

Sermon – “Silence and Provocation”  
Sunday, November 18, 2018  
Scripture Readings: 1 Samuel 1:4-20, Hebrews 10:11-25  
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The books of Samuel cover the period of time when ancient Israel made the transition from a coalition of tribes to a monarchy. Samuel was the prophet who oversaw this change, and today’s first reading tells of his birth...but it mostly concentrates on the story of his mother, Hannah, one of two wives of a man named Elkanah. His other wife, Peninnah, had children, but Hannah had none. Look for God’s word in this reading from 1 Samuel chapter 1, verses 4 through 20.

*<sup>4</sup>On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; <sup>5</sup>but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. <sup>6</sup>Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. <sup>7</sup>So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. <sup>8</sup>Her husband Elkanah said to 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?"*

*<sup>9</sup>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. <sup>10</sup>She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. <sup>11</sup>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."*

*<sup>12</sup>As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. <sup>13</sup>Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. <sup>14</sup>So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." <sup>15</sup>But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. <sup>16</sup>Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time."*

*<sup>17</sup>Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." <sup>18</sup>And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.*

*<sup>19</sup>They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her. <sup>20</sup>In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the LORD."*

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Our second reading is from the Epistle to the Hebrews, a letter written in the early days of the church, most likely to Jewish Christians at Jerusalem. This comes from a section in which the author is discussing how the law is, as the letter puts it, "only a shadow of the good things that are coming." It speaks of how simply following legal requirements and offering sacrifices is not wholly sufficient, and how Christ came as the Great High Priest, offering himself as a once-and-for-all sacrifice that accomplishes something we never could accomplish by our own religiosity. Listen for God's word in Hebrews chapter 10, verses 11 through 25.

*<sup>11</sup> And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. <sup>12</sup> But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, "he sat down at the right hand of God," <sup>13</sup> and since then has been waiting "until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet." <sup>14</sup> For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. <sup>15</sup> And the Holy Spirit also testifies to us, for after saying,*

*<sup>16</sup> "This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds," <sup>17</sup> he also adds, "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."*

*<sup>18</sup> Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.*

*<sup>19</sup> Therefore, my friends, since we have confidence to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, <sup>20</sup> by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain (that is, through his flesh), <sup>21</sup> and since we have a great priest over the house of God, <sup>22</sup> let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. <sup>23</sup> Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. <sup>24</sup> And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, <sup>25</sup> 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.*

###

Why do we give thanks?

I give thanks because there is music. To hear music is to be provoked to dance, and for one's heart to dance is joy. We give thanks for joy. And there is never no music.

There is music in the changing of the seasons. The colors develop harmony upon the ascending and then descending melody of temperature, varying together over that familiar 4-bar repeating phrase; winter, spring, summer, fall—the passacaglia of our spinning earth.

There is music in the elements of creation: the triumphant wide notes of the mountain, the endless deep of the ocean, the vast ensemble of the forest, the hanging rest with a fermata that holds its breath between the lightning and the thunder; the whistling birds, the extended solo of the desert, and the hush of outer space.

There is music in the birth of every new human being who emerges onto the stage of existence with us.

There is music in the giving and receiving of love; in the curiosities of nature; in the certainties of math, the mysteries of physics, and the paradoxes of philosophy.

There is music in the spoken word, and in the pause of contemplation. There is music in the complexities of intellectual virtuosity, and in the steady, fast, athletic beat of a race run hard.

To hear music is to be provoked to dance, and for one's heart to dance is joy, and to encounter joy is to be provoked to give thanks.

Oh, our ears have sometimes been plugged up by the muck and the mire, or deafened by the cannons in the struggles of life. There are things which seem to overpower the song, terrible noises which drown out in our ears the tune for a time. But we have all heard the music, somewhere, once, along the way, and it is only because we have heard it that its absence is so strongly felt.

In those dark times, the waiting times, the Advent times, we look for the life of the world to come—the resurrection of the original melody, in a new key, come back with a sudden blast of the trumpet, when all the pieces of the orchestra are heard from again.

I have known of those who have dreaded the idea of heaven, for they could not abide to hear but a single note which could never end...but this static doom should be no fear of ours, for where there is life, there is always movement to the song.

There are people who cannot believe in the *full* song of heaven, for they say it is impossible to experience good without the existence of evil. It is said that goodness is defined by contrast with something else, or at least that without that contrast it cannot be observed and known to be good. It will always be as it is, in some fashion, for there is no life without death, they say; no happiness without sadness; having without losing.

This philosophy, while tempting, and while matching our experience just well enough to sound true, fails to withstand even one minute of observing a toddler dancing; a three-year-old reacting with glee at discovering some tiny, seemingly inconsequential piece of the world. Have you ever seen that? Think back, and remember. Here is a fresh exuberance, delighting in the joys to be found in life, all the while with utterly no awareness of death or real loss—in the experience of the very young child still new to it all, the idea of death, of things and beings coming to a full end forever, might as well not exist. The youngest of us have, for a brief moment, no awareness of consequential evil with which to contrast anything, and this does not for an instant temper their enthusiasm for the goodnesses they discover. Here, in the child's excitement—excitement for life, for all that surrounds us, for existence itself, we can remember, maybe, faintly, the real heart of joy, the joy of encounter with the music of life, which is not dulled but made fullest and freest in the utter absence of squelching sadness and loss.

We may not know the way back to that place of joy, or we may believe that because in reality the universe does contain evils, there is no way back to that at all. But that is very different from claiming it is ontologically impossible for a soul to know joy without knowing sorrow, or to delight in life without knowing and encountering death.

It may be that the tendency we often have—I've certainly seen it expressed around our culture enough—to be suspicious of eternal life as possibly dreadful monotony is rooted more in our experience of what wrong with life as we currently know it, and what it would mean to extend that forever, than it is based in a clearly conceived vision of what fresh life, clear of evil, might really be.

But even here in this life, the music, while sometimes hiding, is always there. We find sorrow in our days, and what do we do? We turn it into song. From Psalms of lament to the spirituals sung by toiling slaves, the blues sung by people down on their luck to the tragedies of the theatrical stage, even the losses and tribulations of the world are not free from being caught up in the music.

Life grows, surprisingly, in the harshest of conditions the earth has to offer; and like microbes cultured atop the volcanic heat, propagating and multiplying under the Antarctic ice, we stand on the summits of our sorrow and grow there things of beauty. The poetry found in human sadness is a kind of testament to evil's inability to quench the music for good. It keeps on trying to break through and bend our souls back skyward.

We heard today from the book of 1 Samuel, a tale of Hannah, sadly without child, and driven to tears by another who scorns her for it. She is pained and provoked to a state of misery, and she sings a silent song of grief, a plea of promise. The priest, initially mistaking her for a drunk, is ultimately moved by her words and offers his blessing and the hope that God will provide for her.

This reading ended with her giving birth to her son, Samuel, but what we did not hear just now was the next chapter, the famous Song of Hannah, her moment of great thanksgiving. It is an exultant ascription of praise, much like Mary's Magnificat, at God's greatness and justice, and at the Lord's finally bringing things around right. A few of her words:

Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory.

"There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God." ...

"The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world."<sup>1</sup>

There is thanksgiving here for the recognition that sorrow does not have the last word, and that the broken, unfair systems which give to some and take from others shall be reversed, and she has seen enough to believe this.

Our second reading assures us of the same. "And every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins."<sup>2</sup> Day after day we see and do the same, and we despair of it ever being enough. But our laments and our confessions are heard by the Lord, and in Christ they are answered. The things that are wrong, not just around us, but even in us, are made right in him.

"But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins," Hebrews declares, "'he sat down at the right hand of God,' and since then has been waiting 'until his enemies would be made a footstool for his feet.' For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified."<sup>3</sup>

"[L]et us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith," it offers, and "[l]et us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for [the one] who has promised is faithful."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Samuel 2:1-2, 4-8 (*New Revised Standard Version*).

<sup>2</sup> Hebrews 10:11 (*NRSV*).

<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 10:12-14 (*NRSV*).

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 10:22a and 10:23 (*NRSV*).

There are times when we think we have lost the original melody, and have forgotten what song we are even a part of, but this promises us that we are but in the middle of the bridge back to the refrain, and we can be thankful not only for the song to come, but for the music that is with us here, in the hardest parts of the journey.

What do our thanks look like in practice? We are even told the answer to that. Far from the antagonistic provocations of Hannah's rival, we are given counsel for provocation of a different sort: "let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds," Hebrews advises, "not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another."<sup>5</sup>

Just the other day in Bible study, someone brought up the fact that generous and gracious living is indeed a provocation. Even the simple act of an unexpectedly kind-hearted tip left for a server at a restaurant can change the direction of that person's heart for the day, and thus change the course of that person's interactions with others, carrying goodness forward and outward. Goodness begets thanks, which provokes goodness, and every gratuitous kindness carries the tune of the Gospel to parched ears.

Let us indeed, then, come together, encouraging one another, standing beside one another. For there are times when we can help keep the music living in one another, whispering all-but-forgotten lyrics in each other's ear. There are times, too, when we can join voices together in loud, joyful chorus. For all of these times together, let us be thankful, and in our lives let us give one another ever more reason to give thanks again.

Why do we give thanks?

I give thanks because there is music. Even in the moments of silence, there is music. To hear music is to be provoked to join it. May God join our hearts together in a song and spirit of thanksgiving, in our recognition of the blessings of this day and ever more in joyful hope of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is faithful to his promises. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 10:24-25 (*NRSV*).