

November 14, 2021
Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost / Proper 28

Meditation: "God of the Improbable"

Okay. Show of hands. How many people here thought at Christmas 2019 that in only three months' time the world would be in the grip of a global pandemic? How many here thought that when we left our sanctuaries in March of 2020 that it would be a year and a half before we returned to them? How many here thought that the church would spin on a dime and move to online worship almost overnight? How many here thought that you would find someone to be the chair of the board prior to last year's annual meeting? How many thought you would find a part-time minister, and quickly at that?

Hannah sat in the temple at Shiloh, praying fervently to God. She was barren. The only way a nomadic or semi-nomadic people could survive in a world of settled people who vastly outnumbered them was to bring lots of babies into the world. She had been unable to bring even one life into the world. In her culture, she was worthless, or worse. She consumed resources without providing new life. For many years she and Elkanah had tried to make children, and he had been successful with his other wife, Peninnah. It was her fault. She wanted nothing more than to bear a son to stop the relentless harassment poured out on her by Peninnah, and to discover her value as a mother. Oh, sure, Elkanah was kind and loving toward her, and told her that he loved her dearly, but without a child, she was worthless. She poured out her pain and sorrow in that prayer, and the priest, Eli, saw her lips moving, yet he heard no sound. He accused her of being drunk.

Peter stood at the edge of a grove of trees and looked to the west. There it stood, across the Kidron valley, the temple. He marveled at its beauty and magnificence. It shone out like a beacon from the top of the temple mount. Even in the late day sun, Peter could see the glow from the gold adorned east side of the temple that he was looking at. In the morning, he would have to get up early and watch the sun rise above mount Olivet. When it strikes the east side of the temple, surely the light would reflect directly on the very spot he now stood.

Earlier in the day, when he had been at the temple, he had felt in awe. The white marble columns, 40 feet tall. The ten gates to enter the temple, every one gilt in either silver or gold, except the Beautiful Gate. It had doors 45 feet tall made of Corinthian bronze. Then there was the enormous new court of the gentiles that Herod was almost finished enlarging. The blocks that the temple itself was constructed of; they were the size of the house he had lived in by the Sea of Galilee,

the size of a modern shipping container. They must have weighed 100 tons apiece. How had humans ever moved such large blocks?

The temple was the centre of Jerusalem. It was the centre of their nation. It was the centre of their life. It was the centre of their faith, and it had stood there for 1000 years, ever since Solomon built it, except for the years they had been in exile in Babylon. The Babylonians had torn down the first temple, the one that Solomon had built. When Cyrus came to power, he allowed the Israelites to return to Jerusalem to start the work of rebuilding the temple. But it wasn't until Darius had come to power that the money and materials and skilled tradesmen had been made available to truly rebuild the temple. Now Herod had been restoring it and working to enlarge the very temple mount itself. He had built retaining walls and filled in behind them so he could greatly add to the size of the court of the gentiles. He added colonnades, columns and stairwells. It had taken decades, and now the work was nearing completion. Such a magnificent structure. Surely it would be there for all of time. Peter worried about Jesus. If he kept saying things like the thing he had said today, people would think him a fool. He had said that not one stone would be left standing on another. How could such great stones ever be toppled? It was more than improbable. It was unthinkable.

Okay. Show of hands. How many here, if they had been one of Jesus' disciples would have believed that the temple would be toppled? How many here, if they had been Hannah, would have believed that she would have a child? And yet that is exactly what happened. In the year 70 CE the Romans toppled the temple, and the retaining walls that made possible the large court of the gentiles. Elkanah and his entourage returned home from worshipping at Shiloh, and he knew Hannah, and she conceived a son, Samuel. And we do find ourselves in a global pandemic. And we were out of our sanctuaries for over a year, and we stayed together as congregations despite being out of our sanctuaries. And the church did spin on a dime and moved to virtual worship. And we did find a leader for the board, and even a part-time minister. The improbable, even the highly improbable happens all the time.

I'm not ready to say that God was behind the toppling of the temple, but I'm sure that God was behind the rest of those things. God was surely behind the fulfillment of Hannah's prayer for a son. She named him Samuel, God has heard. And Hannah wasn't the only woman in the Bible to have an improbable conception and birth. Sarah was fully 90 years old and Abraham 100 when Isaac, laughter, was born. Jacob's wife, Rebekah, had been barren for many years before she gave birth to

Joseph. Elizabeth was...full of years...when she got pregnant with John the Baptist. And then there is Mary, mother of Jesus, who conceived and gave birth while still a virgin. God hears our prayers, and improbable things happen.

And now it is time, once again, for prayer and discerning. The nominating committees are looking for new leaders in our congregations. We need to pray for the nominating committees, yes, AND we need to be open to discerning who would be the best people to fill the openings that the nominating committee is working to fill, even if that improbable person might be us.

In thanksgiving, Hannah gave Samuel to God as a Nazirite, someone consecrated to the service of God. Improbably in those days, it was Samuel who succeeded Eli as priest, and not Eli's sons, Hophni and Phinehas. It was Samuel who consecrated Saul as the very first king of Israel, and then, improbably, consecrated David as Saul's successor, while Saul still sat on the throne. You see, with God, all things are possible, even the improbable things. So don't worry about the seemingly impossible or improbable, but pray and give thanks for the outcome, and trust in God, for the God we worship is the God of the improbable. Thanks be to God.