

Sermon - 11/14/21
1 Sam 1:4-20, 2:1-10; He 10:11-25; Mk 13:1-8
Let the Weak Say, "I Am Strong!"

Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening
by Robert Frost

Whose woods these are I think I know.
His house is in the village though;
He will not see me stopping here
To watch his woods fill up with snow.

My little horse must think it queer
To stop without a farmhouse near
Between the woods and frozen lake
The darkest evening of the year.

He gives his harness bells a shake
To ask if there is some mistake.
The only other sound's the sweep
Of easy wind and downy flake.

The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep.
(poetryfoundation.org 11-12-21)

The poet stops before the black tangle of a New England woods – perhaps birch and maple – all bare and dark. It is winter and this little stand of sleeping trees is taking on a blanket of snow. The writer includes his horse in the flow of his meditation – reflecting on the unusual stop as they travel home. The year is 1922. Frost was living in the Vermont countryside with his wife and children.

On the darkest evening of the year(12-21-21), the soul ponders the draw of mysterious woods – the stark landscape of the inmost being – conflict, dark shadows, the sense that soon only the topmost branches will be visible in the snowstorm. He is drawn toward a long reverie – sitting in his buggy. But he must slap the reins and move on to finish his journey. No time to wander in the tangle of complex feelings or troubled thoughts.

Switch scenes to the sadness and agony of another poet, Hannah. This is about the 11th BC (give or take). This woman is devoted to the Lord and loves her husband, Elkanah. But she has no children, especially no son. Hannah also has a rival, her husband's second wife, Penninah. The other woman has many children, and she chooses to be cruel to Hannah because she has none. Life is hard. Hannah is inconsolable because a woman's standing and honor then depended upon having children.

On one of the family's pilgrimages to Shiloh (the high place where the community of priests and prophets lived), Hannah prayed fervently to the Lord for a son. The Tent Shrine and the Ark of the Covenant were kept at Shiloh for almost 400 years after the Exodus, before being moved to Jerusalem. Sweet Hannah is mis-understood by the crusty old priest, Eli. But in the end, the holy man prays for her. Soon, Hannah learns that she is pregnant. What a joyful day! Like so many of our mothers of the faith (Miriam, Deborah, Elizabeth, Mary of Nazareth) Hannah sings a song of praise to God. The song is also a powerful prophecy of the future Messiah.

(Continued on next page.)

Hannah's song is full of thanks for God's gracious favor to the weak and poor:

The Lord brings to life;

He brings down to Sheol and raises up.

The Lord makes poor and makes rich;

He brings low, He also exalts...

The Lord will judge the ends of the earth;

He will give strength to His king,

And exalt the power of His anointed.

Out of her own dark tangle of grief and pain, Hannah has seen the day when God will establish a king in the nation – even a King who rules to the ends of the earth. Messiah!

She foresees that God will give Messiah strength.

God will lift up high and increase the power of

His anointed. We also receive this good news, having seen by Scripture that there was no other plan than to send God's only Son into the world.

The journey of humankind has continued for over three thousand years since the day Hannah sang her song. She and Elkanah – along with all those who traveled to Shiloh to observe the Passover and the other holy days – knelt outside the tabernacle. There the sons of Aaron, the priests of the sanctuary, offered the animal they brought as a sacrifice. From the time of the symbolic shedding of goat's or ox's blood, God's people moved on through the time of the earthly kings – another five hundred years, into the time the King of kings arrived at last. Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

Hanna is our mother in the faith. She believed and trusted in the Lord to bring her out of shame and obscurity by the birth of a son. She named him Samuel. As priest and prophet of Shiloh, Samuel anointed both Saul and David as kings of Israel. How proud Hannah must have been of her boy!

Jesus Himself saw clearly that there was more darkness and barrenness to travel through until the coming of God's kingdom in its fullness. Jesus prophesied that there would be many false messiahs. And so there were – and are even today. The Lord prophesied that there would be wars and rumors of war. Read the news. He said, "Do not be alarmed; this must take place." (Mk 13:7)

Jesus saw the dark days when Rome would besiege and destroy Jerusalem and the temple in it. He foretold that not one stone would be left upon another – all would be thrown down. It was.

In Jesus, we weak and frail believers can say, "In the Lord Jesus is our strength and our victory."

(1 Sam 2:1) "By Him the bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength." (v 4)

"The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn." (v 5)

This is Hope, born poor and humble in a stable.

So, friends, we can now—without hesitation—walk right up to God, into "the Holy Place." Jesus has cleared the way by the blood of his sacrifice, acting as our priest before God. The "curtain" into God's presence is his body.

So let's do it—full of belief, confident that we're presentable inside and out. Let's keep a firm grip on the promises that keep us going. He always keeps his word. Let's see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshipping together as some do but spurring each other on, especially as we see the big Day approaching. (He 10:19-25 MSG)

Amen.