

Great Is Thy Faithfulness
Sermon on 1 Samuel 1, 2; Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8 Preached at Highland Park UMC
Sunday, November 19, 2006

I am often asked, “How do we know that God is faithful?” It is a question that often arises in the context of loss of some kind. It came up the other day when I was talking with a good friend of mine, a bright and talented young man who nevertheless often struggles to believe that God exists, much less is good and faithful to his promises. My friend is not alone in his thoughts. Each one of us has experienced illness or the death of a loved one, failed relationships, broken promises, dashed hopes, unmet expectations, loneliness, or despair. All of these experiences would suggest that God is absent, vanished, hidden at best, cruel at worst—playing with us, toying with our emotions, demanding praise, worship, and obedience (as well as regular cash contributions to the church). But where is God in those times? Has God made good on God’s promises to be with us always? Is God faithful? From scripture the answer resounds, God *is* faithful, and God’s faithfulness can be seen by looking to the past, the present, and the future.

One person who had every reason in the world to question God’s faithfulness was a woman named Hannah. Hannah and her husband, Elkanah, were devout, God-fearing people who worshiped regularly, studied the scriptures, and had an active prayer life. Elkanah loved Hannah very much, perhaps even more than his other wife, Penninah. But one thing was conspicuously absent from Hannah’s life: children. Like so many women of the Bible—Abraham’s wife, Sarah (Gen. 16:1), Isaac’s wife, Rebekah (Gen. 25:21), and Zechariah’s wife, Elizabeth (Luke 1)—Hannah, the wife of Elkanah, was childless. In an age where children meant the survival of the family and were seen as a blessing from God, childlessness amounted to a curse, a sign of God’s disfavor, a condition that undoubtedly led many to question God’s faithfulness.

Hannah, however, resisted the temptation to doubt, turning instead to the faith that had always sustained her, to faith in the God of Israel. It was this God who had proved repeatedly to be faithful to the most remarkable, if not outright improbable, promises. To cite but one example, God had promised that the aging Abraham and his barren wife Sarah would have not simply one son, but a whole host of descendants, too numerous to count. Scripture tells us that Abraham believed God, and this was credited to him as righteousness. To this faithful couple was born Isaac, the child of God's promise. To Isaac and Rebekah were born Jacob and Esau. To Jacob and his wives were born twelve sons, who became the tribes of Israel. Hannah and Elkanah were themselves children of the tribe of Ephraim, and were thus children of the promise, children of the God of Israel, the great I AM. God had promised sons, and God had proved faithful.

For years, Hannah had prayed for children. Every year Elkanah would take his family to the religious shrine at Shiloh, where he would offer worship and sacrifice to the Lord. Every year Hannah would pray, yet every year her womb remained empty. And for as long as she remained barren, Elkanah's other wife, Penninah, who had borne him several sons and daughters, would provoke Hannah. "So it went on year after year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, [Penninah] used to provoke [Hannah]. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat" (1 Samuel 1:7).

Despite their efforts, despite their love for one another, despite their closeness, Hannah remained unable to conceive. Yet she did not forsake God. She did not turn away. In fact, Hannah turned again to God in faith and entrusted to God the deepest desires of her heart. One year Hannah again accompanied her husband to Shiloh. After so many years of dashed hopes and unmet expectations, Hannah presented herself before the Lord. In her deep distress, and

weeping bitterly, she poured out her soul to God in the prayerful silence of her heart. She made a vow to God: If he would look on her misery and not forget her but remember her and give her a son, then Hannah would consecrate that son to God's service.

It is an astonishing act of faith: If God gives the childless Hannah a son, she will give that son, her only child, back to God. And just as he had with Abraham and Sarah and with Isaac and Rebekah, God proved faithful. He heard Hannah's prayers, the ones she offered continually in worship. The Lord remembered Hannah, and in due time she conceived and bore a son whom she named Samuel, for she said, "I asked him of the Lord" (1 Sam. 1:20). When Samuel was old enough, Hannah fulfilled her promise and gave him back to God, consecrating him to God's service. And as she did she prayed, "There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God" (1 Sam. 2:2). Hannah trusted that because God had been faithful before, he would be faithful again.

And because God has been faithful in the past, we can be certain that God is faithful to us even now. We know that God is faithful to us even now because of the saving work of his Son, Jesus. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews says that "[W]hen Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, 'he sat down at the right hand of God' ... [By this] single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (Hebrews 10:12, 14).

Now if the meaning of these verses is not immediately clear, don't worry. The theology of Hebrews is as notoriously complex as are its sentence structures. The meaning becomes clearer a few verses later. We can have confidence in God and God's faithfulness because Jesus' offering of himself on the cross has opened for us a new way to enter God's presence, to share in the life of God now. We no longer depend on priests who offer "again and again the same

sacrifices that can never take away sins” (10:11). We have instead Jesus, who is “a great high priest over the house of God” (10:21).

Because Jesus is our great high priest who offered himself as a sacrifice for sins, we can “approach [God] with a true heart in full assurance of faith” (10:22). Like Hannah, we can pour out every desire of our hearts to God, knowing that God will hear our prayers. But even more important, we can approach God in worship to ask to share in his life and his holiness. Jesus’ sacrifice has given us “hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and ... bodies washed with pure water” (10:22). Therefore, the writer encourages his listeners, “Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful” (10:23). God has not left us alone, isolated, despairing, without hope. In Jesus God has come to us and removed every obstacle that separates us from the presence of God. God is faithful to us now.

But what about the future? Will God be faithful in the days to come? We have simply to look around us to find evidence to suggest that the end of time is approaching. Wars and rumors of war, kingdom rising against kingdom and nation against nation, the occurrence of earthquakes and the outbreak of famines—all of these we see on the evening news. But it is important to say that in the passage from Mark, Jesus is cautioning his disciples not “to misinterpret the significance of contemporary events such as war or natural disasters.”¹ Although these catastrophes happen, “they do not signify the end, or even that the end is near.”² As two scholars point out, “A major theme in Mark 13 is that everything is taking place according to the divine plan, and so for righteous and faithful believers there is nothing to fear.”³

¹ William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition, and Notes*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Mich. and Cambridge, England: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974) 458.

² Ibid.

³ Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel According to Mark*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 2002) 369.

And so Jesus brings us both good news and bad. The bad news is that calamities such as wars, earthquakes, and famines are “but the beginnings of the sufferings” (Mk. 13:8). There will be more suffering to come. We will be called on to be faithful and obedient to God and to persevere through these times of tribulation as we await God’s ultimate victory (Anderson, 293). The good news is that such events do not happen apart from the unfolding of God’s plan. Because God is in control of events in our world, we can face trials and calamities “with firm confidence and unwavering faith.”⁴ According to Jesus, wars, earthquakes, and famines are “but the beginnings of the birthpangs,” which “symbolize the agony which can lead to a new beginning.”⁵ As every mother—including Hannah, Sarah, and Rebekah—knows, there must be a time of agony and pain before new life can emerge. Even in the face of end-time events, this is only the beginning. God is at work bringing to birth his new creation, a world of justice, peace, mercy, truth, and love. The promise of scripture is that God “who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:6), the day when all of the promises of God will be fulfilled.

When we look to the past, to the present, and to the future, we can see that God is faithful, doing what God promised to do, and so with joy and thanksgiving the church can say, “Great is thy faithfulness!”

⁴ Lane, 459.

⁵ Morna D. Hooker, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: A&C Black, 1991) 308.