

A DRUNKEN PRAYER

FIRST SAMUEL 1: 4-20

November 15, 2009; University Church of Chicago

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When I was in the sixth grade and our family lived in Homer, Louisiana, my Dad worked as the parts and service manager at Harkness Motor Company. Frank Harkness, the owner of the Ford dealership was a drunken, red-faced, red-haired tyrant whose prized possession was a maroon Lincoln V-12 Zephyr automobile. He loved that car, he had it washed and polished each day. It sat in front of his Ford-Lincoln-Mercury showroom.

Until somebody stole it.

Harkness immediately ordered my Dad to find the car and bring it back to him. Dad located the car in New Orleans. He determined that whoever stole the car had driven it to the Crescent City and abandoned it—in of all places—in front of the police station. So, Dad and I took a bus to New Orleans to retrieve Frank Harkness's Lincoln Zephyr. It was for me a magical trip. We ate beignets and drank real chicory coffee at Café Du Monde. We sat in the plaza in front of St. Joseph's Cathedral and Dad implored me to count the people of all races and ethnicities who came through the plaza (I was reading Rudyard Kipling's novel, *Kim*, at the time). And I discovered jazz.

It was easy to appreciate jazz in New Orleans in those long ago, antediluvian days. Jazz bands sprang up on the streets in the Quarter, playing for money that people like us would throw in a hat. And Dad also somehow sneaked me into several jazz joints in New Orleans where I fell in love with America's only truly indigenous music. Jazz arose among the disadvantaged blacks who could not afford to have things settled because if things were settled, they would be settled against them. And so they practiced a beat that keeps making impossible angles of reality possible and available. The disadvantaged patrons of jazz always come from and live in a place that is far from settled power where life is lived with a combination of suffering and joy.

Moreover, jazz consists in a theme that keeps recurring, and that theme is played out with endless variations, endless freedom combined with remarkable discipline. It keeps returning to the core theme, and the ultimate return of the jazz number is decisive and spirit-lifting.

By the time we drove Frank Harkness's V-12 Lincoln Zephyr back to Homer, I was hooked on jazz, and I have spent the rest of my life in love with that form of music. Two of my several hometowns, Kansas City and Chicago, offer the most innovative jazz in the world.

Do you remember that jazz artist named David who danced joyously naked around the Ark of the Covenant when it was recovered and brought back to the Holy City, Jerusalem (1 Samuel 16: 12-13, 2 Sam. 6: 16)? And his uptight wife looked out of the palace window and frowned at such shenanigans? And how about those three Jewish boys who danced on hot coals in the furnace of Nebuchadnezzar,

dancing safe and not burning (Dan. 3: 27-28)? But we go behind the furnace to the exile where our folks sang songs of remembered Zion while the Babylonians mocked them and teased them. But their singing never stopped (Psalm 137 : 1-6).

Jazz at its best is variation on a theme. If you keep pushing back you will come to the very genesis of jazz. And in today's First Lection, the song is sung in Hannah's Song (First Samuel 2: 1-10). After the unexpected baby is born, she sings:

God kills and God brings to life; God brings down Sheol and raises up. God makes poor and makes rich; she brings low, she also exalts. God raises up the poor from the dust; God lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's and on them God has set the world.

The legend (using that word in its most complimentary form) of Samuel is one of the most significant figures in the entire history of the people of Israel. He was a pivotal religious, moral and political leader when a loose confederation of tribes and tribal leaders, beset by powerful neighbors, became a nation with an organized state and capital city—Jerusalem—a kingship—David—and in time the Temple the earthly abode of God.

In the beginning of the Samuel narratives Israel is portrayed as a troubled, waiting, marginal community. As the story unfolds, we discover that Israel is waiting for a king who will protect, defend, gather, liberate and legitimate the community. Indeed, Israel is waiting for a particular king: David!

But in true Biblical fashion, the story does not rush to David. There is a long waiting, a confused waiting, for Israel cannot know for certain where its future lies. Just like us: when we were young, we waited to graduate from high school, then we knew a degree would send us out to conquer the world. But then another degree was needed. And even if we did not have a degree, still we waited for success. We strove for it, for that elusive approval, status, the place at the top. Then when a few of us got to the top, they had to look around and protect themselves, hoard their money, afraid all they had acquired was going to disappear.

But the Bible tells a more complete story. And behind the "great leader" narrative it locates the origin of Israel's future in the story of a bereft, barren woman named Hannah. Like your story and mine, like the church's story, the story of Israel's waiting begins neither in grand theory nor in palace splendor nor in doxological celebration. It begins, rather in a single Ephraimite family whose father has a splendid pedigree but whose mother is without children and without prospect of children.

The first scene in the story tells of a transaction between Elkanah, her husband, and Hannah. He obviously loves her dearly but the other wife Peninnah taunts Hannah, provokes her because she cannot have children. Hannah's barrenness overrides the power of her husband's love. So, she retreats into depression, grief and loss of appetite (verse 7).

The second scene portrays an interaction with Eli, the priest at Shiloh. Her husband is not there, and the action consists of three speeches. First, Hannah makes a vow (verse 11). She addresses Yahweh, the

same God who has caused her barrenness. Her vow seeks to evoke a new gift from God: "O God, if only you will look on my misery and remember me and give me a child, then I will set him before you as a pure offering."

Eli, the priest, thinks that she is drunk. So the second speech is one of self-vindication. She is not drunk—she is desperate. She speaks candidly to God in anguish that eludes even the priest.

The third speech is Eli's response, an assurance to Hannah that all will be well and a benediction that "the God of Israel will hear and answer."

In the third scene, Hannah is filled with new hope. The priest has given her assurance that God will answer, so she is no longer sad. She eats and drinks with her husband, they worship God, they thank God for the promise and they go home to Rammah where she conceives and bears a son. She names him Samuel which means "I have asked him of the Lord."

Hannah is in good biblical company in her barrenness and in God's response of fruitfulness and new birth. Remember Sarah (Gen. 17:16-19)? Or Rebekah (Gen. 25: 21-16)? And Rachel (Gen. 30: 22-24) and even the mother of Samson (Judges 13:2-5). And, course, Elizabeth (Luke 1: 5-17), the mother of John the Baptizer.

On the next to the last Sunday of the Christian year we are invited to see our life as God's people in light of this story of God's answer to Hannah's prayer for a child, her dedication of the boy Samuel to God, the One who has lent the boy to her, and her dedication of him for life.

She was a woman without children who cried inconsolably to God to grant her prayer. She promised that if God did bless her with a child, she would give the child back to God. She understood that every gift we have is from God.

These stories are not just about miraculous answers to prayer, about some intractable God who finally relents, about unusual children who are born as a result of barrenness being overcome. Hannah's change from sadness to joy, following the turn of events leading from barrenness to childbirth, situates her move from praise within a larger story of God's faithfulness to Israel for the sake of the world.

You know all this. You know these stories. You have heard the good news a thousand times. So I tell you all this in the context of sober thoughts. Jazz has its sober moments, but for the most part jazz is about joy, about triumph over the odds, about living with hope through all the suffering. So, consider how we have grown deaf to the music that declares God's rescue.

We nickel and dime God's love by giving a little here and a little there, turning the tithe into a requirement rather than an expression of gratitude and trust in God's love. We turn Christ's Church into a bunch of committees and we spend hours remembering the old days when things were better and more people came to church and the Blue Gargoyle was here instead of seizing the moment that God gives right now. We doubt God's power in 2009 and in our doubt we grow weary and in weariness we become fearful and anxious.

General Eric Shinseki, who as U.S. Army chief of staff, told Donald Rumsfeld in so many words that he was a fool about Iraq and Afghanistan and is now trying to change the Veterans Administration into an agency that can actually help wounded veterans likes to say words the church needs to hear: "If you don't like change, you are going to like irrelevancy even less."

Life is full of uncertainties, and there is little we can know for sure. Belief is not a matter of learning, assenting to certain doctrines. It's more than that. It's a matter of faith that lives with ambiguity.

Samuel becomes the prophet who stands up and tells Israel the truth. Who among us will have the courage to stand against death and evil in our time? When a jury in DuPage County finally convicted Brian Dugan of the murder of Janine Nicarico, the prosecutor turned to Dugan and said, "We got it right!" What he and most others forgot is that they got it wrong for over twenty-five years. Jim Ryan, who is running again for governor, and Joe Birkett, the present states attorney, sent Alex Rodriguez and Rolando Cruz to death row for eleven years, knowing all the time that they were innocent of Janine's death.

Who will stand up. Who will remember that chickens do, indeed, come home to roost?

Father Andrew was the BBC's adviser on Roman Catholic affairs. A producer who was planning a series of programs wrote to Father Andrew asking him how he could ascertain whether or not there really is heaven and hell. The reply from the priest was contained in just one word: "Die."

A friend of mine was filling out an application for a job in a factory. He puzzled for some time over the question, "Person to notify in case of accident?" Finally he wrote, "Anybody in sight!"

These jazz songs of Miriam and Hannah and Elizabeth sing a reality that gives us a vision of what God is bringing about. Most of us know only from a distance the lives of the poor, the beaten down, the weak and the lowly. Yet Hannah's vision invites us to see the world as God intends.

That great jazz artist, Paul of Tarsus, sings it well:

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Romans 8:38-39).