

“Waiting on the Lord”

1 Corinthians 1: 3-9 and 1 Samuel 1: 1-20

November 29, 2020

2020 has been a tough and tragic year. In early March we discovered the existence of a pandemic which was blowing through our country and our communities. Covid 19 began its march of destruction far, far away and, as Americans, we didn't quite believe it would ravage our lives; surely, we had the technology to contain its destructive effects. We didn't quite understand what the results of this coronavirus would mean for us but now, 9 months later, we have a clearer picture. Over 265,000 people have died and 13.5 million people have been reported infected. Our children are learning remotely, we are instructed to remain 6 feet apart and wear masks and the changes to our everyday lives goes on and on. People of color seem to contract the disease at a rate almost double of those people who are Caucasian, implying systemic inequalities which we need to also address. The disease has affected our economy. The Brookings Institute reports that small business revenue is down 20 percent since January. 25 percent of the labor force has not worked since January. In 26 states, 1 in 5 households are behind on rent as of July. And we know from our local food banks that people suffering from food scarcity is up by 35 percent. And, we have just endured and continue to endure the worst political election and climate I have experienced in my lifetime – it is an understatement for me to say that we are a divided nation. We are hurting.

One of our dearest church members – one of our members who helped to organize this congregation nearly 40 years ago – sent me this reminder from poet John Greenleaf Whittier, who lived through the Civil War years in this country.

“Don’t Quit”

By John Greenleaf Whittier

“When things go wrong, as they sometimes will; when the road you’re trudging seems all uphill; when the funds are low and the debts are high; and you want to smile but you have to sigh. When all is pressing you down a bit – rest if you must, but don’t you quit.

Success is failure turned inside out; the silver tint on the clouds of doubt; and you can never tell how close you are, it may be near when it seems far. So, stick to the fight when you are hardest hit – it’s when things go wrong that you must not quit.”

This morning we begin a new church year as we celebrate the first Sunday of Advent. Advent is the season in the church year when we begin to look forward, with hope and faith, to the coming of Jesus into our messy, conflicted, tragic and suffering old world. And isn’t it interesting that the birth of Jesus occurs during the season of the year when the days are short and the nights are long and the darkness threatens to overcome us. Advent focuses us on what God will do and away from obsession with ourselves. This morning God’s word comes to us from Paul’s letter to the Corinthians and from the Old Testament book of 1 Samuel.

Prayer for Understanding:

God of signs and wonders, God of everyday surprises, we are eager to hear your Word, thankful you choose to dwell among us and lead us to your new day. We want to celebrate your blessings, share them with those who most need them, and together learn to live as responsible, compassionate people. Amen.

Our first scripture reading this morning comes from Paul's letter to the people of Corinth. Corinth was an extremely wealthy city and considered the second most important city in the Roman Empire; located in Greece, it was a popular port city at the cross roads of a heavily used trade route. It also boasted 12 pagan temples. Paul spent 18 months in Corinth, establishing a Christian community there as a stop on his second missionary journey. After he leaves Corinth, the folks send word back to him that there are factions erupting in conflict within the community. The church is divided by two folks in particular who are promoting opposing beliefs and ways of worshipping God. The new Christians become so embroiled and focused on what divides them that they are unable to celebrate their differences and they have forgotten that diversity can actually strengthen their community instead of destroying it.

Let's listen to the beginning of Paul's letter in response to what he has heard from them.

Read 1 Corinthians 1: 3-9

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus, for in every way you have been enriched in him, in speech and knowledge of every kind – just as the testimony of Christ has been

strengthened among you – so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ. He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful; by him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.”

Grace and peace to you. Grace – God’s love extended to you because of who God is and because God loves you. Grace is not predicated on what you have done or not done. Grace is a gift which enables you and I to begin anew. Peace – not an absence of conflict but an ability to remain confident in God’s presence with you even in your darkest of hours. Paul’s letter begins with a reminder to the Corinthians of who God is – it is not about them, but what God is doing among them. Grace and peace – gifts from God; not something we create.

From *A Pastor Sings*, a fellow preacher says: “One of the problems the Corinthians faced was their own arrogance. They had become proud of their knowledge and their eloquent speaking, to the point of claiming that the gifts they enjoyed were actually of their own doing instead of coming from God. They had crossed the line between celebrating what God had done and was doing and taking credit for the result of God’s work in their midst. They were no longer looking for Christ to be revealed. More to the point, they were no longer revealing Christ to the city of Corinth.” My father had a saying when people were too focused on themselves: “they are belly button gazing.” When we are focused on our own accomplishments, conflicts, failures, we are belly button

gazing and unable to consider the world from God's perspective or the needs of our community. When we are obsessed with ourselves, we fail to serve God in the community because we cannot even see the needs of other people. The Corinthians were belly button gazing; question becomes, are we? Are we so focused on ourselves that we are unable to perceive what God is doing in our midst? Or calling us to do?

Advent is about what God is about to do in our world, in our community, in our lives. We are called to wait on the Lord and pay attention to what God is doing. And trust God's power to bring new life, grace and peace. Waiting is not something to be prepared, packaged, gift wrapped or placed under the Christmas tree. Waiting is the thing that happens after all the preparations have been made. Waiting is the thing that forces us to put our faith in what we do not have the power to provide. It is time for the Corinthians to stop their striving, their preparation, their doing and wait now for the revealing of the Lord.

When I think about waiting, my heroine is the Old Testament person of Hannah. Here is her story; she exemplifies the kind of waiting Paul is calling us to exhibit. Read 1 Samuel 1: 1-20

As Hannah's story begins, the problem is immediately articulated. A man, Elkanah, who has an impressive genealogy and proud past, is married to a woman who is barren and therefore they, seemingly, have no future. Each year, they travel to Shiloh, Israel's capital city, to worship; it is a holiday of Thanksgiving. And this is how the

conversation goes in this one particular Israelite family as they prepare to worship God and give thanks:

Penninah (Elkanah's prolific second wife who has no problem conceiving and bearing children): "Hannah, aren't you excited to go to Shiloh? For the purpose of saying thank you to God for all of our blessings, for all our children? Oh wait. You don't have any children, do you? Silly me. I forgot. So, what do you thank God for?"

Hannah, remembering that her mother taught her to keep silent if she didn't have anything nice to say, does not reply. Elkanah, who loves Hannah deeply but seems a bit clueless in this situation, says, "Why are you crying? Am I not better than 10 sons?"

So, Penninah walks into the temple with her children, proudly, knowing that God has blessed her greatly. Elkanah walks in, dutifully, appropriately. Hannah walks in, deeply distressed and weeping bitterly. She pours out her soul before the Lord, begging for a child.

Ely, by all accounts a good priest, sees her praying. Her lips are moving, but no sound is coming out. He determines she must be drunk and chastises her. Hannah is the one person in the whole place who has come before God with humility and honesty. She is not hiding behind any self-righteousness. She is not there to impress God. She is there to pour out her heart to God, trusting that God hears our cries. Eli, rather than telling Penninah to take that smirk off her face, interrupts the one person in the sanctuary who is honestly praying. Some days we clergy types just don't get it! But Eli quickly recognizes his mistake when Hannah responds to him. He hears the integrity

and honesty in her pain and despair. “Go in peace” he says. “May the God of Israel grant your prayer.”

Hannah asks and God answers, God remembers. Our God is a powerful rememberer. And when God remembers the partner and the promise, new life becomes possible. The hopeless one (Hannah) is now the one given a future. Nineteen verses prepare for the birth and only one verse narrates it. Hannah gives birth to a son and names him Samuel. Samuel will grow to become one of Israel’s greatest prophets he will anoint Israel’s first kings. The waiting is long, but when God hears and remembers, the action speeds up at a dizzying rate! Hannah is faithful. God is powerful. And Hannah is grateful. She sings a song of thanksgiving in chapter two which will shape the song of another mother who will follow in the generations to come: Mary the mother of Jesus.

Walter Brueggemann says: “This song becomes the song of Mary and the song of the church. It is a song of how God will turn and right the world. It is a song of hope in the world wherever the prospect and possibility of human arrangements have been exhausted. When people can no longer believe the promises of the rulers of this age, when the gifts of well-being are no longer given through established channels, this song voices an alternative to which the desperate faithful cling.”

During this season of Advent – a season of beginnings and the possibility of new life – remember God’s gifts of grace and peace. And wait for the revealing of the Lord. When all is pressing you down, rest if you must, but don’t quit hoping/trusting in God’s power to bring new life.