

Something is About to Happen

I Samuel 2:1-10; Mark 13:1-8

Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, (Nov. 17) 2024

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Early in Gail Godwin's 1988 novel, *The Finishing School*, the student/narrator remembers a conversation with a teacher and friend: "*There are two kinds of people,*" she once decreed to me emphatically. "*One kind, you can tell just by looking at them at what point they congealed into their final selves. It might be a very nice self, but you know you can expect no more surprises from it. Whereas, the other kind keep moving, changing. With these people, you can never say, 'X stops here,' or, 'Now I know all there is to know about Y.' That doesn't mean they're unstable. Ah, no, far from it. They are fluid. They keep moving forward and making new trysts with life, and the motion of it keeps them young. In my opinion, they are the only people who are still alive. You must be constantly on your guard, Justin, against congealing* (p. 4).

Our Scripture readings this morning are about resisting congealing. We're not yet congealed; we're not locked in. Our personal lives are not locked in. Our church is not locked in. And our society and our world are not locked in. Instead of becoming congealed, we are called by God to expect surprises. We are called to be fluid and flexible so we can participate in God's surprises. Something is about to happen, and we have no idea what it might be.

I'm warning you. Not knowing what might happen is scary, and we do not like to be afraid. Being congealed has a lot going for it: it is reliable, we know what to expect because it is like the past, or at least the past we remember, we don't have to work as hard or think as hard. To be congealed is about being in control.

And there are a lot of people in this world who want control. They like being congealed.

But if we want the open future God calls us to, we have to let go of being in control.

Hannah in I Samuel 1 and 2 is a woman locked in a society full of brutality and moral chaos. Go back and read the last four chapters of the Book of Judges to get an idea of Hannah's context. There is bitterness and suspicion. People are disappointed and they've been so disappointed for so long that they are addicted to it. They no longer trust God to bring about a new future.

It reminds me of a line from Victoria Barnett, the eminent Holocaust historian and authority on churches in Nazi Germany. She commented on the obliviousness of Christians in Germany about Hitler in the early and mid-1930's, explaining that recovering Germany's lost honor and self-perceived greatness after WWI motivated everyday Germans to support Hitler. Barnett said, "It blinded them to the fact despair, not hope, had enabled Hitler's rise to power" (*For the Soul of the People*, p. 28).

Israel at the end of Judges and the beginning of I Samuel is blinded by despair, unable to see or even look for the hope that comes from God.

Hannah, on the other hand is all about hope, even though by the standards of her day, she should be without hope. You see, she was barren, unable to have children. And in that day and time, unable to have children meant no heirs, and no heirs, meant no future, and no future meant no hope. Hannah is bereft, and she is marginalized. Other women whisper behind her back, point to her as they pass her on the street. Yet, in her grief, she prays and continues to pray because she still

trusts that God will make a way out of no way. Hannah believes that with God, something is about to happen.

In our story, in chapter 1, she calls out to God, pours out her heart and desire for a child, God hears her, and she becomes pregnant. In chapter 2 Hannah sings:

My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. There is no Holy One like the LORD...there is no Rock like our God...the bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil...The LORD...raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world.

Hannah takes what God is doing in her and sees the deepest of truths: if God has rescued me from barrenness, then anything is possible. Might and power will no longer count for everything. The rich will be brought low. The hungry will have plenty to eat. Change is coming. We are on a precipice, slightly leaning forward, toes over the edge, wind blowing in our faces – something is about to happen.

When I first came here, many years ago, long-time church member Steve Smith took me aside. By my time, Steve was a senior political science professor at SFA, and a loyal but cantankerous church member. Steve remembered when he was young, and Austin Heights was young, it was in the 70's and we had a church-wide retreat. One of the activities was for everyone to go around a big circle answering the question: Why come to church? Or why stay in church?

Steve said, "I told them, I come to Austin Heights because every Sunday I feel like something is about to happen." He went on to tell me, "And I still get that

feeling. I can't always put my finger on it, but I still feel like something is about to happen."

Back to Hannah. Fast-forward nine centuries or so after Hannah's story to another young woman, who Luke tells us "was great with child" which means she was very, very pregnant, whose ankles were surprisingly swollen, whose life was graciously chosen, and whose voice sang a similar song:

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name...He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:46-53, selections)

Mary was singing this song at the hinge of history, something for the ages was about to happen. She was about to give birth to Jesus, whom we confess as the Christ. Now, we don't know if Mary ever sang this song again, but sometimes I've wondered if she might have sung this as a lullaby. Cradling her son, watching him twitch in his sleep, whispering to herself as much as to him, "Something is about to happen."

Fast-forward thirty years or so to our strange reading from Mark. That baby is now a man, gathered with his fellow travelers, days before his death. Jesus and his disciples are sitting outside of the majestic Temple, with all the stability and greatness it represents. All week they had been in and out, teaching, debating with the religious leaders, watching, and learning. Sitting there, Jesus says to the gawking disciples, "Do you see these great buildings? There will not be one stone

left upon another that will not be toppled” (Mk 13:2). The disciples respond with shock and skepticism, “What are you talking about? When? What signs do we have that it will happen? How will we know?” Jesus then delivers his last and longest sermon in Mark.

“This massive and impressive building is going to come to an end. Furthermore, be careful because you’re going to hear all sorts of things. All kinds of people will try to lead you astray and convince you that they are the true Messiah – fake preachers, loud politicians trying to seize power. They will try to convince you they really know the answers. They will attempt to convince you that they can lead Jerusalem back to greatness. But I’m telling you something is about to happen. (Mk. 13:6-8).

Let me be clear with you. Jesus is NOT saying God is causing all this. What Jesus is saying, like his mother before him, and like Hannah nine centuries before, is that something important is about to happen because of God. Changes for justice, changes for hope, healing, and right relationships with people and with all Creation, but those who want to hold onto the old power systems of racism, hatred, and violence, in despair want to go back to the congealed, old ways of doing things, are on a collision course with God’s newness which is coming.

Jesus’s mother had taught him well. He remembered her song. And maybe he remembered Hannah’s song. And get this, he ends our reading this morning with this, “This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” Something is about to happen.

We hear these words from Jesus being about our future. But they’re really about our present. Our precarious present. Things we want to hold on to are

changing. Things are not stable. People are scared and want to go back to old, congealed ways. Studies show that most people come to church looking for stability and an antidote to precariousness, just like they went to the Temple twenty centuries ago. So, we build impressive buildings that look older than they are, and we bolt down the pews.

And Jesus says, this is just the birth pangs of something new breaking into our old world. Something is about to happen.

Chris Graham, long-time pastor and good friend of mine, who died about a dozen years ago from ALS, wrote poignantly when he only had weeks to live, “Dying isn’t hard. What’s hard is relinquishing” (quoted in Walter Brueggemann, *Reality, Grief, Hope: Three Urgent Prophetic Tasks*, p. 44).

Jesus calls us to face the reality of relinquishment. Indeed, so much of the Bible is a call to face reality, especially the reality of relinquishment. The Powers and Systems of Domination do not want to face reality and certainly do not want us to face it. And they will fight and destroy the Earth to hold onto their congealed reality.

John says, “The light shines in darkness and the darkness did not overcome it (John 1:5). He does not say the darkness won’t try.

Therefore, we do not give up. We are people of hope, not despair. I urge you to remember that relinquishing is part of learning. To learn new habits means giving up some old ones. Reading books, getting an education also implies changing our minds, giving up old ideas. Learning to give up some old views, old assumptions, and old points of view frees us up to the new.

Every move toward God also involves relinquishment. To invite God into our lives also means making room for God. It means giving up some things that are in the way of God, obstacles to God, and obstacles to growing in the love of God. It means giving up becoming congealed and giving up our control. We relinquish, let go of what is temporary and passing away, so we can open our lives to God. And – so we can participate with God in what is going to happen next. With God we have to learn to be fluid.

Jesus Christ is the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. Some things must end so we can receive the new in Christ. Something is about to happen. Birth pangs.

It was no coincidence that both Mary and Hannah were pregnant when they believed enough to sing their songs. They remind us “that help that is on the way” and here is the deal – we are part of the help. This is like the work of a woman laboring to bring new life into the world. We are part of the process of the new birth coming. We participate. It will exhaust us. It will scare us. We may say we want it to stop. It will hurt like hell. It will make us sweat and cry. It will require more of ourselves than we have ever given. It demands change. It will feel impossible. But oh, the beauty and joy on the other side...

So, we take a deep breath and join in. We take a deep breath and push!

Something is about to happen!

New Testament scholar Tom Long, says he once taught a confirmation class to a small group of three girls. In one of the sessions, he was teaching them about the seasons of the church year and why we observe them – Advent is about preparation and coming, Christmas is the coming and Incarnation of Christ, Lent is

prayerful examining of our lives and walking with Jesus toward the Cross, Easter is resurrection, and then Pentecost fifty days later.

Tom said he asked the girls if they knew what Pentecost was and since none of them knew, he explained, that “Pentecost was when the church was sitting in a group praying and the Holy Spirit landed on them like tongues of fire on their heads. Then they boldly spoke the good news of Christ in all the languages of the world.” Two of the girls took this information in stride, but the third looked astonished, her eyes wide. She said, “Gosh, Reverend Long, I must have been absent that Sunday.” Tom comments, “The beauty of that moment was not that she misunderstood about Pentecost, but that she understood about the Church. In her mind, there was the possibility that the event of Pentecost could have happened even in our Sunday service” (Thomas G. Long, *Something is About to Happen: Sermons for Advent and Christmas*, p. 14-15).

And I still get that feeling. I can’t always put my finger on it, but I still feel like something is about to happen.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. One True God, Mother of us all. Amen.