The Salt of the Earth

I Samuel 1:1-17

sermon digest October 11, 2009 carolyn dipboye

I remember them well and still today carry them with gratitude in my heart. I suspect you know them, too–maybe by different names, but still solid as a rock, shot through with integrity, loving and strong, faithful and full of compassion, beacons for young people first setting their feet to the road, and later companions on the way: C.B. Davis, Willie Mae Sexton, Vann Compton and Jean Ballew of Spring Place, Georgia; Robert Otto, Willis Glover and Jean Hendricks of Mercer; Henlee Barnett, Wayne Oates, Andy Lester and Wayne Ward of an earlier Southern Seminary; Wil and Louise Duke, Jim and Jean West, Charles and Mazelle Allen, Granville Kyker, Marie Flynn, Irene Rankin, and Betty Galloway of St. Louis, Louisville and Oak Ridge; and so many more. These are a part of that great cloud of witnesses who have surrounded us all the days of our lives, who have been for us a loving example, a reason to keep on believing and working and loving Christ's church. Jesus called them the salt of the earth; and we have a very good idea of just what he meant–those good people whose very presence in the world have a healing effect; those whose deep integrity have a way of preserving that which is best in the world; those whose joyful, loving presence have a way of giving the world its flavor.

Over the last several weeks as we have stepped aside to consider some of the individual biographies of the Bible, we have enjoyed identifying with the humanity of our heroes of the faith. We have smiled at Moses' reluctance to answer God's call, the family competitiveness of Jacob and Esau, Joseph and his brothers, and the ill equipped forces of Gideon. We have taken great comfort in acknowledging the message that God uses less than perfect people to accomplish great tasks of deliverance, justice and peace. But alongside our sense of relief, we need to acknowledge another thread of truth that winds its way through scripture, through the church of the ages and through our own personal histories. Our heroes of faith, though admittedly and sometimes embarrassingly blighted with weaknesses, are marked by an underlying and persistent fidelity. Far from the super heroes of the silver screen, whose perfection overwhelm us, these heroes are recognizable as those who simply put one foot in front of the other in day to day living and day to day dedication to the task. Far from suitable objects for a personality cult, these, in the words of the psalmist, are like trees planted by streams of water. Their roots sinking deeply into the ground, they withstand the tests of time. Theirs is a purity of heart, a singleness of purpose that resides, not in a self-righteous legalism, which is sometimes the only way we seem to be able to talk about righteousness. Theirs is a righteousness, the psalmist tells us, that springs from *delight,* not slavish obedience and certainly not mastery, of the law of the Lord. In an age when we find ourselves subtly coaxed to shave just a bit off of the truth, to compromise our integrity for the sake of political expediency, to give up on far-fetched dreams of justice and peace, we would do well to revisit the lives of our salty saints and seek there the clue to how we too should live.

The integrity of God's people is critical to faith's story. It opens with the familiar phrase, "There was a man," or in this instance it reads, "there was *a certain* man." A favorite means Jesus used to introduce his parables, it was also a way Hebrew scripture sometimes noted a significant turning point. In this instance, it was a turning point, not just for the man, but as was often the case, for the nation. As a matter of fact, the story of this man and this woman may be interpreted as itself a parable of the nation.

It was a watershed moment for the nation of Israel. The rising success of the Philistines posed a threat from outside while moral, political and religious challenges were undermining Israel's stability from within. "In those days," the book of Judges ominously concludes, "there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes" (21:25). The closest thing Israel had for this moment to the judges who had arisen in past times of crisis was the aging Eli. Yet, even he was being succeeded by his two sons, who were "scoundrels [with] no regard for the LORD" (2:12). Hope for the nation appeared remote, to say the least.

Enter Elkanah, a pious and good man with a strong family heritage, and his two wives--Peninnah, whose name means "fertile, prolific" and Hannah, whose name means "charming, attractive." Hannah's barrenness, sent upon her in the judgment of her community by God, closed her and seemingly Elkanah off from a future of hope. Compare the derision she suffered at the hands of Peninnah to the derision Israel suffered at the hands of its neighbors, and her anxiety and deep longing over having no children in spite of Elkanah's love to that of a nation which had no central leadership, no king in spite of God's love and care. Note Hannah's refusal to accept half measures of comfort–the double portion of meat from Elkanah's hand or a place of retreat in the solace of Elkanah's love, which, in his humble assessment, was worth "more . . . than ten sons" (1:8). Refusing to settle, Hannah determined she would present herself and her case before God–a purpose that could not be thwarted even when the keeper of God's house, the priest Eli, dismissed her as a drunken spectacle. Note that she, a lowly woman, talked back to this keeper of God's house: "No, my lord . . . Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation" to the Lord" (1:15-16). Note the steadfastness of her trust once her case had been made to God and met with Eli's eventual blessing. In hope she turned her steps homeward to await the conception and birth of her son. And, note the name she gave her son: Samuel because, she said, "I have asked him of the LORD"–*samu* (heard) + *el* (God) = Samu-el, "heard of God" [Cartledge, *Review & Expositor* (Spr 2002), 144].

We celebrate with Hannah the gift of life in the birth of a son. She became a mother, but she was also more. Her story was for Israel and becomes for us the model of faithfulness in the midst of what seems to be a hopeless

situation. She did not settle for half measures or resort to other more “realistic” hopes. She rested her hope in the God who hears and responds.

We work with God to turn impossibilities into possibilities. Our scriptures reverberate, in the words of Walter Brueggemann, with “songs of impossibility.” Conventional definitions of reality do not contain or define what yet may be. The God lauded again and again in Israel’s psalms of praise is the God who works with and through God’s people to reverse the way things are. Hannah’s own song of celebration in chapter 2 rejoices in just such a God. Most likely a “public hymn,” known among the Israelite people long before it was sung by Hannah, Hannah’s song, which would eventually become Mary’s *Magnificat*, sings of the God who acts in delivering love not just on behalf of the individual, but the God in light of whom the nation chooses its course. Far from being reduced to following the political norm of the day, far from a course of action others would call practical or realistic, this God is the God who reverses the status quo. This God lifts up the lowly and puts down the mighty. This God feeds the hungry and gives sight to the blind. This God makes the barren woman into the joyous mother of children. Human definitions of the way things have to be in this world are brought to naught, when the freedom and power of this God is at work.

Service to this God says to us, then, that we do not have to adjust our expectations to the way things are. We do not have to settle for half comforts as if the best we can hope for is the flimsy consolation that things, after all, could be worse. We do not have to redefine what is right and good by what serves our short tem interest or proves expedient for the short haul. Righteousness that springs from delight in the law of the Lord is not about slavish obedience but the joyful discovery that there is hope for the future. It is about the audacity of clinging to the bedrock assurance that we do not have to let go of our far-fetched dreams of righteousness, justice and peace. We do not have to abandon our integrity and all that we hold dear. On the contrary, we may, if we are ready and willing, hang onto it so steadfastly that it shapes the days of our days and the prospects for the world in which we live.

Reflecting on Hannah’s song of praise, Patrick Miller sums it up for us:

> In a world that assumes the status is quo, that things have to be the way they are and that we must not assume too much about improving them, the doxologies of God's people are fundamental indicators that wonders have not ceased, that possibilities not yet dreamt of will happen, and that hope is an authentic stance [*Theology Today* (1988), 186].

All of this, Miller goes on to say, is ridiculous unless, of course, we have kept our eyes open to the wonders of the past. None of it seems reasonable or makes sense until we remind ourselves of those times in which we have actually seen, seemingly against all odds, an oppressed people set free, the gift of life in the face of death, the emergence of new life where before there was only barrenness, and the witness of God’s saints who have lived out their days as models of integrity and hope.

So what clues do the lives of our salty saints leave for us? Just this: a singleness of purpose, a purity of heart that dares to live and work toward a new day of righteousness, justice and peace.

Unrealistic? Impractical? Say that to the Martin Luther Kings, the Gandhis, the Nelson Mandellas, the Desmond Tutus, and the good people of integrity, vision and hope that have surrounded and nurtured us all the days of our lives. We are, you see, surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Some of them died, faithful still, but never having seen that for which they longed and hoped. Now we confront the question: What about us?