

“The Gratitude Test”, a sermon based on the story of Hannah in 1 Samuel, chapters 1 and 2, and shared with the congregation of St. Andrew’s United Church on Sunday November 15, 2015 by Catherine Somerville.

We are a people who define ourselves by the fact that we carry a sacred story in the very core of our being. That story reminds us, over and over, that we are not alone, that we are loved, that there is hope which can dawn again, and even in the broken moments, we do have the choice to say thank you—even in this, even now. In all the times when life is messy, and when we find ourselves asking questions, when there are no apparent answers, we have been given a sacred text that reminds us, again and again, of the presence of God in the midst of the greyness.

This story we carry is a gift, especially in the messy times, the anxious time, and the over-full times.

So now, let me tell you a story about what this means, and how when we look with holy eyes, and listen in our very core to the story we carry, that we can find a bit of centre when life tilts us sideways.

This event happened many years ago. I was the minister at another church in this city. One morning, a woman called. She was crying, terribly distraught. Between her sobs, I was able to make out that her beloved father, the person she loved most in the world, had just been given very bad news by his doctor. At this point, the job of a minister is to listen, and then to pray. So I listened, and it became very clear that there was so much that was unknown in this story. There was too much grey.

After we prayed, and I promised to come and see her father a bit later that day, I reminded her of the story. I told her that at this moment, now more than ever, she needed to remember the wisdom of the three days. This day to her, was literally her Good Friday, her day of death. She was among the disciples, standing at the foot of a cross and watching the one she loved in a death sentence. She stood there so helpless, and so aware of the end to everything she had known to this point in her life. There was no future, no looking forward. On Good Friday, there is only blackness. There is only bad news.

But we talked about the rest of the Easter story. Saturday is the day between Good Friday and Easter Sunday. It is a day for learning what it all means, and starting to come to terms with the news. It is a day of repositioning, if you will, of trying to sort and find a new centre. And one of the things you need to do on Saturday is gather your strength. I told this woman that she needed to go and seek out information about the disease. She needed to read and ask questions and make lists. It wouldn’t be only one day... Saturday in her case would be weeks of information gathering. I also told her that the disciples were together on Saturday. This woman

and her dad needed to tell their friends and family what was happening. She needed to tell other people so that they could bring the casseroles and the flowers, and phone and visit.

The next part of the story is Easter morning. On that day, the disciples discovered that love had not died. They discovered that God could not be contained in a place of death. They learned on Easter Sunday that there were plans that could be made and they could start to think about the future. For the woman and her dad, Easter was the next doctor's visit. They would go to that appointment with information, lists of questions, and they would be able to talk about treatment options and possibilities. The two of them would plan for the future. They would realize that life would be different than anything they had imagined previously, but the story of three days had the power to remind them of the confidence they had in each other to walk together, and ability to remember that Good Friday is never the last word. There is always an Easter Sunday.

I have used that analogy many, many times through the years. Whenever a person tells me some terrible news, I believe it is my job to remind them of the story we carry. This is your Good Friday, but there will be an Easter Sunday. Now is Saturday, a day to seek out all you need to make it through what you have been given.

And as I ponder the story of Hannah, I see that same pattern emerging. Think of her. Broken dreams, harsh treatment by those close to her, rigid traditions, neighbours belittling her, leaders with myopic vision and clay feet. Her distress is so great that she can neither eat nor drink. Her days are spent crying and praying for help. She comes to God in loneliness, isolation and despair. Literally, she groans in her anguish. This is her Good Friday.

Then she is silent and she waits....comfort comes in food and the care offered by her beloved. It comes as a priest engages first in conversation, and then slowly he starts to realize what is happening. He offers Hannah a blessing. With that assurance, she returns to her home. No doubt, Hannah and her husband, Elkanah talked long into the night, and with compassion and grace, in love and tenderness and the strength that is found when you realize you are no longer all alone, together, they made a baby.

The next piece of her story is Easter Sunday. Her song is a prayer of joy.

"My heart, my strength exults in God. The Lord brings life. God brings low, but also exalts. He even raises the poor, like me, from the dust. He guards the feet of the faithful all the days of their lives."

Her song is a reminder of how we are to live—with generosity and with gratitude. When God's story becomes the core of whom we are, when we are able to come to those places where we can remember, and then our response can be nothing less than gratitude.

When I read Hannah's story, that is what I am left with.... the story of the grateful heart, and one who knows that God has been with her, even when she had trouble seeing all the signs for herself. The truth is, all of us can get so caught up in our Good Fridays that too often, we are

unable to see all the ordinary blessings that surround us, even in the darkest of times. And when we live like that, we forget about the rest of the story, the Easter Sunday.

One of the books that has helped me live through my own Good Friday experiences, is a piece called Soul Keeping by John Ortberg. He writes that,

“More gratitude will not come from acquiring things or experiences, but it will come from an awareness of God’s presence and goodness. It’s a way of looking at life, choosing to see the good. Gratitude is a by-product of a way of seeing things, and it always involves three factors. Ortberg reminds us that it all comes from finding the words, and he begins with the Latin word, *bene*, which means good. Gratitude, he says, involves three *benes*.

First, there is the *benefit*. In order to be grateful, you have to receive and recognize what you have been given is a gift that you believe is good.

Second, there is a *benefactor*. A benefactor is one who does good. To be truly grateful you see that the gifts you have been given are not accidents. They come from someone who has good intentions for you. To be grateful as people of faith, is to believe that the good in our lives comes from God. Not from your own efforts or merit. Not from others who might want to impress or manipulate for their gain.

Then there is the *beneficiary*, the one who receives the good gifts of God. That’s us. That’s Hannah who is able to sing a song of joy on her Easter Sunday. It is the person who knows that God has our interests at heart.

When we take things for granted, or believe we deserve only the good, then we are no longer able to be grateful. You can’t be grateful for something you believe you are entitled to, and without a grateful heart, the soul suffers. The soul needs gratitude. This is where many of us fail the gratitude test. We tend to look around us and believe all that we have gained has come to us through nothing more than our own resourcefulness. We have to stop thinking that we are entitled to the blessings in our lives. Gratitude always comes from a posture of humility. It was the place where Hannah started, the Good Friday. No one, especially Hannah herself, thought she deserved any more than what she had, even the priests in the temple, who more than anyone, should have known and helped her hold onto hope.

With the gratitude test, the more to which you think you’re entitled, the less you will be grateful. The bigger the sense of entitlement, the smaller the sense of gratitude.

Hannah knew that God is the source of things almost impossible, things unexpected, even things that defy explanation. And when you start to realize that, what else is there to do but sing and say thank you?

Her story is about trusting. But it is also about remembering who we are, and it serves as a reminder of the need to make our lives as generous and grateful as we possibly can. It is that simple, and that complex. Living in the grey areas is challenging, but think about what you have

been given, who you are blessed to travel beside, and remember all the resources that are at hand. At the end of day, that is all God asks of us, to be grateful for what comes, to seek after what we need, and say thank you, sometimes in spite of it all.

We know that life is great- being loved, giving love. A fun night out, a quiet night in. Being a child. Having a child. Having children as our friends.

We know that life can dull, waiting in lines, filling out forms, reruns on the television. Grumpy people, bored children. Being told what to do, thinking of something to say.

We know that life is hard: debt and depression, being at home on the street, living with loss, being thrown out of work, families divided, being ignored. But we can declare that in all of it, The God of life is there. Good Friday. Waiting Saturday. Easter Sunday. The God of life is there. Amen.

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