

Teaching Time: “Children of Promise: Samuel and Jesus, and their moms”

I have spent time this week at Ian Anderson House, the hospice on Sir Winston Churchill Boulevard. It’s on the border between Oakville and Mississauga. It is also on the border between life and death. Another word for this is “liminal space”. People hover between this world and the next. This is true for the dying person and for those who gather with them and wait.

The space around an actively dying person is a place of mystery, between everything we know, and all that we don’t. It is an incredibly tender, and raw, and open place. Emotions are nearer the surface. We see the person who is dying, and we see each other’s hearts. We can see things that are always true, but do not always have our attention. We can see that everybody, whether they or not they are ill, is actively dying, and actively living at the same time. We can see that we are, all of us, vulnerable, and mortal, and in many ways powerless. We are all the same in this, regardless of our position in society, our place on the economic food chain, our worldly influence.

In this space we can remember what God always knows, that we are all in need of love, we are all in need of acceptance. We are all in need of reassurance. We are all in need of security, of safety, of peace. We all need to be held gently, and looked upon with love.

I was in this liminal space yesterday, and its influence is still at work in me. The harder parts of my heart are softer today. My eyes have been affected by the different light of that place, that is bright with hope, and murky with shadows at the same time. I have

trouble telling people apart, because I am mostly seeing the things that make us all the same.

I sat in an easy chair in the corner of the room, and prayed, and watched as a woman in her 40's, the youngest child of the dying man, held his hand, stroked his forehead, and repeated a spoken lullaby, "It's okay Dad, you are safe, we are here with you, and we love you. It's okay Dad, you are safe, we are here with you, and we love you. "

When it seemed the right time, I stood with this woman, and her brother, and we placed hands on their father, and we prayed. I said, "Here is what I believe: Before we are born, we are with God. God watches as our body is formed in our mother's womb. God is with us as we enter this life, and is with us for all of our earthly days. God is with us for every moment, every breath. God loves us. When we die, it is simple- we go back to be fully with God. Then I touched the man's forehead, and said, "God is with you, and is holding you safe. I ask God to help you in your passing, and I give thanks that soon, the discomfort will be over. God is ready to welcome you home. I ask God to bless you in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen."

I felt my words were good for that time and place. But I also felt the tremendous power and rightness, the holiness, of the daughter's words. Words she resumed when I sat back down in the corner chair. "It's okay Dad, you are safe, we are here with you, and we love you. "

We have been looking at stories of Children of Promise. Every child carries God's promise of a blessed life, and is born both to love, and be loved. Every child, no matter the

circumstances they are born into, comes into life vulnerable, and defenseless. They cannot survive without help, and they cannot thrive without love, and nurture.

We all arrive dependent on the loving attentions of others. We all need someone to hold us, feed us, keep us clean, to show us with actions, and tell us with words, "It's okay, you are safe, we are here with you, and we love you."

The stories are about babies who are almost not even born, or who after having been born, are in danger of being killed. Babies who depend upon brave and faithful people for their continued existence. It seems odd that God works this way. Why doesn't God choose powerful people to raise these children of promise: royal families, or the families of generals, or prime ministers, or rock stars, or investment brokers? Why would God choose babies who are born, and even before they cry out in hunger for the first time, are already in this liminal space, the borderland between life as we know it, and all that we don't know?

I think we may see part of the answer this morning in Hannah's Song, and Mary's Song.

Hannah was the second wife of a Hebrew man named Elkanah. His other wife, Perinnah had borne children, but Hannah had not. Perinnah provoked Hannah to irritate her, because she was childless. Once when the family was on a pilgrimage to the temple at Shiloh, Hannah stood and prayed, *"LORD Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life..."*

Eli, The temple priest, wasn't impressed. Eli said, *"How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine."* (There is a hint here that Hannah was seen as a woman of questionable virtue. In those days, an affliction, like barrenness, could be interpreted as punishment for some secret sin the person has done. The provocations of the other wife may have been along these lines. But Hannah is strong enough to defend herself.)

"Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, "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. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."

Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him."

Hannah did become pregnant, and gave birth to the boy Samuel. His name means "God has heard". When he was weaned she brought him to Shiloh, to the temple where Eli was still the priest, and said, *"Pardon me, my lord. As surely as you live, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the LORD. ²⁷ I prayed for this child, and the LORD has granted me what I asked of him. ²⁸ So now I give him to the LORD. For his whole life he will be given over to the LORD."*

The story then presents Hannah's Song, a powerful hymn of praise:

*"My heart rejoices in the LORD;
in the LORD my horn^[a] is lifted high.
My mouth boasts over my enemies,
for I delight in your deliverance.*

*² "There is no one holy like the LORD;
there is no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God."*

The song goes on to describe a series of reversals of fortune. Those who are powerful are brought down, and the lowly are lifted up. Those who were looked down upon are raised in stature.

*4 "The bows of the warriors are broken,
but those who stumbled are armed with strength.
5 Those who were full hire themselves out for food,
but those who were hungry are hungry no more.
She who was barren has borne seven children,
but she who has had many sons pines away.
6 "The LORD brings death and makes alive;
he brings down to the grave and raises up.
7 The LORD sends poverty and wealth;
he humbles and he exalts.
8 He raises the poor from the dust
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
he seats them with princes
and has them inherit a throne of honor. "*

We can hear similarities between Hannah's Song, and Mary's Song, also called the Magnificat. Bible scholars say that the author of Luke's Gospel used Hannah's Song as a model when writing about Mary's response to being told by the angel Gabriel that she was going to bear a son. There is a connection between these two women. Hannah knew what it was like to be viewed with suspicion and scorn. Mary, if she had not know about that, would soon learn, when it became known that she, an unmarried woman, was going to have a child.

Mary's song, like Hannah's is about placing your faith, not in how you are viewed by the world, but in God, who has the power to work through us, in spite of, and perhaps

because of, our vulnerability and powerlessness. These women, these mothers of Children of Promise know in their hearts that is in the tenuous places, between life and death, that we become most aware of the power and mystery of God. Mary sang:

My soul proclaims God's greatness.

My spirit rejoices in God my saviour.

For you have looked with favour on your lowly servant.

From this day all generations will call me blessed.

You have done great things for me, O Most Mighty.

Hallowed be your Name!

You have mercy on those who fear you,

From one generation to another.

You took action with a strong arm.

You scattered the proud in their conceit.

You pulled the mighty from their thrones.

You raised the lowly.

You filled the hungry with good things.

You sent the rich away empty.

You come to the aid of your servant, Israel,

for you remembered your promise of mercy,

to our ancestors, Abraham and Sarah,

and to their children in every age.

Amen