

Weekly Reading – Monday, November 9, 2009

Have I called your attention to this? My Seattle-based organization, Congregational Leadership Northwest, is putting on "**Festival of Preaching Northwest,**" next April 19 - 21. We have some wonderful preachers coming. There will also be some excellent lectures and a diverse, interesting array of worship and music. Check it out at www.festivalofpreachingNW.org. Early bird registration by February 1.

Now to the lessons for November 15, 2009, the Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost. You may have noticed that last week I jumped the gun, commenting on the epistle lesson from Hebrews 10 (this week's text) a week early. So you can scroll back to find that one.

I Samuel 1: 4 - 20

The story of Hannah, a woman unable to conceive a child, who takes her case to the Lord at the Temple. There the priest, Eli, mistakes Hannah's distress for drunkenness (recalling Acts 2 where enthusiasm and the Spirit are confused with inebriation!). The text makes a point of drawing a contrast between Hannah and her husband, Elkanah's, other wife, Peninnah. Peninnah "lords" her fertility over Hannah making her life miserable. So when Hannah does conceive it is a kind of great reversal whereby the last are made first and the first last. I note that Hannah is described as "deeply distressed" and "weeping bitterly" as she prayed to the Lord. There is no holding back, no "nice, little prayer" here, but a telling it like it is (which Eli finds indecorous!) Soon, in Advent and Christmas, we will be hearing Luke's story of the birth of Christ, beginning with the birth of John. This story from Samuel seems quite formative for Luke's stories in the weeks ahead. In some ways the Magnificat is inspired by Hannah's story and song of praise in chapter 2.

Daniel 12: 1- 3

The typological Old Testament option, from the final chapter of Daniel, is a snippet that picks up the apocalyptic tone and tenor of the gospel reading from Mark 13. "There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence." As in the Gospel reading the call here is not to be overwhelmed or undone by such a time of shaking, but to keep faith and to be patient. So the brief reading ends with a quite beautiful word of promise, "Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever." As the days darken, that is a lovely word indeed.

Hebrews 10: 11 - 14, 19 - 25

The Barthian distinction between faith and religion comes to mind as we hear the continuing contrast between human religiosity (v. 19 "And every priest stands day after day at his service offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.") The point is human activity that must be done over and over to win God's favor or to show that we are on God's good side. The author says, in effect, "Stop it! Stop it right now! In Christ God has shown God's favor and taken your side once and for all. Trust this and live!" Note

that while the priests stand at their never-ending work, Christ has "sat down" at the right hand of God. Work is over and done . . . almost. He has sat down, but he hasn't put his feet up. The decisive engagement has occurred at the cross, but there is yet work to be done. But it, and this is the important thing, is work done in the confidence and boldness of Christ's saving action, not work undertaken to somehow gain God's love or favor. The juxtaposition of faith and ethics in the final verses is just right. "Let us hold fast to our confession without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds." Salvation is all about grace; ethics is all about gratitude. The "provoke one another" reminds us how much we depend on the example and encouragement of others. Churches can create cultures of risk, service and generosity. Or they can create cultures of fear and self aggrandizement.

Mark 13: 1 - 8

This reading comes from that chapter of Mark dubbed the "little apocalypse," for its stress on things falling apart, worlds dying and worlds being born. Is there ever a time when it doesn't feel like this? Certainly our own time has no shortage of apocalyptic fears (nuclear weapons, terrorism, global warming) and plenty of anxiety. In and for such times, Jesus offers words of counsel, wisdom and comfort, though the comfort is not cheap or easy. He encourages the church, and the faithful, to be discerning, and to not be seduced by various groups or persons claiming to be the Messiah. Moreover, he encourages patience and a kind of faithful calm in the midst of trial and disorder. "Do not be alarmed." Easy to say, hard to do. And aren't there times when we should be alarmed? The brief passage ends with a note of hope, describing the present disorder as "birth pangs." Something new is being born. It's not the end. But a new beginning. There is pain and suffering but it is in the service of a new birth and creation. The image brings us back to Hannah, conceiving and in time giving birth to Samuel who will become a great prophet.