

Marion weekly update

SERMON Dec 31

This week we're in that odd Sunday where New Year's Eve falls on a Sunday. It only happens every so many years. The turn of the calendar marks for many people a sense of newness. New opportunity. New hope. New promise. A lot of new. Something I find encouraging is that this is one of the few days of the year where people all over the globe regardless of nationality, religion, or otherwise have decided together that this moment is significant and deserves attention. It's a cumulative putting away the past and looking forward to a brighter future.

The day itself has no inherent value. No day does. It's only what we choose to impart to it. Different days hold significance to only an individual, a family, a state, a nation, a religion, and so on. This is because it's up to us to decide what we want to do with a moment or a remembrance. So when a day crosses all lines to hold significance it's special.

The question then for all of us who embrace this sense of the new is "where do I find whatever newness is waiting for me or that I should pursue?"

For people of faith one important resource is scripture. Whether it's looking for that new purpose or inspiration, or simply ensuring that the new course we chart is in right standing with God, scripture is foundational for us. Promises of God are a popular starting point.

The promises of God in scripture can be tricky. They are tricky because we can't claim all of them. Some promises are absolutely to everyone. For example in the story of the great flood, the promise to never destroy the world by flood again was made to Noah, but also to all those who would come after him.

On the other hand the promise to Abraham was made to Abraham alone. That he would have descendants as great as the stars in the sky was HIS promise, not ours. That promise to him according to God would one day bless every nation, but that promise of descendants and the revelation of the Messiah through his bloodline was not to or for me.

That's how it is with many promises or covenants or prophecies. They are time bound. They are to a singular nation. They are to an individual person. To claim that for ourselves is dishonest and to be frank a little arrogant. Imagine promising your best friend to help them move when they are ready after buying a new house. You do it. Then a year or so later someone you don't even know comes knocking. "I heard you promised your friend to help them move, I'm here to claim that promise for myself." That wouldn't turn out very well would it? Because the promise was to your friend, not some stranger you don't know.

Promises claimed amiss have caused some serious damage. When the settlers came from the Old World to the New World they claimed a promise. They claimed to be the "new Israel" and the New World the "new Promised Land." As such they claimed "promised" ownership by God, and proceeded to commit horrendous atrocities to claim the land. All justified by their belief that the promise of a promised land to Israel was there's to claim and the New World theirs to take.

The promise we read today in Isaiah is one of those time bound, nation specific promises, but it also gets claimed often by the church. The line that is typically grabbed is that "God is doing a new thing". In a moment we're going to see that this statement isn't nearly as profound as people make it out to be. The promise in context of scripture was to an exiled Judah. The promise was that ultimately they would be restored, along with some additional add ons from the lost tribes of Israel, and that Babylon who God used to punish Israel would get their just desserts. This promise was fulfilled. Ultimately Babylon fell as all empires eventually do. Judah and a remnant from Israel returned to their homeland and rebuilt. This is recounted in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah.

The promise wasn't made to us. It was made to them in a very specific context. But sometimes even these promises provide inspiration and timeless truths.

God doing a new thing isn't new. It's actually a constant. God is always doing a new thing. If we believe that God is constantly guiding, calling, redeeming, and so on then every moment somewhere God is inspiring a new thing to happen. Every time someone responds to God's call a new thing has happened. Every time someone jumps into helping or creating a new ministry God is doing a new thing. In every life, every day God is trying to get something new going. Because every day is new. Every opportunity is new. With all of this over and over again God is doing a new thing trying to bring creation closer and more intimately entwined with the Kingdom God has always guided us towards.

Perhaps most important is the question in the promise. "Can you perceive it?"

Are we open to what God wants for us over ourselves? Do we see what God dares us to embrace and embark upon or do we shy away? Do we open ourselves to new possibilities, new ideas, new sensibilities or do we cling tightly to old ones even if they are past their day or incorrect? What is God trying to do in your life, in my life? Will we perceive it? And if we do, will we follow it?

If we are daring. If we are willing. These new things God is trying in our lives could lead to the revival so many are clamoring for. We just need to get over ourselves first. And I'm going to share something that I believe is Biblical and true.

I keep hearing people talking about split in denominations, even our own, as this great opportunity that "God is doing a new thing, can we perceive it?" The sentiment is that somehow God is doing a new thing amidst the dissension, the hatefulness, the discord. And I agree that God is. The problem is that the "doing a new thing" is in the context of accepting that we can't get along. The same sentiment is in most things that are polarizing. Certainly in politics.

Sure, we see place in scripture where people, even nations, part company and see how God works through it. But is this God's intent? Does God want us divided, angry, and unable to mend our differences? Unable to stay together until we find together what God's real desire happens to be? NO!

Christ's prayer is that we would be one even as the Godhead is One. What if the new thing God wants to do is for us to get past our differences and get along? What if it is for us to find unity amidst our similarities rather than division over our differences? What if it is for us to treat those with whom we disagree with unconditional love? I seem to remember Jesus telling us to love our enemies. And these aren't even our enemies. This is just siblings in Christ and neighbors.

What kind of 2024 would we have if we could embrace and inspire this new thing? It's Biblical. It's Christ centered. And it's what we need to bring peace in our hearts, peace in our communities, peace in our nation, and peace in the world.

BIBLE STUDY—1 Samuel 1

This first chapter of 1 Samuel is very much a set up for the rest of the book. It also needs to be understood in the context of the end of the book of Judges. Israel is in a horrifying state. The last story is of a Levite who turns his concubine out to an angry mob not unlike the story of Lot in Sodom. They "abuse and rape her" through the night and in the morning the Levite sees her left for dead on the doorstep. Callously he tells her to get up, throws her on his donkey and takes her home. We don't know if she's yet dead, but what we do know is that he carves her into 12 pieces sending one of each to the various parts of Israel. They are outraged and decide to take revenge on the tribe whose men did this atrocity. The other 11 tribes go about looking to destroy all of the tribe of Benjamin. After they have done irreparable damage, they think better of it and don't want to see a tribe vanish. They can't offer up their daughters to the remaining Benjamite males because they'd take an oath that anyone who would do such a thing would be cursed. They hatch upon a scheme to have the remaining males hide in wait at a festival in Shiloh. When the women of the town came parading and dancing by they were to run out, "catch" one and take her for a wife. The explanation to their families would be "hey, help them out and it won't be charged against you because you technically didn't 'give' them away." Why? They were taken.

This is the state of Israel. Disconnected, temperamental, and at the end of Judges it says that "they had no king, and everyone did what was right in their own sight." The stage is set for something to happen. Much of the teaching about Israel wanting a king in my experience is tuned to jealousy of the

kings of other nations. In this light it might not be quite that cut and dry. Perhaps they were looking at the relative stability and the one factor that they could pin down was that they all had kings, and Israel did not.

Then we have Hannah. Hannah is by all regards a devout woman. She is barren, and carries the shame of that with her. Elkanah, her husband's other wife, is fertile and doesn't let Hannah forget it. She taunts Hannah, and apparently no worse so than when they do their yearly trip to Shiloh as a family to worship and offer sacrifice. Hannah is in tears and heartbroken. She's endured this for years. Elkanah offers her extra meat from the sacrifice out of love. What we can't dismiss is that this offer out of love may just be one more reminder to Hannah of her condition and inability to bear children. Elkanah's response to her grief is also fairly crude. "Why are you crying? Why don't you not eat?" He's not paying attention. Perhaps he's more speaking out of his discomfort at his wife being destroyed and his seeming unwillingness to do anything about it. "Am I not worth more to you than ten sons?" Not "I love you more than if you had born ten sons". The attention is turned on himself. His wife is grief stricken and Elkanah is self-absorbed.

To be fair to Elkanah, something we can attribute to him is a sense of devoutness as well. There is no indication that the family's yearly pilgrimage had anything to do with established holidays and festivals that everyone would attend. It seems more that this is their family's act of worship and sacrifice. They did it because they wanted to, not because they had to. They are familiar with the experience, and the abuse of Hannah seems routine. Nevertheless, they are going out of an act of worship to God. Hannah seems in this opening chapter to have the fullest sense of God and drawing near to God. In her grief she goes into the worship place and prays intently and heartfelt. We see here a sign of the state of the priesthood. Because she's praying with her mouth moving but not speaking Eli's immediate assumption is that she is drunk. It may have been customary to pray aloud, but really? That's all it took? What we find later is the Eli's sons Phineas and Hophni are also priests. Priests that are wildly abusing their role. They are living it up. It's entirely possible that women they have been partying with may have found their way into the worship space drunk, and Eli was mistaking Hannah for one of these women.

She corrects him and informs Eli that she is simply grieving and pleading to God. Eli blesses her request and asks that God grant her request. She goes away contented and sure enough conceives with her husband when they get home. There's some irony here.

Eli had no idea what he was blessing. He may not have known. Ultimately this child would grow to undo his family and their priestly role. Eli had just blessed the demise of his own family. This is a grand illustration of "be careful what you wish for" and the reply of many a teacher when asking for volunteers. "Can I have a volunteer?" Hands go up immediately. "You might want to know what you're volunteering for first."

We can learn a lot from this. Anymore people follow personalities, rumors, opinions, or the word of others without learning for themselves what's really going on. This is a recipe for ending up in a position we don't want and never saw coming. Taking a pause to ask clarifying questions is critical in establishing a faith, a country, a relationship worth having. If the questions can't or won't be answered, keep walking.

Hannah weans Samuel for likely 3-4 years. This adds to her faithfulness. Imagine finally having the child you'd longed for so long. Then knowing you have to give him up. Years spent connecting and loving your child. That must have been heart wrenching. And giving him up to Eli? He was no expert raising his own two sons for certain. Yet she would trust that giving Samuel back to God was the right thing to do. How proud must she have been to see the man, the judge, the prophet he would become? There are some language pieces here that are also helpful to see deeper into what the writer is trying to accomplish. This is setting up the story that brings about a nation and a king over Israel. As with much of the Bible, this isn't just written as a flat, lifeless historic account. There is theology in it, perhaps some symbolism, and intentionality. In Paul's letters and in Acts we saw language and phrasing used in multiple parts of the books. They refer forward and in reverse to one another. The writer is making a stronger point.

In this chapter the term “Lord of Hosts” might be more accurately translated Lord of the armies. God is the Lord of the armies. What does this insinuate? God is the God of Israel. How does a mighty army form? Not from a loose confederate of tribes in the state that Israel was at the time. It happens when there is a greater united front. It happens when there is leadership to rally them. This is a term for God first used here in 1 Samuel. What is about to happen for Israel? They are about to be brought together as a nation under a king.

Hannah is referred to as having her womb closed by God. This was a common understanding of the day. It also explains her treatment to a degree. For God to close a womb adds to the shame of being childless. There may also be the assumption that there is something inherently distasteful to God about the woman. Thus the disdain. Yet Hannah bears the prophet who would guide a nation, holding even the king accountable. If she was childless to this point, who then is responsible for delivering Israel from chaos and destruction? God. The story is taking shape. Israel is coming together, and God is the author of the transition. Even through the mess, God is working, and working through this faithful, devout, heartbroken woman.

Another gift of God to Hannah and revealed in language is that when she says Samuel was given, a more appropriate translation might be “lent”. This is a significant mindset. Given implies ownership. How much harder to release him? Lent implies for a time. Reminding herself of that Hannah was prepared that one day Samuel would no longer be hers, he would belong to God. In fact he belonged to God all along. For us today this is a helpful idea. Instead of fooling ourselves to think something is what it’s not, look at it honestly. Honesty prepares us for the ultimate consequence or result. It may be a lifelong commitment, it might be temporary. It might be easy or hard. Whatever it is, confront honestly so that expectations are real. Real expectations help us determine if we should even undertake the task. Real expectations help us steel ourselves to see through the tasks we undertake.

Hannah and Peninnah(the other wife) have been suggested to be symbols of Israel and the surrounding nations. Who is longing for someone? Hannah AND Israel. Hannah is longing for a son, Israel is longing for a king. Just as Hannah persistently asks for a son, Israel persistently asks for a king. Peninnah mocks Hannah for not having a son. The nations surrounding Israel mock Israel for not having a king. The story of this family squabble represents more than just a family squabble. It may well represent the desperate state of Israel in the midst of the world around it.

Elkanah says to Hannah when she refuses to go to Shiloh for their annual pilgrimage in favor of raising Samuel “may the LORD establish His word.” This is important language. It is prophetic of a prophet. The job of the prophet is to speak the word of God and do his utmost to see it come to pass. To establish it. Samuel does this throughout his entire life. The LORD establishes His word through Samuel. In the play of words, later on one of Saul’s criticisms that cause him to fall into disfavor is that he does NOT establish the word of the LORD. Over and over Saul disobeys. Where Samuel’s obedience is his glory, Saul’s disobedience is his downfall and shame.

We are cued here to anticipate that Samuel will go on in this story to be a great prophet.

A final word play is in Samuel’s name. Hannah says that she named him Samuel because she asked and he was given. This isn’t accurate. The more accurate name that would translate this was is Saul. What?! Some suggest that there is a mistake made in the writing. Others, which makes more sense to me, suggest that this is intentional. In “mixing up” the names we are given a heads up that these two men are intertwined. They are connected. And they are. The stories of Saul and Samuel are linked inextricably.

At the end of the chapter when it says that Samuel is “given over to the LORD”, “given over” transliterated is “Saul”. Samuel is Saul to the LORD. Here is my interpretation. Saul would be king, the highest and most influential leader in Israel. Saul equals king. Yet Saul would fail. Who would be the true leader of Israel, anointing kings and standing against kings who were disobedient? Samuel. Samuel, not Saul was the greater leader. Samuel is Saul(King) to the LORD.

What matter in the end? Who has the title or who has the blessing of God? We do well to remember that. Seeking after titles holds little value. What we do with the title we have is everything to God.

This first chapter, seemingly just a story about Samuel's birth is so much more. It establishes where Israel is about to go, to a nation. A new prophet is on the way, Samuel. Who is ultimately at the root of this transition? Samuel may be the instrument but God is the one calling the tune. And Hannah is a model of gracious, faithful persistence not only trusting God with her pain, but entrusting God with the life of the child she'd always longed for yet would give up.