

1 Samuel 1:4-20
1 Samuel 2:1-10
Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25
Mark 13:1-8

In just about a week and a half, our whole country will pause to celebrate the national holiday we call Thanksgiving. Families and friends will congregate to enjoy a festive meal and each other's company and to pause to survey all their blessings. People will drive long distances to reach family or get on an airplane for the first time in nearly two years. It's a time we look forward to every year. And when we can't spend Thanksgiving with family or friends, we can easily feel a little left out of the party. Thanksgiving alone is one of the loneliest times of our lives. But it's also a powerful time when we stop to take stock of all that we have and all that we enjoy...all that we remember and all that we wish for and all that we hope for. Most of us had a pretty quiet Thanksgiving last year because of the pandemic. We're still having to navigate the fear of serious illness, but it is happening less and less frequently and we have vaccines now that guard against its being lethal for us. If we are healthy, we have quite a lot to be thankful for.

But our thankful hearts are not just for once a year celebration. Our thankful hearts are daily exercises in speaking with God, in thanking God, in petitioning God for what we need and what we want. Every single day of our lives is a day to give thanks to God for something. And to be aware of God on a daily basis is a source of thanksgiving in and of itself. We are lucky...and blessed...to be aware of God in our lives. We are fortunate to know the stories of the Bible. We are grateful to know the gift given to us by Jesus himself when he opened the doors of heaven to us and the ultimate reunion with God and those we love who went before us. How in the world can we adequately express our gratitude for that?

And we are blessed to have each other and this beautiful sanctuary where we can gather for worship. Some time during the last week, you should have received a letter signed by our Warden, June Jallah and by me. It's an invitation that comes around every year at about this same time. It's an invitation to express your gratitude to God not only with your lips and in your heart and in your lives, but also in a tangible way. This is the time of year when we not only celebrate Thanksgiving around the family dinner table, but also at the altar at St. Paul's . This is not just Thanksgiving season, it is also stewardship season when we are given the opportunity to translate our gratitude for all that God has provided for us by choosing how we will support the body of Christ in Bailey's Crossroads that is our beloved St. Paul's.

During the last two years our world has been rocked by the pandemic. The rhythms of our lives have changed...dramatically. Our sense of security has been shaken to its core. We find ourselves struggling with trying to stay connected to those we love. We have been finding out the hard way how much we need the physical presence of those people who are important to us. Some of us have weathered the actual physical death of someone held near and dear to us within the last year or two. Our faith does not take the pain of separation away, but our faith can hold us up and hold us together when we are convinced that we can't possibly manage. And our faith holds out for us the promise of eventual reunion which is so sweet to contemplate.

Our scripture passages this morning give us some insight about God's love and care for us and God's willingness to listen to us when we cry to Him and his willingness to do something about our anguish when we hear Hannah's plea. God does for us on a grand scale the kinds of things he wants us to do for others on a smaller scale. God cares for us so that we can learn how to care for each other. Do you remember what it feels like to cross swords with someone you love? Do you remember what it's like to feel like you've made such a horrible mistake that you can never be forgiven? Do you know what it's like to believe that you have somehow damaged a relationship beyond all repair? Most of us know exactly what all of this feels like. It's a horrible sense of loss. And we are sometimes tempted to rush to cover up our own fault in the

situation only because it's so painful to realize what we've done. We can't undo it. And perhaps this person will never forgive us. We're having trouble forgiving ourselves. But avoiding owning the blame for what we've done wrong just makes it worse...and makes the division between us and the one we love even harder to bridge. That's where our faith comes in. That's where our belief in all that Jesus said and did and taught us comes into play. In our prayer to God through Jesus we are able to own our own mistakes. As painful as it is and as much as our hearts hurt, when we take responsibility for ourselves and experience the magnificent forgiveness of God, our heart takes flight. The places in our soul that seemed so heavy suddenly feel like we are floating. All of us have experienced that wonderful feeling of restored love between us and someone we fought with and thought we had lost forever. It's the most wonderful feeling in the world. And it's a gift from God!!

In the Old Testament lesson this morning, we hear about how miserable and heartbroken Hannah is. She's even tormented by her husband's other wife because she can't have children. Hannah takes her broken heart to the Lord. She pours out all her pain and frustration and gives it to God. She tells God exactly what she wants and needs...and God provides it for her. Those miracles are not just ones that happen in the Old Testament. That feeling of love and elation and gratitude that Hannah feels toward God is not something that happens only "way back then." Those kinds of things still happen today. They don't always happen in the way we expect or in the timeframe we wished, but they do happen. God is still at work in the world. God continues to hear those who call to Him.

The psalm from Samuel that we just said together this morning was Hannah's revelation of all that was in her heart and all her gratitude toward God. God didn't just work those miracles for the people in the Old Testament. God is still working those miracles today with those who believe in him and trust in him and petition him and have an ongoing relationship with him. We don't always get what we ask for...and years later we may look back and think, God was right not to give me what I thought I wanted. That would have been a mess...and God was protecting me! The reminder is that God is always looking out for us...that when we are in ongoing

communication with God we can count on the fact that God is listening to us and is taking care of us.

As we approach our Thanksgiving holiday, this is a good time to do the inventory of all the times that you can remember that something in your life worked out perfectly...and quite mysteriously. Our secular Thanksgiving is the time we set aside to publicly and in our hearts, pause for a moment to express our gratitude to God.

And secular Thanksgiving is not the only way we can express our thanksgiving and gratitude to God. The responsibility that we feel toward our church family is another avenue we have to express that gratitude. Within the walls of this sanctuary, we lift up our hearts and our prayers to God. We sing God's praises with the help of the beautiful music that comes from our organ and Anna Ko's talented fingers on the keyboard. We listen to scripture passages that tell us what God is like and what God expects from us. We learn about Jesus' mission on earth and the mission that he has handed over to us...to go into all the world and preach the gospel. He tells us to feed the hungry; to clothe the naked; to comfort the sick; to visit those who are imprisoned in any way. Jesus left us with a lot of work to do. We should never be idle. There are missions for us around every corner. And we should never stay within the walls of our sanctuary.

It's not just time for secular Thanksgiving. It's also time for Stewardship...which means taking care of all that God has given us...all that God has put in our lives...not just material things, but talents as well. And don't think that you don't have any. We've all been given gifts to share. Some of us are still discovering what our gifts are. But stewardship is using those gifts to the glory of God...not just for our own comfort or amusement. We need to look around. We need to be able to see what's right in front of us that needs our attention. We need to be willing to share what we have...not just our money or our material things...but our time, our attention, our care, and our concern. Those things are all part of our talents as well.

If we want to survive as the body of Christ in Bailey's Crossroads, we need to harness everything we have to take Jesus' message out into the world and continue with his mission. We need to share our love. We need to share our company. We need to make friends with the people that live on the same street we do. We need to move beyond our own boundaries. It's not easy. No one ever told us that following Jesus was going to be easy. When we think about stewardship, we think about time, talent, and treasure. The part about treasure is the easy part. That's about money and we all have some that we can spare. Our time is another thing, but that's what we need to share if we are going to build relationships right here in Bailey's Crossroads. We can't hide St. Paul's under a bushel. Our goal needs to be that we will never again hear anyone say, "I had no idea there was a church back there!" There's lots of movement going on in Bailey's Crossroads right now. There's lots of revitalization being planned by Fairfax County for Bailey's Crossroads and we need to be sure that we are a part of it. Everyone who lives here needs to know that we're here. That takes time and talent and treasure and commitment on our part to do exactly what Jesus told us to do!! There are hurting people right outside our door. They've been there for a long time. Inside these walls we worship a God who commanded us to go out in the world and take care of all the people who are hurting...and we haven't done it. At least...not yet!

It's stewardship week. Next Sunday is Stewardship Sunday. We'll put our pledge cards in the offering plate and lift them up to God to use for His mission in the world. The following Thursday is Thanksgiving. Let's each one of us take inventory and decide what we are most grateful for and what we are willing to share with a hurting world. In the process of doing as Jesus commanded us to do we may just save our own lives.

It's a tough ask, but with God's help and blessing, we can do just that.

Thanks be to God.

AMEN.