

We are nearing the end of the long season after Pentecost. Each year at about this time our liturgy and lectionary orbit around Jesus' final days and teachings just before his last meal and arrest. In our gospel reading this morning from Mark we find what scholars call the "little apocalypse." These are strange and unsettling words from Jesus; it is almost as if the listener is suddenly transported to the book of Revelation, with Jesus describing what "the end" might look like.

Now living in the South, we tend to hear a lot about "the end," don't we? Words such as "rapture," "eternal fire," "left behind" are ways we commonly here it put. There are other ways of putting it. Jim Morrison put it this way:

"This is the end.  
Beautiful friend.  
This is the end  
My only friend, the end  
Of our elaborate plans, the end  
No safety or surprise, the end  
I'll never look into your eyes ... again."

Eliot put it this way:

"This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
This is the way the world ends  
Not with a bang but a whimper."

Frost put it this way:

"Some say the world will end in fire,  
Some say ice.  
From what I've tasted of desire  
I hold with those who favor fire.  
But if it had to perish twice,  
I think I know enough of hate  
To say that for destruction ice  
Is also great  
and would suffice."

How does love put it?

In Mark's "little apocalypse" Jesus speaks of war and famine and earthquakes. Later he proclaims that "the end" looks like fathers betraying their children, of children rising up against their parents, of the sun going dark and the stars falling from heaven. Strange and unsettling words indeed. But perhaps the strangest of them all comes at the end of our reading. Jesus frames all of these events under a larger understanding: the perspective of birth. "This is but the beginning of the birth pangs," Jesus says. To reinforce this perspective of pain and loss leading to a birth of some sorts, the folks who structure our lectionary have chosen this Sunday to point to Hannah and her transformation. Is it possible that love sees "the end" as birth?

One of the great themes of scripture is what scholars refer to as "creatio ex nihilo" – creation out of nothing. This comes of course from the creation story at the beginning of Genesis, where tradition has held that the universe came into being from "void," nothingness. Now science will remind us that the universe did not take shape exactly as Genesis chapters 1 and 2

describe. But we have to keep in mind that the function of our scriptures is not to serve as a historical or scientific textbook. The purpose of Genesis and the other 65 books of the Bible is to describe the nature of our God, and who we are in relationship to God. The deeper truth to which the Genesis creation stories point is that creatio ex nihilo is how God works. God creates impossible life.

This reality is demonstrated repeatedly in the Bible, especially poignantly in the stories of infertility giving way to birth and life. There is the story of Sarah, who struggled with “barrenness” all her life, and did not give birth to Isaac until the tender age of 90. Rebekah, wife of Isaac, and Rachel, favorite wife of Jacob, were unable to have children. Yet through God they gave birth to children who became the bearers of God’s covenant. The prophets repeatedly speak of deserts suddenly bursting into full blossom because of the sudden appearance of the messiah. And in the New Testament impossible life comes in two familiar episodes – Elizabeth, in her elder years, becomes pregnant with John. And Mary bears the son of God without ever being with a man. Impossible life.

But few of these stories give us as much detail as Hannah’s story. Hannah was one of two wives of Elkanah (whose name means, “God creates”). Hannah’s name means “grace.” Hannah may have thought that name ironic, because she was unable to have children, and the other wife tormented her about this. We heard this morning about the great grief of Hannah, and about her prayer. We heard how Eli, the priest at Shiloh, mistook her grief for drunkenness and was about to have Hannah thrown out. We heard Eli’s compassionate response to Hannah’s condition. And we heard how God created “impossible life” with the birth of Samuel. What we did not hear was what Hannah did with Samuel. Did she hold this precious gift tight to her always, never letting Samuel out of her sight? Did she wear Samuel like a crown, as a sign of God’s love and devotion to her? Did she wield the child like a weapon, tormenting the other wife of Elkanah as she had been tormented? No. This child that Hannah had waited all her life to have, this child whose absence created such an enormous wound in the soul of Hannah, this child who represented the power and providence and blessing of God, this child Samuel Hannah GIVES BACK TO GOD. Hannah took Samuel as soon as he was weaned and gave him to Eli to serve God in the temple at Shiloh. Think about that. Life comes out of Hannah after incredible grief and loss, and Hannah gives that life back to God completely.

To our Christian ears this should sound quite familiar: impossible life comes in the form of Jesus Christ; that life is given up freely to God; suffering and incredible loss follow; through the power of God that loss is transformed into new and impossible life for us all. Perhaps that is why Jesus describes “the end” in terms of “birth pangs.” Even the wars and famines and conflicts of humankind that may point towards an “end” – whatever that might mean – even these are understood in terms of God’s ongoing creation. Love never stops creating ex nihilo, out of nothing.

I have an idea for a retreat. (These come to me from time to time). I call it, “Resurrection Knots.” Each person attending this imaginary retreat would receive a length of rope, let’s say 3 or 4 feet long. At the outset of the retreat we would talk about our lives as being like this length of rope. Ideally we would like our lives to be smooth and flowing from beginning to end, like the rope. But in reality no one’s life is smooth and flowing. In fact normal stages in human development are typically full of new challenges and loss, where each of us changes our way of being. And with each change there is loss and new life. I might tie a knot in my rope, and explain that our lives are actually a series of knots, areas of intense struggle, where we experience a pain, a loss, a death of sorts. But on the other side of these knots we find new life, a new way of being,

and perhaps an opportunity to engage God more deeply. Like a series of mini-resurrections. For example when we first walk, we experience profound joy in our new independence. But we also experience the loss and grief of never being carried around in our parent's arms again. When we move out of the home at the age of 18 (or 22 or 28 or whatever) we get the rush of self-sufficiency and responsibility. But we also experience the grief of losing the freedom of irresponsibility, of losing the immediate support system of a family household. If we enter a life-long commitment with another human being, if we have children, if a loved one passes, if we lose a job, if we get a promotion, each of these are resurrection knots. They each contain within them the realization that something new is being created in us, and that there is pain and loss involved. And most importantly that God is working in that new creation. In the retreat scenario I would invite the participants to tie 5-7 knots in their rope, and write down or reflect upon what are the 5-7 major resurrection knots in their lives. Perhaps they might decorate each knot with symbols of that episode, or journal about their experience. That would be in the morning. In the afternoon we would share our knots in small groups. And the point of this exercise would be to learn together that none of our lives are smooth, that we all go through profound changes in our lives, that in each change we lose one way of being for a larger way, that God is always busy creating out of nothing, that with God there is no end, only birth.

And so perhaps we are left with questions on this mid-November Sunday in the season following Pentecost: What is being born in you right now? What is going on that convulses you, stretches you, asks too much of you? What new life is being breathed in you, and through you? How might you give this new life to God, ala Hannah? As God's beloved child, loved from the very beginning, where is love in your lives? We may not be able to articulate full and complete answers to these questions. But this much we know: with Christ there is no safety or surprise, no bang or whimper, no fire, no ice; with Christ there is only the ongoing creation of new life.