

Child of Promise

By: Douglas Forrester

Crozet United Methodist Church

First Sunday of Christmas - December 27, 2009

1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26

Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy wearing a linen ephod. His mother used to make for him a little robe and take it to him each year, when she went up with her husband to offer the yearly sacrifice. Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, "May the Lord repay you with children by this woman for the gift that she made to the Lord"; and then they would return to their home. Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people.

If you have every felt hopeless, then the book of 1 Samuel is for you. If you have ever felt like you were in the midst of a situation where nothing good could possibly ever happen again, then the book of 1 Samuel is for you. If you have ever in your life felt as though you were trapped; hemmed in on all sides by impossible situations and corrupt people, and the dark clouds of doom are surrounding you to a point where you could just lay down and *die*, or if you are just having a terrible, horrible, no good, very bad day, then the book of 1 Samuel is for you, because in the book of 1 Samuel, that is exactly how things are, even before the first chapter has begun.

The world of 1 Samuel was a bad place to be.

Our story begins in chapter 1 with Hannah. Hannah is one of two wives of Elkanah. By all accounts, Elkanah is a loving, trusting, doting husband to both of his wives, especially Hannah, who is childless and who is constantly harassed for it by his other wife Penninah who has children. Elkanah would give double portions of the yearly offering to Hannah. He loved her so much, and hurt for her so much, that he tried to be "more than ten sons to her," but he couldn't, and Hannah suffered, and Hannah wept, and Hannah could neither eat nor drink.

Then, there was the problem of the Philistines. The Philistines were enemies of Israel who were just over the border, planning to attack Israel, and who would kill thousands of Israelites in the process of humiliating the nation of Israel by stealing the Ark of the Covenant.

However, the book of 1 Samuel does not get to that story until chapter four, because first it has to deal with an even more dangerous problem, and internal matter caused by a corrupt priesthood. One of the main characters in the early chapters of 1 Samuel is the priest Eli, whose sons are all corrupting the religious practices in the town of Shiloh, where they do things like stealing part of the offering reserved for God and having carnal knowledge of women who served at the entrance of the tabernacle.

Now you may ask, how were the priests who were the sons of Eli allowed to get away with such behavior, and the answer is this: there was an absence of real leadership in Israel during this time. Israel was going through a time of transition during this period, a transition away from rule by judges towards a rule by prophets and kings. Indeed, there was something of a power vacuum at this time, however, God is none too pleased with the fact that not even Eli can straighten out the corrupt and evil acts of his own sons.

Like I said before, it was a bad place to be. So bad, that by all accounts, this was an impossible situation.

Which brings me to this morning's text. In the midst of all of this bad news, something happens that is truly good. The problem is that, from a great enough distance, it seems both good, yet small and insignificant. Hannah miraculously has a son named Samuel who, as she promised God she would, she gives to God to serve in the temple of the Lord, which Samuel does, starting when he is a toddler, working with the Priest Eli.

In this morning's text, we learn that Samuel is now a boy, wearing a linen ephod, which is an apron, the garment of a priest. Hannah and Elkanah would make their yearly sacrifice and be blessed by Eli, and we learn that as Samuel grows in height, he is also growing in wisdom, in favor with God, and with the people of Israel.

It is a wonderful story; because we are in the midst of the Christmas season, and because we know how God works in strange, mysterious, and often unexpected people and ways, we can see this story working out: Hannah has had a child, God will deal with the house of Eli, and will raise a great prophet and leader, not from the corrupt children of Eli, but from this young boy who is growing in wisdom and stature in the eyes of the people and of God; and God will not be humiliated, so we know that those Philistines who steal the Ark of the Covenant will not be able to hold onto it for long.

Our God indeed works in strange, mysterious, and unlikely ways. God uses Abraham and Sarah, a childless couple in their late nineties to create a nation. God uses Moses, a man with a speech impediment to tell Pharaoh to let God's people out of slavery in Egypt. God uses Gideon, the self-described weakest member of the weakest family of the weakest clan to defeat the Midianites. God uses a shepherd boy named David to conquer the giant Goliath. God brings a valley of dry bones back to life as an army before the eyes of Ezekiel, and we know from just a couple of nights ago that God even becomes human in the person of the child of a carpenter and an unwed mother, a child born in a stable and placed in a feed trough for a crib as a means by which God was going to conquer the world.

When I was in my twenties, I was visiting my parents and my mother told me I should check out a book she had just finished. It was by a heretofore unknown author named John Grisham, and the title of the book was called *The Firm*. She gave me her copy and I began reading it before bed, and the next thing I knew, the sun was coming up, and I still kept reading.

I was completely convinced that were I to close that book, something would happen, and I would miss it. At sunrise, I was at a point in the story when the protagonist was being hunted by members of his company, the federal government, and the mafia, and he, for various reasons, had

to escape them all. He was trying to drive from hotel to hotel, desperately attempting to elude capture, despite the fact that there were eyes searching for him *everywhere*.

Now, if you have read many of Grisham's legal thrillers, you know that things have a way of working themselves out, sometimes even with people relaxing on the beach with millions hidden in a Swiss bank account, but on the night I was reading that story, you never could have convinced me that there was any way that story was going to have a happy ending.

I have been the same way in my own relationship with God, and I suspect that you may have as well. The writer Anne Lamotte says that there are really only two prayers. Both are genuine and honest, and both are heard and honored by God. The first is "Help me, help me, help me," and the other is "Thank you, thank you, thank you." I have lost count of how many times the last "thank you" has just crossed my lips, when I, in the fear and doubt that comes from being all too human, pray again "Help me, help me, help me,"

Yet is it not true that it is in those "Help me" moments that God's finest work is done?

There was once a pastor in a town where the rain fell and fell, until the whole town was threatened with flooding. There was a call to evacuate the town, but the pastor refused to leave, reasoning that he had prayed for God's deliverance for the whole town, and if he evacuated, it would be seen as a lack of faith. So, he stayed at church and continued to pray until the water was at the top of the church steps. A small boat came by, and a voice cried out, "Swim out to us, Pastor! We will take you to higher ground!"

The pastor continued to pray, and the rain continued to fall, until the water was approaching the roof of the church. Another boat came by, the rescuer pleading for the pastor to come to safety, but the pastor, standing on the roof, proclaimed that he had prayed to God, and that he had faith that God would save him.

And the pastor continued to pray, and the rain continued to fall, and finally, the pastor was clinging to the cross on the top of the steeple, when a helicopter flew by, lowered a cable with a rescue basket attached, and a voice from a megaphone cried out “Get in! We will take you to safety!”

And through the wind from the rotors and the noise of the pouring rain, the voice came back, “I am a servant of the Lord God Almighty. I have prayed. I know God will deliver me from this flood!”

The water continued to rise, there were no more chances for rescue, and the pastor died.

In heaven, the pastor asked God, “How could you forsake me like that? I called on your name. I prayed for your deliverance, and you *ignored* me. How could you not rescue me, Lord?”

To which the Lord replied, “What did you want? I sent you two boats and a helicopter!”

In an age that equated the ability to bear children, particularly sons, with God’s favor; in an age that often equated military might as a sign of God’s favor; in an age where corruption and ineffective leadership abounded, God used the faith that one woman had that God could do the impossible to set wheels in motion that would change the history of a nation, and help write the word of God. When human sinfulness had left that nation vulnerable to attack by their enemies such that it appeared that there was no victory in sight, and when it seemed like there was no one left who could be a model of faith and a paragon of leadership for the people; God used the life and witness of a little boy to change history.

There are times when we feel cornered, lost, without hope, feeling like we are in the midst of an impossible situation or in a situation where we are *surrounded* on each side by impossible situations, and we pray and pray for God to act in a bold and mighty way, when we pray “Help me, help me, help me,” and then we cast our eyes upon the heavens, searching for

signs that will shake the foundations of the earth, and we remember, that this is when God's best work is done, but the way God writes the story, the actors who play the heroes are seldom the ones we expect.

There are people like you and me. Thanks be to God.

Gloria In Excelsis Deo.