

1 Samuel 1: 4-20
Mark 13: 1-8
Hamilton Union Presbyterian Church
November 15, 2015

As Jesus came out of the temple one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!”

All that remains of the great temple of Jerusalem is a portion of the foundation which supported the great building and all its surrounding structures. It is called the “Wailing Wall.” It is where Jews come from all over the world come to pray. Every day the cracks in the large blocks of stone are crammed full of prayers written on scraps of paper. It is believed that prayers left at the Wailing Wall are heard by God. In order to come to the wall and pray a person needs temporarily to convert to Judaism and put on a paper covering on one’s head.

Jesus responds curtly to the disciple’s awe of the magnificence of the temple. “Do, you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another. All will be thrown down.” A little less than forty years later, while suppressing a Jewish rebellion, the Roman army would level the city of Jerusalem, paying particular attention to the temple. Not one stone was left upon another.

I am struck by the apparent irrelevance of the first part of Jesus’ response. “Do you see these great buildings?” Well, duh! Didn’t the disciple just say, “Look, teacher, what large stones and what large buildings?” It may be that the disciple’s question caught Jesus off guard. Has it ever happened that you are walking with someone. You have both been to the same event—a movie, a restaurant, a play and you each are lost in your own thoughts. Perhaps your companion thinks the movie was the best she has ever seen, while you couldn’t wait for the

film to end. She says, “Wasn’t that a wonderful movie!” Startled from your gloomy review of the film you reply, in effect, “Did you and I go to the same movie? It was one of the worst I have ever seen!”

And so it is very likely that what Jesus was thinking as he left the temple was very different from the frothy impressions of the disciple. So when the glowing words of the disciple broke into Jesus’ thoughts, Jesus said exactly what he had been thinking. Soon these great stones will be a pile of rubble.

I want to shift scenes to the moving account that comes from the opening of First Samuel. We are presented with a woman who is one of two wives of a prosperous man. Yes Virginia, polygamy was an accepted practice among the Israelites. Elkanah has a domestic problem because one wife is fertile and is producing children. The other wife, Hannah is unable to become pregnant. In those days, a woman’s value was frequently based on her bearing children—not just *any* children, but *sons*. It is bad enough that Hannah appears to be infertile, but the other wife lords it over her, making Hannah’s life a misery. Elkanah means well but he is essentially clueless about Hannah’s feelings. “Am I not more to you than *seven sons*?” To use an overused phrase, he *doesn’t get it*.

Hannah’s anguish is very real and it is not selfish. She goes to the nearest shrine of God and pours out her soul. There is no boundary line between her pain and her prayer—a sign that it is prayer in the truest sense. Her praying is directed to God. She is like the woman Jesus spoke about who goes to the unjust judge and who will not stop banging on his door until she gets a response. She is like Jacob wrestling with the angel and will not let go until she gets a blessing.

At the height of her prayer she makes what must sound like a rash and impossible promise: If she is given a son she will offer him to the service of God.

Another man enters the scene—Eli, the priest. He has become jaded over the years. He sees this woman rocking back and forth and talking, crying, mumbling. He assumes that she is just another down and out washing up on his shore, a victim of the hurricanes of life. He has lost control of the sacrifices to his sons who use the sacrifices of the shrine for their own benefit. Moved by a wave of disgust and despair he tells Hannah to go home and sober up.

He then receives a shock. This woman actually believes in God. She is not there for him, but because she trusts that this shrine actually is a place where she can meet God. Here he is having given up that anything meaningful could come from his work. He and his sons are just going through the motions of religion and a woman comes with more faith and trust in God than he has ever had! And when she tells him not to judge her and to hear her prayer he is properly put in his place. Hannah goes home and soon she becomes pregnant with a son. The time will come when she will demonstrate her faith and trust in God again when she gives this child to the care of the cynical priest and the shrine which has lost touch with the God it represents.

What to these two stories have to do with each other?

On the one hand we have a disciple's naïve impressions of the great religious edifice of the temple in Jerusalem. We hear Jesus deep seated belief that, however big the stones may be they are dust in the hands of God.

On the other hand we have a God-shrine which is going through the motions of being a God-place but which even the priests don't believe that God is present. Yet a woman comes

who trusts that God is present. She pours out her anguish to God in the expectation that *God is in this place*. The shrine represents the presence of the living God even if the religious representatives have lost their faith. She could care less about the stones which make up the physical structure. The only thing that matters is her trust that God is present. Her prayer *demands that God be present!* In deed I propose that Hannah's trust hallows the shrine. It is here faith that transforms the shrine from an place for empty religious ritual into a place of vital and life changing encounter between people and the living God.

What do you and I bring to *this shrine*? Are we like Eli? Have we lost faith that people can actually meet God here? Are we shocked when someone comes and expects this sanctuary to be a place of life changing encounter with God revealed in Jesus Christ? Do we want to send such a one away because her intensity makes us uncomfortable? And are we shocked that someone would actually believe that he or she can actually meet Jesus here!

Yet what if we are not Eli? What if we come week after week expecting, no, *demanding* that God be present and hear our deepest prayers? What if we come expecting something to *happen* in this sacred hour? I don't mean coming to see if something will happen and leaving disappointed if nothing does. I mean releasing all attempts to control the outcome, we come expecting God to meet us and then being patient in expectation of how God will respond—not if, but *how*—God will respond. For God is known when we give our whole souls to him without reserve.

No longer is the temple, the shrine or the church building a collection stones. It is alive with living stones of souls that come to encounter God. Amen.