

Sermon: "Clothe Yourselves With Love"

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Alison Li

Well, here we are again it seems. We are almost two years into a global pandemic now, and once again many carefully-laid plans are in disarray. Another Christmas is being spent in ways we may not have anticipated. Disappointment, despair, and sheer exhaustion are all too real for too many people.

This week, I've been heartened by the words of C.S. Lewis who wrote: "The great thing, if one can, is to stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions of one's 'own,' or 'real' life. The truth is of course that what one calls the interruptions are precisely one's real life -- the life God is sending one day by day." So let us ask, what is the life that God is sending us today? And how has God outfitted us to meet this life?

Our Advent theme invites us today to "dare to imagine God's robe." Clothing can have such deep significance. It can be a means of creative expression, a way of signifying status and occupation. It can represent culture and heritage. For transgender people, being able to wear appropriate clothing can bring a profound feeling of rightness.

Today's scripture passage from 1 Samuel tells us that as a boy, Samuel ministered before the Lord, wearing a linen ephod. The ephod was a sacred vestment representing the special office of the priest. It signified those who had a special relationship with God and it was worn especially in times of seeking divine guidance.

Who is this little boy, Samuel, and why is he able to wear this special priestly garment? In the chapters that come before these passages, we learn of Samuel's origins. Samuel's story happens during one of the low points in Israel's history when the people of Israel have fallen into idolatry and moral chaos. You may have noticed that our reading today is 1 Samuel chapter 2 verse 18-20, 26. Well, the verses we skipped over tell a sorry tale of the sons of the priest Eli who have fallen into immoral behaviour. They are scoundrels. Even their father Eli finds it increasingly difficult to hear and understand the will of God.

The actions of one person are crucial in interrupting this downward trajectory. That person is Hannah, Samuel's mother. Her faithfulness will become the opening through which God acts in the world.

Hannah is one of two wives to a man named Elkanah. One wife, Peninnah has many sons and daughters. Hannah has none. Every year, Elkanah travels to Shiloh to worship and make sacrifice to God. As was the custom, he shares the portions of the sacrificial meat with Peninnah and her children, but he gives a double portion to Hannah because of his love for her. This only makes Hannah sadder and she refuses to eat. Peninnah constantly taunts Hannah because she had been unable to have children. Elkanah tries to comfort Hannah saying, "Why do you weep?...why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" He loves her deeply but he doesn't fully understand her pain. Even her husband's love cannot take away Hannah's grief nor the social stigma of not having children.

During this Christmas season, we've had many invitations to reflect on unexpected births. Hannah's story echoes those of Sarah, Rebekah, and Rachel before her, women who for many years were also unable to have children. But Hannah is unlike these other women. She doesn't engage in subterfuge and competition with her co-wife. She doesn't demean her rival. She doesn't take matters into her own hands by arranging for a handmaid to bear children on her behalf. She doesn't lay the blame on her husband and demand that he do something. Instead, she takes her anguish directly to God.

In the depths of her distress and longing, she prays fervently but silently at the temple. The priest, Eli, is unable to recognize her actions as those of a devout person and accuses her of being drunk. She replies to him with dignity and forthrightness: "Not so, my lord," she says. "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord...I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."

Hannah makes a vow that if God will give her a son, she will give this son to God for all the days of his life, and that no razor will touch his head, which is a sign that he is to be consecrated to God. This is remarkable. Unlike Mary a thousand years later, who will simply be told by God that she will bear a child, or Sarah or Elizabeth whose husbands are given the news by God, Hannah here is the one who acts. She is the one who makes her supplication directly to God and it is she who makes a solemn vow to express her gratitude by offering the very best she has.

Eli acknowledges her faithfulness, saying, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him." Hannah leaves and is able to eat again. Her face is no longer downcast. She has left her cares in the hand of God.

In time, God grants her prayer and she gives birth to a son. It is she, not her husband, who names him Samuel meaning that God has heard her prayer. The next time her husband and the rest of the family go up to make their annual sacrifice, she is the one who sets the terms of her travel. She tells her husband that she will not go up with the family, but will instead stay home to nurse her son. After the boy is weaned, she will present him to God to live at the temple always. Again, it is noteworthy that it is a woman who has made an oath to consecrate the life of her son to God and that her husband is committed to upholding her vow.

Finally, when Samuel is weaned, probably when he is about three years old, Hannah takes him, along with a three-year-old bull and quantities of flour and wine to sacrifice, to the house of God at Shiloh. She presents the sacrifices and she presents Samuel to live and minister before the Lord under Eli.

One can only imagine the anguish of Hannah at this moment as she hands over her much loved and long-awaited young child to serve in the temple forever. The author of 1 Samuel does not tell us about her sorrow, but instead gives us Hannah's prayer which will be the model for Mary's song of praise, the Magnificat: "My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high." Hannah rejoices in God who has the power to raise the lowly and humble the proud. Her's is a bold, prophetic statement that throws open a new phase of repentance and renewed faith for Israel. The private grief and strong faith of one woman hold the seed to social and political transformation in her day, and foreshadows God's greater plan to come.

Our only hint of Hannah's sense of loss comes in the brief passage that we heard today in which we learn that each year, she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice and that she brought a little robe she had made for Samuel. This little robe would probably be a simple knee-length sleeveless garment that would have been worn under the priestly ephod. I find this passage incredibly poignant. I imagine Hannah making the small tunic each year. She pours her love for her child into every stitch. She takes a year's worth of kisses, tears and laughter, stories, shared meals, and simple everyday joys, and bundles them into creating this single article of clothing which she hopes will convey her love to her son. As she makes the robe,

she has to consider how much bigger Samuel will have become since the last time she saw him. And she has to take into account how much he might grow in the year to come. Her love, her tears, and her sacrifice are threaded through the garment.

We learn that Samuel grows in stature and favour with God. Because he has been consecrated for life, he receives the special gift of prophecy. He is able to hear God's word. He calls Israel to repentance and renewed dedication to God. He becomes God's representative guiding Israel through a crucial transition in its history, from rule under the judges to kings, and it will be Samuel who will anoint Saul and David, Israel's first two kings.

In our second scripture reading for today, we learn that in Paul's letter he bids the Colossians to, "clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience," and, "above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. " As we leave 2021 behind and look forward to 2022, I invite you to dare to imagine the robe that your Heavenly parent has prepared for you. What characteristics and preoccupations have you outgrown? What traits or priorities might have worked well at one time but now need to be left behind? Where does God want you to grow in the coming year? And what does rightness of clothing look like for you?

The life that God is sending us today may not be what we had envisioned for ourselves. Hannah's life was probably not what she would have wanted for herself either. Let us remember her example of faithfulness and devotion, and most of all, her wisdom and trust in taking her cares directly to God.

SCRIPTURE

1 Samuel 2

18 Samuel was ministering before the Lord, a boy wearing a linen ephod. 19 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. 20 Then Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, and say, "May the Lord repay[a] you with children by this woman for the gift that she made to[b] the Lord"; and then they would return to their home.

26 Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people.

Colossians 3:12-17

12 As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. 13 Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. 14 Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. 15 And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. 16 Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. 17 And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

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