

### **Introduction to the Theme:**

Have you ever wanted something SO badly that you promised to do something that would be really hard to do for a very long time? For example, I know a little boy who wanted a puppy so very badly that he promised his parents that if they JUST let him get a puppy, he would take that puppy for two walks every single day (he knew that puppies have lots of energy and need to get lots of exercise to get their energy out). But that wasn't all. He also promised that he would feed the puppy breakfast and dinner every single day, too. But even *that* wasn't all. He wanted that puppy so very, very badly that he promised that if that puppy made a mess in the house, he would be the one who would clean up that mess.

Do you think that little boy's parents should get him a puppy? Well, they did. And you know what? The little boy was so incredibly happy and thankful to his parents, that he gave them lots of big enormous hugs—not as many as he gave his new puppy, but a lot.

Well, for the first week or two, that little boy was very focused on keeping his promises. (I'll tell you a secret: his parents did help him out a little bit—especially with the promise about cleaning up the puppy's mess inside. After all, he was just a little boy and it's kind of yucky to clean up dog poo in the house.) But after about two weeks, the little boy forgot to feed his puppy breakfast one day. And then the next day, he said he was too tired to take the puppy for a walk after school. (He'd had a hard day at school, and he really wanted to play games on his computer.)

It kept on like that: lots of different things would distract the little boy and make him forget his promises. And you know what? By the time that family had the puppy for about two months, the little boy had forgotten most of the promises he had made! He still really loved the puppy, and he was still really thankful for the amazing gift, but he just couldn't be bothered to remember or stay focused on all of the things he had promised so hard that he would do. He took it for granted that his parents would just take care of things. Do you think that was the right thing for him to do?

Our Bible lessons this morning both have something to tell us about doing what's right, to show that we love God and believe in God's love for us, and we're thankful for God's faithfulness to us. Our first story tells us about a woman named Hannah, who wanted nothing more than to have a baby. She was so desperate, that she prayed really hard and promised God that if she could have a baby boy, she would let that baby grow up in the Temple! That meant, if she ever wanted to see her little boy, she wouldn't be able to just go to his bedroom or call him to dinner, she would have to go to the Temple and see him. Someone else would get to take care of him and raise him. That's a pretty big sacrifice for a Mum to make, when she really, really wants a baby!

What do you think happened? Did she keep her promise? She did. She kept her promise—and everyone knew that Hannah was a powerfully faithful woman. And her son, Samuel, grew up to be one of the greatest judges that Israel had ever had. In fact, Samuel was the person who found the shepherd named David, and told him that he would become the King over all of Israel.

Hannah's trust in God, and her faithfulness in keeping her promise was a good example to her son Samuel, and to lots and lots of other people, too.

**“What’s the Worst that Could Happen?”**

**Proper 28B**

**1 Samuel 1:4-20**

**Mark 13:1-8**

**18 November, 2012**

Prayer:

Eternal Spirit of God, be with us in this time and place. Because if you are with us, then nothing else matters. And if you are not with us, then nothing else matters.<sup>1</sup>

Amen.

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What’s the worst that could happen? It’s a question most of us weigh up in our minds at various times in our lives, if we’re lucky enough to have the time to prepare for chaos or disaster. For some, the inevitable happens—and it turns out to be their imagined ‘worst.’ That’s what was going on for Hannah. And, about 28 generations later (if you’re going by Matthew’s genealogical count), it’s what was threatening to happen to Jesus’ disciples, too.

Let’s start with Hannah. I imagine that when she married Elkanah, she had visions of a quiver full of children, most of them boys. After all, that’s what the patriarchal culture she inhabited valued. It was considered deeply shameful to be barren. (In fact, I recently learnt from Carla Grosch-Miller that women of Old Testament Hannah’s day were expected to bear at least five children to ‘replace’ themselves! Not that it in any way justifies women today earning only 78% of what men do for doing the same job, but at least it shows that we’ve progressed!)

As if it wasn’t bad enough that Hannah couldn’t manage to conceive, she had to share space with Elkanah’s other wife, Peninnah—who we’re told “used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, [Peninnah] used to provoke her. So Hannah wept and wouldn’t eat.” (1 Sam. 1:7)

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<sup>1</sup> Prayer by Barbara Brown Taylor. (At least, she’s the one I’ve heard praying it; I assume she wrote it!)

Apparently trying to console, Elkanah said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep? Why don’t you eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?” Some of you have withstood the profound grief of childlessness—so you might be able to relate to how that question sounds. For others of us, the closest experience we could relate to might be the loss of a dearly-loved family member, only to have someone say something like, “Surely best to count your blessings just now, rather than focus on your loss.” We just don’t know whether Elkanah was being sympathetic, or dismissive of his wife’s grief . . . and maybe she never did, either. But I’m pretty sure that his inelegant response only added to it.

The worst thing imaginable was happening to Hannah, and she felt powerless to control the overwhelming chaos and loss that her life represented. As a brief aside, it’s worth noting that the story about one of Israel’s greatest-ever judges—the book is entitled 1 Samuel, remember—opens with a narrative about the shattering grief that preceded his life. Doesn’t it just seem like God has a practise of bringing something incredibly life-giving and positive out of situations that seemed like the absolute worst?

So, back to the main character of today’s story. Reflecting very common human responses to grief, Hannah exhibits what many of us have felt at points when the worst thing that *could* happen, has actually befallen us. First, there’s the profound anguish—the kind of tortured pain that threatens to consume a person. It’s eating her alive, and making her starve herself so that her physical pain might somehow mitigate against the emotional and spiritual pain. There’s anger, which gets expressed both in her retort to Eli (the rather clueless priest), and surely was acted out toward Peninnah and Elkanah in various ways that we’re not told about.

But most poignantly of all, her grief drives her to that place where some of us go when we’re desperate: she bargains with God. So intense is her grief that she

strikes an inverse hard bargain—one that promises not just what is most precious in her own life, but also consumes (or, more charitably, *envelops*) the whole life of the son she so desperately wants. She pledges the child as a nazirite . . . “until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.” (1 Samuel 1:11)

We have many lovers of the fermented grape and other intoxicants here this morning, and I notice that just about all of you have pretty neatly trimmed hair—even those of you who wear it on your faces. I hardly need to plead the case that this was clearly a desperate woman!

But more than being a woman of desolation, Hannah was a woman of faith and hope. Year after year, she brought her request to God, and pleaded with the LORD to answer. She did not waver in her desire year after year. And when at long last she experienced the granting of her request, she remained equally faithful in fulfilling the promise she had made. She’s like the persistent widow that Jesus referred to in Luke’s gospel, who keeps going to a judge who we’re told ‘neither feared God nor had respect for people.’ For a while the judge refused to hear her case, but eventually he relents and gives her justice—because, he reasons, otherwise ‘she may . . . wear me out by continually coming.’ The parable concludes with Jesus encouraging the disciples to keep praying and not lose heart. He says, ‘Listen to what the unjust judge says. And will not God grant justice to his chosen ones who cry to him day and night?’ (Luke 18:2, 5, 6-7)

Of course, woven into the texture of Hannah’s story (and any faithful theological reflection on it) is the implicit question of whether it’s appropriate to assume, if we don’t get what we ask for year after year, that God either doesn’t hear us or doesn’t care about us or our request. Today, there are countless people praying daily for lasting peace finally to be won in the Holy Land—even as rockets are fired from Gaza into Israel, and Israel is retaliating with brutal air force of its own, and is

gearing up for a full-scale ground invasion. People have been praying for peace and security in the Middle East since before the Bible was written. May their prayers of faith continue!

In fact, it's more or less what Jesus' disciples were hoping and praying for as they walked out of the temple, in the scene we heard described in our gospel reading.

One of the disciples admired the size of the stones and the buildings surrounding the Jerusalem temple—appreciating not merely the slabs and the architecture that human hands had wrought, but more specifically, appreciating the stones and structures that represented the Jewish people and their faith. “The Roman historian Tacitus described the temple complex as a mountain of white marble adorned with gold, ‘a temple of immense wealth’ . . . Herod the great builder built it to impress the wealthiest and most powerful rulers of the day, and he succeeded.”<sup>2</sup> The fact that Herod had probably built the enormous complex as a monument to his own power, and as a lure for further commerce by Jewish pilgrims to Jerusalem, was of secondary importance to those who were deeply hopeful that their Messiah was among them to usher in a triumphal restoration of the Davidic kingdom. To them, the massive temple complex was the home of *their* God, and represented their connection to visible power on earth.

So they were stunned when Jesus warned, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.” (Mark 13:2) His words could be read as a reminder not to invest all their confidence in the powers or structures devised by human thought or effort; nothing human lasts forever. We don't know exactly when Mark's gospel account was written—but most likely, the original audience was already grieving the destruction of that temple, which

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<sup>2</sup> Robert A. Bryant, *Feasting on the Word*, Year B, vol. 4, p. 311.

happened in 70 C.E. And these words attributed to Jesus would then have seemed both prophetic and possibly consoling. Only God's designs endure forever.

One of the things that happens when chaos strikes a nation —whether it's a crippling natural disaster or a decimating human-created catastrophe—is that its people start thinking apocalyptic thoughts and talking apocalyptic talk. The end seems near, and the final judgment must be at hand. And in many ways, there are ultimate things going on!

Well, apocalypse was what those early Jewish Christians were thinking and experiencing, whether Rome's sacking of Jerusalem had already taken place, or whether the writing was on the wall. . . It was the worst thing that could happen; they couldn't imagine anything more dreadful.

Mark continues his account by commenting that, after Jesus' warning about the stones being thrown down, a few of his disciples asked Jesus a little later in private, "So, when's this going to happen—can you give us a date or a clue?"

Instead of giving them a direct answer, Jesus warns them not to be led astray by those false prophets who will come after him—some of them possibly claiming to speak in his name or with his authority. He tells them not to be worried about wars or rumours of wars, or of earthquakes or famines—these would just be signs of the beginning of the end. If we'd have read on in Chapter 13, we'd have heard Jesus encourage his disciples to persevere in the face of the coming hardships— there would be hardships that included being beaten, and made to give accounts for their faith in counsels, experiences of betrayal by family members, and more. Jesus encourages them to hold fast through it all, because these are but birthing-pangs of the new, divine order: in the end will come the blessing.

Mark's earliest audiences, who were really suffering under the tyranny of Rome—but confident in the resurrection power and hopeful for the imminent return of Christ—would have heard all of these as words of strength and courage. They would have understood that the exhortation was not to give in to the events that were besetting them, or to focus their attention on them as the main object or point of the story or their lives, but rather to continue in prayer and faith because at the end of the day, God is faithful. And God's blessing would prevail.

But what about us? What do the scripture lessons have to say to us today? As we take a few moments to prayerfully reflect on our own lives, on the world, on our faith and experience, I invite you ask yourself, "What's the worst that could happen?" We're going to watch a series of images from this past week's world news, and continue our reflection in prayer and faith.

[A brief note of caution if there are young children in the sanctuary: while none of the images are graphic, some of them may be a bit unsettling.]