

Proper 28B
Peace, Seattle
November 18, 2018
1 Samuel 1:4-20, Mark 13:1-8

BIRTHPANGS

In the language of opera and film it's called a LEITMOTIF—a musical theme that recurs again and again, with a rhythm and melody connected to a particular person, idea, or emotion.

And when it's done right—think of the scores John Williams wrote for JAWS, ET, INDIANA JONES and STAR WARS—**when it's done right, all it takes is a few notes to tell us which character is making an entrance and what's at stake.**

For instance, who can stop her adrenaline from flowing or her pulse from racing when she hears the fear-inducing leitmotif of the great white shark in JAWS?

Within the pages of Scripture there are leitmotifs, too—themes that resound throughout the long saga of God's unfolding salvation story. And today one of those themes is before us, linking our first reading with the gospel.

We first hear this theme in Genesis when Sarah comes on the scene, and it repeats itself in subsequent generations—with Rebekah and then with Rachel.

It reverberates again in the book of Judges.¹ And this morning we hear it once more in the poignant, personal story of Hannah: God makes a way where there is no way.

As the Psalmist says:

“The LORD makes the woman of a childless house to be a joyful mother of children.”

But now we're getting ahead of ourselves...

Our story begins with a man named Elkanah and takes us inside the fraught interpersonal dynamics of his divided household, where one wife, Peninnah, has successfully borne him children while the other, Hannah, has not. And Hannah's sadness over this is palpable.

Now Elkanah isn't a bad guy—he loves Hannah, but feels powerless to help her.

And when he does try, his words fail miserably:

“Hannah,” he says at one point, “why do you weep? Am I not more to you than ten sons?”

One wonders whether it wouldn't have been better to say, “Are you not more to me than ten sons?”²

From this point forward, Elkanah fades into the background, while Hannah stays center stage. Refusing to allow her vulnerability to hold her back, she takes her grief to GOD at Shiloh, pouring her heart out, and in her pleading she makes a vow.

GIVE ME A BOY, LORD, AND I'LL GIVE HIM BACK TO YOU—I PROMISE!

Eli, the old priest in charge of Shiloh's holy shrine, mistakes Hannah's mumbling prayer for the act of a raving drunk, and he's ready to send her packing. But he relents when Hannah reveals the reason for and depth of her grief.

¹ See Judges, chapter 13, and the birth story of Samson.

² Kathryn Schifferdecker, *Working Preacher*, http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3857

GO IN PEACE, says Eli at last. AND THE GOD OF ISRAEL GRANT THE PETITION YOU HAVE MADE.

Though nothing has changed in her outward circumstances, Hannah knows that God has heard her prayer, and this makes all the difference. In due time Eli's blessing is fulfilled by the birth of Samuel, but the healing of her sorrow begins now, with the assurance that God has heard her prayer.³

Now, one caution about the story and one takeaway.

First the caution: God is not the author of Hannah's barrenness! [repeat]

The narrator of the story may say it—and in ancient times it was a standard go-to explanation—but we know better. God is not the author of barrenness.

YET, here's the thing: the God who met all these generations of women in their grief—Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and nameless others—this God does indeed show herself to be a God who makes a way where there is no way. And in Hannah we have yet another example of that very thing.

So Scripture continues building on the leitmotiv that began in Genesis, taking us, with Hannah, from a place of emptiness to a place of fullness; from a place of barrenness to the pulsing labor of a new creation.

Here's the takeaway: When hopes are dim and dreams deferred, people of faith—BE ALERT, BE AWARE! For God is afoot in the world—not distant, nor remote. And when God is afoot the unexpected happens! When God is afoot off-script plots twists emerge! When God is afoot things too good to be true come to pass—and a future built not on human agency but God's agency readies itself to be born.

That's the link to this morning's gospel.

The whole of chapter thirteen in Mark is a call to wake up, look around and notice what's taking place. At the time of Jesus the massive project of restoring the Temple, begun by Herod the Great the century before, was finally finished, and it was impressive.

- Stones weighing upwards of 500 tons each had been meticulously cut and fit together, restoring the Temple walls to a height not seen since Solomon's reign 9 centuries earlier.
- The great stone pavement surrounding the Temple proper had been expanded to an area the size of 24 soccer fields.
- The upper roof of the Temple was covered with thick gold plating, causing those who approached the city to compare the brightness of its reflection to the rising sun.

Its completion seemed to signal a new beginning. No wonder the disciples were awe struck! LOOK TEACHER, WHAT LARGE STONES AND WHAT LARGE BUILDINGS! they tell him.

But Jesus has been challenging the Temple's religious guardians and calling the whole system into question. He wants his disciples to look beyond the old order to the new thing that God is about to accomplish. And so he spends his last days offering a deep critique of a system that, for all intents and purposes, is broken.

SEE ALL THIS? he tells them. THE DAY IS NEAR WHEN IT ALL WILL COME CRASHING DOWN.

³ Ibid.

We've all experienced beginnings and endings in our lives, and the questions prompted by them. Some of those experiences have been joyful, some wrenching; some hope-filled, some tearful.

I think of the people in Paradise, California, and Thousand Oaks who've lost everything dear to them in the recent wildfires. Who look at the devastation and wonder how they can possibly begin again.

The difficult thing about endings and beginnings is that they require us to LET GO OF WHAT HAS BEEN.

A couple with a newborn baby that tries to cling to the identity and social life they knew before their child was born, can't be fully engaged in the present task of parenting.

Families, congregations—even nations—that can't release their former glory—whether real or imagined—cannot move forward.

THE DAY IS COMING, says Jesus, WHEN THE WORLD AS WE KNOW IT, WILL BE NO MORE. BUT DON'T THINK OF THIS AS THE END. THINK OF IT INSTEAD AS BIRTH PANGS.

FOR GOD, LIKE A MIDWIFE, IS COAXING YOU TO PUT YOUR TRUST IN THE FUTURE SHE IS BRINGING TO BIRTH.

And so the leitmotif returns.

As Jesus sits on the Mount of Olives, opposite the Temple, and tells his disciples what lies ahead, he doesn't mince words. He can't avoid the difficult topic so central to his identity and ministry:

- His call to be a suffering servant; to go the distance to the cross so that the world could receive a new beginning.

When we look into the future, we must look with the same candor and boldness.

Not with an attitude that says ALL OUR HOPES WILL BE SATISFIED, or with a naiveté that suggests endings can be postponed or ignored; but with a sure confidence that we who have been buried with Christ in baptismal waters will emerge with him through the womb of rebirth.

There will be new beginning! Even if we must wait, like Hannah, to see what shape that beginning will take.

Such a beginning may feel like death, as, to a newborn, birth must feel like the end.

And it may mean death—as it will and does for us all.

But finally all these deaths, whatever their form, are the birth pangs of God's new creation.

So, keep on watching, keep on trusting, keep on believing that God will accompany you, accompany us, shaping our endings as he has promised, into new beginnings. Amen.