

## **Sermon 14 November 2021 – Mission Sunday**

Many of us enjoy listening to, and telling, stories. Stories help us connect to one another through common experiences. And yet each of our stories are different. Each of us has our own unique stories – those events that form part of our life's journey; that shape us. Even when the events and experiences are similar, or the same, the full story of our lives is different. The reason for this is that not only are our circumstances different– time, context, who we are and so on- but also the way in which we respond is different. Everything we do is in response to the present moment – our present moment.

The Bible too is filled with many different stories about ordinary people and ordinary lives that are made up of painful experiences as well as joyous experiences. No one's life is ever all pain and despair or all joy and gratitude. It is a mixture of both.

Our readings today tell the stories of pain and despair, judgement and spitefulness, love and thanksgiving, repeated sacrifices, war, earthquakes, famines, joy and hope. All the things that we experience in our world - in our lives.

In the first reading we heard the story of Hannah. A story filled with despair because she was unable to conceive a child – a son. A story of grief, lament, injustice and wrongful accusation. But this story is not just about Hannah and the way in which she deals with the situation. It is also about the way in which those around her respond in different ways towards her. You see the fact that she does not have a son puts her life and future at risk. She is blessed with a loving, caring husband who provides for her. But if anything were to happen to Elkanah, without a son, Hannah's life will go from blessed to that of widow, homeless and poor. Despite loving Hannah, Elkanah is insensitive to her feelings and position in the larger society which shames her and considers her useless and worthless because she is unable to conceive and

have a child. Peninnah, the second wife, takes great pleasure in Hannah's distress; ridiculing her and Eli, the priest, is quick to judge, assuming that she is drunk.

In all this Hannah does not respond in kind – to any of them. Instead, she cries out to God. Praying fervently to God for help thereby allowing God to transform her grief and sorrow into joy. Which is clearly seen in the second Samuel reading today in which she gives praise and thanks. Rejoicing in how God transforms not only her situation but the situations of all people – lifting and raising the poor, feeding the hungry, guarding the steps of the faithful. Hannah's prayer of thanksgiving reminds us that the God whom we serve is much greater than our problems and both her prayer and life testify to God's faithfulness not only to her but to us as well.

The question for us today, is how do we respond to the present moment of our lives? Particularly in a society where Hannah's experience is – to a large extent - the experience of so many women across time and culture. Woman who continue to struggle against subtle and overt prejudice – against social and religious constructs that try to control and shame us, that focus more on what we wear than on what we say or do, that make our worth dependent upon something other than being exactly who we are and who God created us to be. (Adapted from Rev. Ginger E. Gaines-Cirelli: "A sermon for Every Sunday," November 14, 2021, *The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost.*)

The Hebrews reading once again, as it has for the last couple of weeks, deals with the difference between earthly high priests and Christ as high priest. The earthly "priest stands day after day..., offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins. Christ on the other hand sacrificed once for all and because of this we respond by living with confidence in a new way.

Our response to Christ saving work, the writer to the Hebrews tells us is that firstly we are to “approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (v22) – this is a response of faith. Secondly, we are to “hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering” (v23) – a response of hope. Thirdly, we are to find ways to “provoke one another to love and good deeds” (v24) – a response of love. Interesting word “provoke” because this word is generally used in a negative way but it means to arouse, foster or kindle. Coupled to this is the importance of meeting together in worship and fellowship so that we may encourage one another (v25). Because it is through our meeting together, which some of the members in the text seem to have stopped doing, we bear witness to our faith in Jesus and wait for his return.

Madison N. Pierce reminds us that this ‘confession is “ours”—it’s corporate not individual—and the next exhortation reinforces a picture of communal responsibility. They are to encourage one another towards “love and good deeds” (10:24), continuing to gather so that they can keep each other on the path of faithfulness. Sometimes we see Church as a place where I learn and worship, where I need to go for my own personal spiritual growth. And yet, the picture here in Hebrews is of service. It is about gathering together for the sake of others.’ (Madison N. Pierce: Workingpreacher.org)

In our reading from the Gospel of Mark we continue to read the story of Jesus and how people responded to him and what he said. Jesus speaks about the destruction of the Temple and the city of Jerusalem. And the disciples want to know when this will happen and what the signs will be – a very real concern for them! But Jesus does not answer these questions instead he warns about some of the signs of the end - wars, rumours of wars, earthquakes and famines that will take place. Part of this warning is that when these things happen, they must not allow themselves to be led astray by some who will come in his name claiming to be him. In other words, they must remain true to him and not allow fear to overcome them because this is

in fact not the end. The end is when God will establish his reign. As difficult as it may be during the period of destruction and suffering, we are to have hope and bear witness to Christ and not be fooled and led astray by those who come proclaiming doom and gloom. The truth is, no one knows when the end will come – what we do know is that God will be there establishing his reign.

So, it is not a time of doom and gloom but rather a time of light, mercy, hope and joy because it is with the end of the world that Christ will come again. For Christians this means that the world is moving to a new beginning and it is thus a time to look forward to with hope and joy rather than fear. Everything is in God's hands and is moving towards fulfillment and not catastrophe. We should rather worry about the end of our own lives which comes with death. What is our life story? We need to examine our lives in the light of scripture which should "kindle a fire" within us, change us so that others can feel its warmth and also be filled with hope in order that their lives may also be transformed. When this happens then we will be able to meet Christ with joy when he comes again.

Today is also Mission Sunday and simply put, our mission and that of the church is to serve others with the love of Jesus. A 1999 report of MISSIO, the Mission Commission of the Anglican Communion states that "the process of transformation, begun by the fact that we are in Christ, needs to continue to reshape our communities and institutions, so that our Communion itself is a proclamation of the gospel." To this end they ask the following questions:

In your context, does "mission on the ground" mean dealing with suffering, conflict, oppression, poverty or any other circumstances which bring death rather than life?

If so, how can you share your burden with others in the family of God? If not, how can you stand in solidarity with those who carry that kind of cross?

(ANGLICANS IN MISSION: A TRANSFORMING JOURNEY Report of MISSIO, the Mission Commission of the Anglican Communion: <https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/108028/MISSIO-Anglicans-in-Mission-1999.pdf>) In other words, what is our missionary response to those who suffer and are burdened?

Our readings today, speak to these very questions, inviting us to discover signs of the coming of a new world and the ways in which we respond. The fact of the matter is that we do not know how long any moment of personal suffering or struggle or grief will be. We do not know how long the social pressure and turmoil we're experiencing in our country right now will last. We do not know how long the COVID pandemic will last. The only thing we know is that God is still at work in our lives and in our world.

As we think about these readings this week – let us think about our life's story. Do we respond to events in a positive – hope filled - way or with fear and dread? No matter how intense the persecution, however frightening the world events described, those who trust in Jesus can take comfort in knowing that God's plan unfolds according to the word of His Son. And until that day – when he comes again - we need to keep our eyes fixed on our Lord, who is our strength and shield, our one true Lord.

Amen