome here...

I hope that it might be of some solace to you that one of the ways to think of a local church is to think of it as a kind of spiritual family. We become adopted sons and daughters of God by faith; that is our primary identity, whether we are male or female, single or married, and so forth... As we are adopted into this family, we can have a close personal friendship or fellowship with God. In prayer, the Lord Jesus prayed to his *Abba*, his dear heavenly Father. For Christians, God is not merely a distant judge, but God is close and loving...

Whatever our backgrounds, then, one way to think of the parish community is as a kind of spiritual family, into which we are adopted... We are never alone. The Spirit of Christ is within us, and part of the Christian package is to belong to a local church family who are truly learning to love...

Back to Hannah, who so desperately wanted a child... Hannah makes a kind of offer to God: If she will conceive a male child, she will dedicate him as a Nazarite. A Nazarite means “one separated” or “one consecrated.” In the Jewish tradition, a Nazarite would not consume alcohol, nor would he cut his hair.

(We can read more about Nazarites in Numbers, chapter 6.) Nazarites took on these temporary oaths, but Hannah apparently intends for her son (if she has one) to be dedicated to God's service for all time... Here is Hannah's prayer:

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.' (I Samuel 1: 9-11)

Now as it turned out, Hannah did become pregnant, and after her son Samuel was weaned, Hannah brought him to Eli the priest to raise him. Samuel became an amazing prophet, early in Israel's history...

Christians do not have to go through rituals in order to dedicate our lives to God. But we are called to be something like Nazarites in our time: To be set apart from the world around us, to live by different priorities – God's values. And, with the help of the Spirit of the Lord, we are becoming sanctified, becoming more holy... The Christian process of sanctification doesn't mean that we become "holier than thou," or stuffy, or arrogant... But sanctification is a process, to turn from being self-centred, to be Christ-centred... True humility isn't about putting ourselves down, but instead, being focused on God and others... We want to become more like the character of Jesus Christ in our lives today...

Christians do not have the requirements of Nazarite rules. But we are called to be "set apart" – to live *in* this world, while being ambassadors for the world to come... An ambassador represents his or her country of allegiance in a foreign land. In the same way, we are called to live for Christ in this world, in our daily lives... St. Paul puts it this way: "So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God (II Corinthians 5: 20)..."

How can we help spur one another on, to live beautifully for Christ in this world?... There are lots of ideas in the Bible, and in the history of the Church. Let's limit ourselves to the suggestions in today's second reading... The context of the second reading is that as faithful Jews would approach God to worship in the temple, we are called to draw near to Jesus Christ. Christians come not to a place, but to a person – to Jesus. Hebrews 10: 21-25:

Since we have a great priest [Jesus] over the house of God, let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith... Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.

And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

How can we be good ambassadors?... Holding fast to the good news, we can encourage one another, with love and good deeds. Encouragement. Love. Good deeds...

As Samuel was dedicated to the Lord's service so many years ago, may we dedicate ourselves to the Lord's service in our generation... May we shine for Christ in our daily lives, in the world around us. And, as we gather together for worship and fellowship, may we encourage one another; and may we help one another to show love and do good deeds; all for Jesus, our great High Priest, and Saviour...

Amen.