

May grace relieve my fears

1 Samuel 1:4-10; Mark 13:1-8

I wonder, when was the last time you expressed sincere anguish and despair to God? Have you ever been hurt by a person of faith by what they said or did, intentionally or not? Have you ever felt judged by someone in your life because you weren't living up to their expectations, or the expectations of society, or the expectations of a religious belief system? And how did you come to understand what it means to be sinful and in need of salvation?

These passages today invite us to explore and reflect on the concepts of salvation and grace, sin and repentance, forgiveness and transformation. For in the words of Emily M. Townes, we are invited:

“to explore how we move from darkness to light, from alienation to divine community, from guilt to pardon. From slavery to freedom, and from the fear of hostile powers to liberty and assurance.”¹

This story of Hannah is a story that moves from darkness to light. She takes her despair and anguish to God in prayer. She comes to the temple in humility, with an open and vulnerable heart. She comes to God with great faith. Her faith has taught her that God is full of grace and compassion, and thus she makes a deal with God. Now I have no doubt that many of us have done similar things in our lives: sat down, prayed because of something that was going on in our life, making a deal in hopes that that would help make it come to fruition. In Hannah's case, she received the gift of a child from God, and then she follows up on her deal with God and offers the child to the temple, where he will, as he grows, become a priest.

Like many of the passages from the Bible, we need to be careful in our interpretation of the message. I have no doubt that this passage has led to many

¹ Emilie M. Townes, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, Volume 4, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 310.

people – especially women – experiencing pain and judgement, believing that they didn't have enough faith because, unlike Hannah, they did not receive what they had asked for in prayer. I have experienced moments in my faith journey where – I would name it as religious trauma.

When I was in Grade 8, I went to another denomination to a different church where I was basically told I was going to hell because I didn't give my entire life to Jesus, even though I was going to church of Sunday and playing the organ and all of those other things. I didn't really realize the impact that those words had on me until I was in university taking a course on theology, and the professor asked me, "Where did you get your idea of original sin?" Suddenly it triggered. It dawned on me that in that moment, I had been told that I was going to hell, I was a sinner, and that I was beyond redeeming, to the point where my friends chose not to be my friend anymore. In a small town, it is a bit devastating in Grade 8 when suddenly you have no friends. That was what led me to want to be working with youth and creating a safe place where people weren't judged or told things that didn't fit with the message of Jesus.

In *A Song of Faith*, which is one of our credal statements, it says: "Before conscious thought or action on our part, we are born into the brokenness of this world." To me, that's not "born into original sin". We're brought into a world that is full of brokenness and hurt. It goes on to say, "Before conscious thought or action on our part, we are surrounded by God's redeeming love." We are born, we are surrounded by God's redeeming love. We are loved, we are worthy from the point of our birth, all the way through. Hannah had this belief that she was worthy, even though she wasn't able to fulfill her wifely duties in that time and in that culture. She believed she was worthy of God's love and could go to God with what was on her heart – her anguish, her pain – and share that.

One of the most loved and familiar hymns that we will be singing today is *Amazing Grace*. It starts by saying, "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. What once was lost but now I'm found, was blind but now I see." How many of you have ever felt shamed because you received the message that you didn't have enough faith? And that is why you are suffering? How many of you have been brought up believing that guilt is a vital part of faith, and it is our guilt that brings us to church so that we can relieve ourselves of this guilt and then do the whole cycle all over again? Can you imagine how Hannah would have felt when the priest Eli came into the sanctuary, and instead of believing that Hannah was praying from the deepness of her heart, accused her of

being drunk? Can you imagine how it would have felt to be told that you were making a scene, when in fact you were sharing your pain and anguish and suffering in prayer?

In the passage from Mark today, we hear Jesus warning the disciples – Peter, James, John and Andrew – that they must be very careful to not be led astray by others who will come after Jesus and claim to speak with Jesus’ own authority. I wonder if Eli is an example of this today: a leader who believes they are acting on behalf of God, but who is not offering grace, who was not in that moment offering forgiveness, comfort, acceptance or love. The focus of this passage from Mark is actually about the beginning of the end, of the second coming of God. Some might refer to it as “The Rapture”. As we move towards the end of the liturgical season – which is the church year – we move into these eschatological passages, or the end times. Jesus is sharing with the disciples what is to come. The destruction of the temple; the buildings will be torn down, will crumble. And then, when Jesus is gone, we need not fear, for Jesus will return.

But again, here is where we often go wrong in the interpretation. We, like the disciples, begin to focus on what will come in the end, and so we watch for signs. We see what’s happening in our world, and we begin to wonder, “Is this the end?” We have heard about all the climate change. We have heard about all the political unrest and the violence in the world, and it does feel like the world potentially is coming to an end. What Jesus is teaching the disciples yet again is that by waiting and watching for these signs, we are focused on the wrong thing. We are not living out the Gospel message in this time and place. Our attention should be turned to the one who is to come; not the signs and the destruction around us. To focus on the message that Jesus has brought us: which is, as we all know, to love one another. To not cause harm; to be kind, compassionate and offer grace. Hannah turned to God in her anguish, and we believe in the United Church, as it’s written in *A Song of Faith*, that “By becoming flesh in Jesus, God makes all things new. In Jesus’ life teaching and self-offering, God empowers us to live in love. In Jesus’ crucifixion, God bears the sin, grief and suffering of the world.”² God offers Hannah grace. Jesus offers the disciples grace. And every single one of us is being offered grace today.

The second verse of *Amazing Grace*, which I have come to love, is: “Twas grace that taught my heart to fear, and grace my fears relieved. How precious did that

² *A Song of Faith*, The United Church of Canada, 2006.

grace appear that hour I first believed.” We have faith in God. We are given grace. God offers it to people who even don’t have faith in God. It is a gift that is freely given. Not because we deserve it. Not because we have proven we have enough faith. Not because we have done enough good deeds. We receive grace because it is the result of God’s love for each and every one of us. Hannah is drawn to God in her brokenness. She prays and shares her grief and her pain as she comes to God believing that she is not worthless, but is deserving of God’s love. So if anyone has ever told you that you are not worthy, that you shouldn’t step foot in this, or you shouldn’t do this...those words are causing pain and are not a reflection of God’s message.

The scriptures today are a good reminder to all of us that we are not to judge each other’s actions or compare one’s faith to another. We are called to love and be kind and compassionate and provide a safe place in the world for people to be held gently, lovingly, in their time of sorrow and pain, and also in their times of joy and thanksgiving. To hold each other in love prevents us from judging one another. Malcolm Sinclair writes:

“All churches fall down. All eras end. The power of faith has always been found in the gifts of the living God, scattered among us on the move. We cannot hoard them, own them, or keep them, but only be open to their power.”³

So how are we – the living grace and love of God in this world – how do we, as Robertson-Wesley create a safe place for people to know that they belong? That they are loved for who they are? And that they are worthy? You are worthy. We are all worthy. May God’s love work in and through each and every one of you, so that we can bring healing to this place and this world that is so full of destruction. Watch for who is to come, not for the signs of destruction. And our faith will make us well. Amen.

³ G. Malcolm Sinclair, *Feasting on the Word*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), p. 295.