

**“Listening for a Change” based on 1 Samuel 1:4-20 and Mark 13:1-8**

**Delivered by Pastor Drew Mangione on November 14, 2021, at Shelby Presbyterian Church**

*“Hey teacher, get a look at these stones and at these buildings!” (Didaskale, ide potapoi lithoi kai potapoi oikodomai! It’s got a ring to it in Greek with all those rhymes.)*

Even after all they have seen, all that Jesus has taught them, the disciples who have walked with Jesus for three years now, still have no idea what is happening. They have no idea what to expect. Despite having the most direct access to God ever, they miss the point. They mess up. They will mess up and sin again, and we, who have come after, still do the same, all while acting as the world expects us to, with words of certainty.

This is our last reading from the Gospel of Mark before the end of the church year. We’ll return to Mark in the lectionary in two years, after a year each of Luke and Matthew. So, I want to point something out. Luke and Matthew portray the disciples in a little better light than Mark. Luke’s an outsider, perhaps the only Gentile New Testament writer, so, his focus is on how Jesus and the good news is for the world. Matthew is writing for the Christians still in Judea and Galilee, where his goal is to show Jesus first as very Jewish, more Jewish than the Jewish leaders opposing him.

But Mark is different, and over the past year, I’ve come to really love Mark’s gospel. You see, tradition tells us that Mark is sharing the gospel relayed to him by Peter. Mark shows us the flaws of the disciples, especially Peter, and those Galilean fishermen who were Peter’s close friends. Reading his Greek tells us that Mark is writing in a language he clearly struggles with, but he’s doing so because he wants it to be read by a wider audience. Mark also seems to choose his words very carefully, perhaps because he isn’t just letting it flow, so he is agonizing over a language foreign to him.

And so, immediately after Jesus tells the disciples to beware of the flashiness of the Scribes, and after Jesus praises the poor humble widow with nothing who gives her last coins, the disciples go outside the temple and marvel at its flashiness and special stone. *“Hey teacher, get a look at these stones and at these buildings!”* It’s as if they were not listening, still seeing things as the world sees, and still unable to grasp the way God sees the world. And so, what comes next in Mark’s gospel, which we had read way back during Lent, is Jesus entering Jerusalem on a donkey, a beast of peace, not a warhorse, to claim his place as King, by dying on a cross.

There’s an old adage in writing, ‘Show, don’t tell,’ and it’s because people don’t listen well. Jesus shows the disciples what his love is, and where he is leading them – the cross. I think this is why the bible is a collection of stories, and not direct instructions. It’s why my wife, echoing my preaching professors, always reminds me, that my sermons are better when I give a story to relate it to. Mark is not a master of language, but he is a storyteller, who captures the difficulty we all have as believers, understanding Jesus and what it truly means to be a disciple following him.

While in seminary, I kept hearing the name of a writer whose work I needed to read. She was a little younger than me and had a couple popular books, and a lot of critics. I figured that at some point, I might read one of her books and file it away, you know, to be able to say, *'yeah, I've read her,'* and give an opinion. A seminary classmate was supposedly close friends with her. I dismissed it as a fellow former reporter who was name dropping. I could do that too. I had famous 'friends' I had interviewed or worked with as a reporter.

But I was wrong. A year after I had left seminary, a medication was given to this author for an infection. She had a reaction, was placed in a coma, and after a month, my former classmate was there with her husband. It was at this point that I hurried up and read one of her books, titled *'Inspired: Slaying Giants, Walking on Water, and Loving the Bible Again.'* Coincidentally, I was in NJ reading this book while Claire was here, over in Boiling Springs with her family for a wedding.

And what I discovered in this author's writing was a resolute commitment to orthodoxy, the historic faith of the church: that God shared in our humanity in Jesus Christ, and that by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we get to share God's life, which is abundant and eternal, and by which we get the Holy Spirit, to live in us and among us, as temples of this loving and present God, known to us in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

But with this orthodoxy came a willingness to doubt, to struggle in her faith, ask questions, to lament and challenge God, even with anger, all while remaining faithful to God, trusting God's love. This vulnerability made her capable of remaining a Christian, even when she struggled to see Christ in many who claimed the title. What's more, she had the humility to see those same Christians she struggled with, as a key part of her walk of faith, part of the same team of flawed players, all just trying to understand. She saw them as acting like the disciples in Mark's gospel, getting things wrong, getting impressed by the wrong things.

What's amazing is that her message has helped restore the faith of thousands in our country, maybe more. She challenged the misconceptions spread by atheists, and she put the love of God where it belongs, at the forefront of the gospel.

Now, I've deliberately withheld the author's name to this point, and I'll do so a little longer. Some might know who I'm talking about, that's fine, but I'm going to get back to Mark. You see, I believe we still read this text without listening. We are just like the disciples, focusing on the wrong things, and we make the same mistakes.

Jesus looks out upon the massive structure of the temple, the center of faith in him, for he is the embodiment of the One God of Israel worshiped in that very temple. He says the humanmade structure will fall; the stones will be torn down. This happened in 70AD when the Roman destroyed that very temple. And so, in Mark's gospel, written just before or maybe very shortly after that event, Peter and those fishermen, James, John and Andrew, pull Jesus aside and ask for some inside information. These are the disciples who make the most mistakes. Here they are looking to get an inside scoop, not in front of all the other disciples, but alone, and so Jesus warns them.

*'Take heed,'* he says, *'lest anyone cause you all to wander, for many will come in my name, saying, 'I am,' and many will be caused to wander.'* In Greek, *'ego emi'* or *'I am'* is the name of God from the book of Exodus. It can be translated into English as *'I am he,'* but literally, it is *'I am.'* When Jesus says, *'many will come in my name, saying 'I am,'"* I believe he is invoking his divine nature here, stating that his name is one with God's own name.

I don't believe this is not an attempt to show off or even reveal himself in his identity, but to say that many will claim to speak for him, for God, and they will lead people astray, by focusing on the preservation of humanmade things. But Jesus's point is that the destruction of the temple, wars or divisions, and rumors of them, are necessary, not because God wills them, but because only in death, as we will learn when he is hanged on the cross, do we find what we are looking for – resurrection to new life.

How much do the things which humans have made matter, even good things like churches? We are a resurrection people – so turmoil, earthquakes and famine – are birth pangs. They are the pain of something new, the renewed creation that is to come. This is the change that is coming, but it is not the wrath of God to destroy, but the love of God that brings renewal out of sin's destruction.

It was not an act of God that destroyed the temple, but an act of the Roman Empire, provoked by the people of Judea and Galilee who rose up because they were straining under the oppression of Roman rule. But even before that moment, God was already redeeming the world in Christ. Jesus's warning is to not be led astray by thinking sin's destruction is final. It's not. His words are a consolation that God will make all things new.

In our story from First Samuel, we find Hannah in her pain, provoked and with complaint, crying out to God to be seen, to be recognized and remembered, to be heard. Her husband does not understand her pain. He thinks it's about him. He asks why he isn't good enough. He ignores the fact that if he dies first, she is left a widow with nothing, no male heir through whom she can inherit. But what's more, she is made to feel as though she is the inferior wife to her rival who makes her feel, as if her barrenness is a punishment from God. It's not.

However, she does not try to be perfect to get on God's good side, so that God will be coerced into giving her a child. No, she comes to God with all that she has, her whole being, and she pours it out to God. When the priest sees her as a woman alone, acting strange near God's house, he dismisses her as a mere drunk wandering where she should not be, but Hannah pushes Eli back, just as she pushed back against God. She asserts that she is most certainly not intoxicated, but she has poured out her whole being to the Lord.

In Hebrew, whole being here is the word *'nephesh,'* which is often translated as soul, or life, identity. She poured out everything that she has to God. She demands not to be seen as a 'worthless woman' but speaks out of her abundance. For her, who has nothing, she has nothing left but complaint and provocation to speak of in her life. She has no son, a rival who mocks her & a husband too self-centered to notice her pain. But she has God, the Lord who will hear her in her brokenness. This is what Eli notices and he believes *for her* that God will answer. Simply

by this conveyance of God's love, she is restored. Notice this restoration comes before Samuel's birth.

Hannah, whose name means 'grace' or 'the gift of favor,' bears a son and names him Samuel. The name that means, 'Heard from God,' because God heard her plea, remembered her. Samuel is not just any son, but she gives him to Eli, and God calls Samuel to service. Now I feel bad for Eli a little here because this service which includes foretelling to Eli the destruction of his own family, the death of Eli's sons and the end of his priesthood and leadership. Samuel's service includes the end of the period of Judges, and the beginning of a monarchy in Israel, as Samuel first anoints Saul, and then David, who unifies the kingdom and becomes the one through whose house, the world is redeemed in Jesus.

Eli lives into God's will, which ends up meaning change for him and for the tribes of Israel, but it begins by listening to a woman on the margins, whom he first dismissed. Jesus says that the humanmade things we marvel at, like the temple, like our national identities and the powerful kingdoms and governments of this world, the stability of our environment and even our food security, are all liable to destruction. But he makes clear, out of sin's destruction God's Reign is so much more.

This is both a prediction of what has happened, the destruction of the temple by the Romans, and a prediction of what is to come. No, I'm not talking about the end times, but the pains of childbirth, when sin is displaced by love, when kingdom comes, and God's will is done. Later in Samuel, Eli seems to know what God will predict against him, but he trusts in God's bigger plan that God started with Hannah.

A little less than two weeks ago, a book written by the late Rachel Held Evans came out, assembled from her writings before she died, by my former classmate, Jeff Chu. Evans has been a controversial figure, but she is a voice we should listen to. Even she would say, as she does in her book, not to blindly follow her – *Rachel said it, therefore I believe it, so it is* – no. That's not why I bring her up.

I'm not saying you have to read her or you must agree with her. But that, she is a voice that even in her death, needs to be listened to by the Church, because she has helped people traditionally excluded from the Church to know Christ. And because despite her doubts and her challenges, she remained faithful, and not just to some idea of Jesus. She held the historic faith of the church, especially to the radical idea that God would share in our humanity, to live as we live, reaching out to those on the margins, dying for us on the cross and rising again in love for us. By this we are made ready to have God's spirit in and among us to be a ministry of reconciliation, of restoration, to repair this broken world.

This book is not some authoritative tome about what to think or about bulletproof answers to every question you might get. Instead, it is an expression of what it meant for Rachel to come to God with her whole heart, hence its title, 'Wholehearted Faith,' and it is about seeing God's love at work.

Being wholehearted for Rachel isn't about acting perfect before God, as if we might fool God into thinking we are perfect. It's about being like Hannah, coming before God with who we are, sinners as we are, because God can handle us. God can hear us, God can heal us, transform us, reform us and redeem us. God can mold us and make us new again, just as we see with the disciples. I bet Rachel would love being compared with Peter and her book is brutally honest about her imperfections, much like Mark's gospel in how he writes about the disciples.

To be like Hannah is to be restored not by getting what we want, but by a word of God's love. Hannah seemed to be on the outside, but Eli listened to her. He saw God's love for her. He saw that she poured out her whole heart before God, and he assured her of God's love.

We must learn from the mistakes of the disciples who marveled at buildings and institutions, who wanted to know the future, rather than be present and active in God's reign right now. We can be like Hannah and love God with our whole heart, not in a pretend way, but by being bold enough to share the Lord all of our complaints and provocations, along with our praise and our petitions. Let's be like Eli, as hard as that may be, and listen, trusting that if challenges and change come, God is still with us and has a plan to redeem us all. Amen.