

## GOD IS CALLING US INTO RELATIONSHIP

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1Samuel 1 and the Canticle of Hannah

Friday morning about 11:45 I was excited because my sermon was done and I had the afternoon open for pastoral care visits. Then I turned on the news Friday night to hear of the horror of the terrorist attack in Paris. I debated most of Saturday about how to respond this morning. Our gospel is from the little apocalypse of Mark. Written probably around 70 the author was writing from the viewpoint of the end of the war between Rome and the Jews in Jerusalem. The temple was gone, the people were scattered and a genocide on the order of WW2 had occurred. It seemed like the end of the world. Some may feel the violence we see in our world today seems like the end of the world forecast in our Gospel of Mark.

In this apocalypse Mark warns us to beware of false prophets and we certainly have many of those today. People, who pervert the word of God to justify horrific acts of violence like Paris, like Beirut and other places around the world. How do we tell a false prophet? Well it is helpful if we have a relationship with God and Jesus. Since that is what I had written my sermon about I decided to stay with what I wrote with a few modifications. So here is that sermon.

This week I found my thoughts turning to our passage about Hannah and the Canticle that is the Song of Hannah. This comes from a combination of events including a lecture that several of us heard by Fr. James Martin SJ last Friday night in Hampton. Fr. Martin is a leading writer for the National Catholic Reporter and has written among other books the Jesuits Guide to Just about everything and Jesus A Pilgrimage which the Wednesday night bible study is currently reading.

Hannah as was the norm in those days and for much of the bible, was the one of two wives. The problem was that she was barren. The other wife has numerous children and this is a source of great distress for her since it is obvious that the fault is hers. Being childless was considered a disgrace at the time and meant the woman had somehow sinned or was not favored by God. She was considered less than whole.

Our passage finds her deeply in prayer and offering sacrifices hoping that God will open her womb. The important point is that she is persistence in her prayer. She does bargain with God, which is certainly not unusual since many of us do this, but she keeps

at it year after year until Eli notices and according to the story so does God. I will not go into the problematic theology of that today.

As we approach Advent this should bring to mind two other miraculous births. Elizabeth in her old age will bear John the Baptist and Mary becomes the mother of Jesus. Zachariah who has been waiting and praying for the birth of the Messiah and others.

One thing that is common in all of these is that they all stayed in relationship with God. They were all persistent in prayer. They also listened and responded in the affirmative when God spoke or acted. In short they cultivated an active and ongoing relationship with God through prayer.

Last Friday several of us, Dana and Kevin and John and Jeanette Hamilton drove over to hear Fr. James Martin SJ speak as part of the Bishop Keane lecture series sponsored by Immaculate Conception Roman Catholic Church. Now the lecture was held in a non-denominational church because the crowd was large and Immaculate Conception's main worship space is under repair.

Fr. Martin made the statement that he suspected that on Sunday morning there would be more Jesus talk in this worship space than in all the Roman Catholic churches that most of the audience came from. He said we are better at churchiness than Christianity. He reminded us that people come to church to have a relationship with God and Christ not a relationship with the institution the church. I was very aware of the nervous laughter in that congregation.

I know I've heard Michael Curry say much the same and there is that same nervous laughter. In fact at one point of his installation sermon he said, "Why are you all so quiet, don't go all Episcopal on me when I'm talking about Jesus."

Michael Curry in his sermon at his installation referred multiple times to the Jesus movement. He encouraged us to all have an active and personal relationship with Jesus. I suspect over the next 9 years we are going to hear a lot about this. This is not a new theme, but it is for the Episcopal Church in fact for many of the "catholic" churches.

So what make us so nervous when the talk truly becomes about Jesus and a relationship? Really that relationship is what Hannah shows us this morning except hers was with God. That relationship with God is what Samuel will learn and understand and will undergird his entire life and ministry. A relationship with God and Christ is why we are here. If you are not interested in that, then folks we are in a lot of trouble because we have no real reason to be here. For the people who walk through our doors, the

people who will be our future are looking for Jesus whether they know it or not. They know that this world is not enough, that there is more to our existence than just breathing in oxygen. God put us on this earth to make his kingdom a reality for all God's children regardless of who they are.

Just this past Wednesday we read the section of Fr. Martin's book<sup>1</sup> where he gave four reasons why he believes we are hesitant and I have found these to be very true.

**Reason 1.** Unworthiness. So many people feel unworthy, in part because of the bashing into our heads that we are all sinners. Ok, so we are sinners, but that doesn't mean God doesn't love us. What I realized last summer at my retreat was that many people confuse being unworthy in the religious sense with being worthless. They are not the same. None of us is worthy when compared to God, but through grace God does make us worthy. Nobody is worthless in God's eyes

**Reason 2:** Fear of God: By this I'm not talking about awe and reverence but real fear as in afraid of God. So many people worry about God sitting up there with his finger on the smite button.

**Reason 3.** Fear of change; This is the fear of what happens if you say yes to where God seems to be leading. I had a friend that I worked with for 16 years who when learning that I was going to seminary said, "I'm not sure I want to know God like you do. I'm honestly afraid of what he would ask me to do." I wise counselor once told me "Change is the exchange of the known no matter how painful for the unknown." Many of us would rather stay in the pain we know than let God lead us into something life-giving.

**Reason 4:** Fear of intimacy: Many fear what an intimate relationship with God would look like if we really believed what the Collect for Purity I say at the beginning of the service implies. Almighty God, to you all hearts are open, all desires known, and from you no secrets are hid:" This simply means that God knows everything anyway so as one spiritual director told me, "Get over yourself."

This prayer led me to turn to a quote I have on my bulletin board by Marcus Borg: "Spirituality combines awareness, intention and practice. I define it as becoming conscious of and intentional about a deepening relationship with God. The words are very carefully chose. Becoming conscious of our relationship with God; I am convinced that we are all already in relationship to God and have been from out birth. "

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<sup>1</sup> Martin, James, Jesus a Pilgrimage (Harper Collins, New York NY. 2014) pgs. 159-162

So you see God already is in relationship with us, the invitation is to respond to that relationship and of course to remember sin is the breaking of that relationship

Bishop Clark Grew the previous bishop of Ohio was giving the sermon at the ordination of priests in the class ahead of me. I remember vividly his injunction to the newly ordained that they would burn out if they did not spend time in prayer, in relationship with Jesus. He said something to the effect that it is only when your ministry flows from your relationship with Christ that you find ministries that feed you rather than drain you. Without a relationship of prayer you will not last long in the vineyards.

In the next few years you will hear much from our new Presiding Bishop about rebuilding or maybe discovering for the first time, your relationship with not the church, but with Jesus. I think you will find a new call to ministry based on what God judges important. Ministry that flows from a relationship with God and Christ is truly the water that gives us life. And a church filled with people with a relationship with Jesus will be a growing thriving church that brings life to our world that continues to be torn apart by violence and hate.

The only antidote for the hate we see dressed up as religion is a faith soaked in the love of Jesus. I pray that good faithful people of all faiths Christian, Jew Moslem must all come together in a relationship with God who desires peace in our world, not violence. The only hope we have is pray to God that he may use us as instruments on his peace. Otherwise we will only see more and more violence and hate. You cannot control others, but you can start with your own heart and your own relationship with Jesus.