

The Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost
November 15, 2015
Proper 28, Year B, RCL

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1 Samuel 1:4-20
1 Samuel 2:1-10
Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25
Mark 13:1-8

Jesus said, "When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed. . . This is but the beginning of the birth pangs." In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So here we are in the middle of our capital campaign to raise almost a million dollars to repair and enhance this stone building. It is pretty ironic to hear Jesus say, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." It doesn't sound much like good news to me! Of course, Jesus was talking about the Temple in Jerusalem, and he was right. Forty years later the Romans did destroy the Temple.

Actually both the reading from the Hebrew scriptures and from the Gospel are full of ironies and paradoxes.

In the Gospel, the disciples are visiting the temple, and for some of the disciples it must be the first time. They are awed by the size of the place. Jesus says in effect, "Don't be too impressed; even this place is not eternal." Then in private, the disciples who know Jesus the best ask him when the end will come. Jesus does not answer that question, but warns them that many false messiahs will come. And wars and famines. It all sounds very grim and foreboding. Then Jesus closes by saying these are the beginning of the birth pangs. This is what leads to a birth. There is something new coming, a new life, a new world. How often do we see calamity or a loss as an ending, and yet it turns out to be the prologue to a new beginning? As is said of Easter, the

message is that the worst thing is never the last thing. There is always something new. Even death is not the end.

Now consider the story of the birth of Samuel. Hannah is one of two wives of a wealthy man. The other wife has had babies, but Hannah is barren. The other wife taunts Hannah about her infertility. Hannah prays for a baby, and promises that if God gives her a son, she will give the son back to God. One might ask, what the point of that is. Why ask for a baby that you are willing to give a way? Still God answers her prayer, and she keeps her promise. Then she has other children as well. This change in Hannah's status from infertile to fruitful, elicits from her a song of thanksgiving, even of triumph. In the Song of Hannah, which we read instead of the usual Psalm, we hear the theme of reversals:

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 barren has borne seven,
 but she who has many children is forlorn.
 The LORD kills and brings to life;
 he brings down to Sheol and raises up.
 The LORD makes poor and makes rich;
 he brings low, he also exalts.
 He raises up the poor from the dust.

There can be little doubt that the Song of Mary or the Magnificat is modeled on this song of Hannah. And Mary's son is destined to serve God in spectacular ways, just as did Samuel.

Our God is a god of reversal and new starts, and happy surprises. Whatever may come to us that feels like death or disaster, God turns into a new birth, a gate to a new garden, or the dawn of a new day. This war or famine will be the end of us, and it will bring a new birth. My barrenness will end when I am prepared to give my offspring to God. I will become rich when I learn to give away what I have. I will be experience love when I love the unlovable. I will know peace when I learn to forgive those who have made war on me. I am strong in God, when I acknowledge my weakness on my own. God will help us restore and improve this beautiful building as we dedicate it to the service of all of Litchfield.

When we hear of terrorists in Paris and rumors of violence all over the globe, we do not fear, for God has some new thing coming. At the very least, it is an invitation for us to love more fiercely. I finally figured out why the window of St. Michael in the chapel has no serpent under his feet. Instead, our Michael stands guard over the entire earth protecting us. The Enemy would like us to retreat from ourselves and give up on love and hope and faith in the face of the news from around the world.

Andrew McCall Smith closes one of his 44 Scotland Street novels with this reflection on love. Where he says "Scotland" feel free to hear "America" or "The United States":

When I was a boy, not yesterday of course,
 When life, I thought, was a whole lot
 More certain than it is today,
 I made a list of those I thought
 Liked me as much as I liked them –
 For at that age we're loved
 By just about everybody
 Whom we care to love; how different
 It is in later years, when affection

Has no guarantee of reciprocation,
When we may spend so very long
Yearning for one who cannot
Love us back, or cares not to,
Or who lives somewhere else
And has forgotten our address
And the way we looked or spoke.

The remarkable thing about love
Is that it is freely available,
Is as plentiful as oxygen,
Is as joyous as a burn in spate,
And need never run out.
And yet, for all its plenitude,
We ration it so strictly and forget
Its curative properties, its subtle
Ability to make the soul-injured
Whole again, to make the lonely
Somehow assured that their solitude
Will not last forever; its promise
That if we open our heart
It is joy and resolution
That will march in triumphant
Through the gates we create.

When I look at Scotland,
At this country that possesses me,
I wonder what work love
Has still to do; and find the answer
Closer at hand than I thought –
In the images of contempt and disdain,

That are still there, as stubborn
As human imperfections can be;
In the coldness of heart
That sees nothing wrong
In indifference to want, in dislike
Of those who are different,
In the cutting, dismissive
Turn of phrase, in the sneer.

Love is not there, in all those places,
But it will be; love cannot solve
Every human problem, but it makes
A start on a solution; love
Is the only compass-point
We need to learn; we need not
Be clever to know it, nor endowed
With unusual vision, love
Comes free, at least in those forms
Worth having, lasts as long
As anything human may last.

May Scotland, when it looks
Into its heart tomorrow
If not today, see the fingerprints
Of love, its signature, its presence,
Its promise of healing.

The End

Or Jesus would say, "The Beginning."

