

“Warning: May Cause New Life!”

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Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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1 Samuel 1:4-20

Mark 13:1-8

“Hannah, Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Aren’t I worth more than 10 sons to you?”

If any of you find yourself in a situation where your spouse is having trouble conceiving a child, please put this at the top of the list of things *not* to say.

Hannah is part of a sisterhood of women in the Bible who for various reasons have trouble creating new life. When I was having trouble getting pregnant in the years before I had Kai, I was part of an imaginary support group of women, all from the Bible, who also had yearned for a child that did not come. These were women such as Sarah, who laughed when God told her and Abraham that Sarah would conceive at a very old age. Sarah reminded me to laugh in the midst of disappointment and stress. There was also Tamar, who let’s just say was *innovative* in how she ended up getting pregnant after her first two husbands died. Tamar helped me navigate the overwhelming fertility industry. I talked to and prayed with these women regularly. Hannah especially would pray with and for me, her lips moving without any speech.

When the priest Eli saw Hannah doing this in the temple, he thought she was drunk. Strange behaviors in church sometimes point to a deep-felt need. We all come to church bringing our deepest desires, some of us holding them so deep that no one but God will ever know what we hope will be engaged during our time of worship.

I wish I could tell you that if you pray hard enough, and you offer the best of your gifts before God, then God will reward you with just what you want, whether that is wealth, or health, or even happy news about a pregnancy, like Hannah got. This is what I call the “Spiritual ATM” version of faith: if I put in the right code of faithfulness, if I pray, give my donations to church, and try to live a good life, then God will reward me with prosperity. Sometimes this sort of blessing happens! However, I am going to tell you a funny thing for a pastor to say on Stewardship Sunday: God as spiritual ATM is not the kind of faith God asks of us.

It is true that I believe in the power of prayer. I value it, because it opens a channel where we can connect with God, and possibly start to see the world the way God sees it. Prayer can even re-orient our bodies; some studies show that prayer can actually alter the cells in our bodies, changing our physiology. Dr. Andrew Newberg at Thomas Jefferson Hospital has been studying the power of prayer for over 20 years. He says that because the brain controls basic body functions like heart rate, blood pressure, and the immune system, “there’s evidence to show that by doing these practices [of prayer], you can cause a lot of different changes all the way throughout the body, which could have a healing effect.”<sup>1</sup> Soren Kierkegaard wrote, “The function of prayer is not to change God, but rather to change the nature of one who prays.”

I even think that sometimes, prayer might tip the scales in favor of God’s intervention in the world. I suspect that sometimes, prayer can even change God. But to say that God always rewards the prayers of the faithful... well, it makes a mockery of real suffering in the world. Some of you have been like Hannah, and desperately wanted a child. But despite your prayers, that desired child did not come. Some of you have prayed intensely for healing that never came. As I survey from afar the damage done by the awful fires that burned through California last week and continue to smolder, as I pray for victims of this disaster, I know that the

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<sup>1</sup> “Power of Prayer: What Happens to Your Brain When You Pray?” on *NBC.com*, Dec. 23, 2014

loss of life and the destruction of entire communities was not a sign of God's abandonment of these people and places. To see our successes as a sign of God being with us, and our losses as a sign that God is not on our side, misrepresents who God is. Indeed, it is *in* the midst of these losses that I am convinced God is actively at work, even in California, where God's Spirit is calling forth resurrection from these ashes even as Jesus Christ kneels beside survivors weeping with them over their loss.

Years ago when I had traveled for the first time to The Philippines with Chris, I used my bank card to get Philippine Pisos out of the ATM. As soon as I started to hear the machine shuffling the cash, I reached my hand into the dispenser to grab what was about to come out. But when the first leaf of paper money hit my hand, the dispenser grabbed all that cash and swallowed it back into the machine! I was so mad-- I felt entitled to my money, but it just disappeared! I spent a few minutes trying to chase that money down in a foreign bank system where I did not speak the language, but quickly became discouraged and gave up.

We are heading into Thanksgiving, and it is easy to feel grateful when we feel we are getting the blessings we think we deserve-- especially when we have such visual examples of deep loss, like those suffering in California, to compare our comfort and safety to. But the gospel today challenges us to find our gratitude in things more eternal, things that cannot even be destroyed by a fire.

Mark 13 warns of destructions that will happen: in the Temple, all stones will be thrown down; we talked last week about how the destruction of the Second Jerusalem Temple happened in the year 70 CE, just before Mark's gospel was written. So Jesus was not just foreshadowing here; the authors of Mark literally knew the future as they went decades back in time to piece together and record Jesus' ministry and teachings. All of Judaism had to learn how to worship God when they no longer had The Temple as the seat of God's glory and as the central place of gathering. But the Temple would

not be the only shake-up: there would be wars and rumors of wars, earthquakes, famine. Still today, events such as these are a global reality.

Last month a woman from *NJ Monthly Magazine* came to visit our church. She was putting together an article on places of worship from a variety of faiths in NJ and what you should know about them. I was so excited that our church was on that list! She emailed me a couple of times while she was writing the article. “What kind of stones form the base of your church?” “How tall exactly is the church tower?” I didn’t know the answers to her questions. When she sent me the draft of her article, I saw that she had written one paragraph about the design and architecture of our church. She wrote another paragraph about the history of its founding and the plaque that spoke of George Washington’s retreat from Fort Lee. The article featured two paragraphs about our church’s building and history, but only two sentences about our ministry today-- and these said little about the diversity of people in the church, or how we pray, or how our worship shapes our mission in the community. I urged her to engage these parts of who we are; we will see if she did when the article comes out.

The wealth of our church is not in its impressive building structure-- not even with our fancy new sign or the much improved kitchen and bathrooms we will see early next year. The wealth of our church is in its people-- each one of you. The wealth of our church is in those moments when a hymn moves someone to tears, or a prayer stirs another’s heart and releases to God something settled deep within. The wealth of our church is shown when what we practice in our worship within these walls of stone and mortar transforms the lives we lead outside of our sanctuary. The wealth of this church can be measured in our ability to increase worshippers’ ability to love and be loved, by God and one another. Buildings may crumble and glory may fade, but what the Holy Spirit accomplishes when the people of our church gather together gives birth to something that is a glimpse of the new life Jesus offers, a life that really is life. Amen.