***A Journey of the Heart: Hannah Seeks the Lord***

After having spent this long season to the church in contemplation of the Advent, Epiphany, Lent and then Eastertide, which culminated last week in Pentecost, we turn our attention in this Season After Pentecost in, to the major historical books and major prophets.

This year, year B of the three-year cycle of the lectionary, takes us to the Books of I and II Samuel and Kings. So we turn our attention, which has been focused on NT mostly, to OT themes for a while. Full disclosure, I’m going to go a bit long today so I hope I don’t try your patience to severely.

If I may remind you of the historical context of the Book of Samuel, you will recall that we join the drama of Israel at the establishment of the monarchy, about 1000 years before Jesus. Abraham was about 1800 years before Jesus, Moses about 1200 years and the monarchy emerged about 1000. The united monarchy of Solomon divided into two kingdoms, North and South about 900, Israel carried into captivity in Babylon about 600 and the temple rebuilt around 500.

Samuel is what we call one of the Bible’s “historical books,” But it isn’t really recognizable as an objective historical account of the period as we understand history today.

The story of the emergence of the monarchy is quite an epic roller coaster ride. It is really a story about the ***people*** who lived through this period, and what they experienced as they tried to discern what God was doing and how they ought to follow. Sometimes they succeeded, often they failed, but overall they generally made it through. The monarchy was established (Saul, David, Solomon) and Israel throve.

The Book of Samuel isn’t really history, it is a “journey of the heart” for both the people and God.

Our lens for this walk through the Book of Samuel will be the notion of the Journey of the Heart. The title of this message is Exhale.

In all its forms the word heart occurs 858 time in the Hebrew Bible. In Samuel there is constant reference to what is going on at this personal, affective level of personality -something like 90-100 times in the whole cycle of I and II Samuel and I and II Kings.

This is just the kind of theme that we should spend our time on because a theme that is so broad and deep in the Bible is, of its nature, of great importance to us. Hans Walter Wolff, in his *Anthropology of the Old Testament* says that “the most important word in the vocabulary of the Old Testament anthropology” is “heart.”

So we are going to use this idea as our lens as we work in Samuel over the next couple of months.

Do you know how eye doctors have that contraption that they use to help determine your glasses prescription? I don’t know if they still use these (it’s been a while since I’ve had my eyes checked), but they would flip these various lenses in front of your eye and say, “Is the eye chart clearer or not clearer?” The lens that you use depends on how well you can see something.

When we read biblical literature we use various lenses too. Sometimes we use the lens of doctrine. This is Trinity Sunday and we could have a look through Scripture for evidence of that doctrine. Sometimes we use the lens of history, sometimes of poetry or wisdom literature, sometimes the lens of emotion or ethical principles, advice on how to live..

In this series on the Book of Samuel I am going to be using the lens of the “heart.” What did the story mean to people on the level of the heart, Hannah, God, David, Samuel, Saul etc.

This is an affective lens really. When we speak about the anthropology of the faith, we are talking about the human experience of God. What is it inside us that responds to God and participates in this union of grace between God and humans? We are, after all, just people. Living, breathing, dying creatures of God.

The “heart” (Heb *lab)* is a very powerful metaphor in the Old Testament. I don’t mean the physical heart, because in the Ancient Near East the didn’t know how the heart worked as a physical organ, or how whether or not it was working was a matter of life or death (there are a few references to the physical heart, as in 2 Kings 9:24, Jer 4:19 which seems to refer to a heart attack).[[1]](#endnote-1)

Today we think of the brain as the physiological centre of what makes us unique. The heart is just a pump. Or, metaphorically, the seat of emotions like hate or love or jealousy, etc.

But to the ancients of the OT the heart that was the seat of the entire personhood, the “many different aspects of our being” including:

* Intellect
* Memories
* Emotions
* Desires
* Will (think of IMEDW)

In short, all those things that make us unique individuals and comprise our personhood. And these are the aspects that are in play in our lives of faith. In fact, in biblical parlance the flesh is the antithesis of this inner sanctum of the human landscape.

See how complex and wonderful the interplay of these many features of our human experience are! In the Bible, the heart is what “in modern idiom” to describe “what makes us tick.” It is “those dynamic forces that make us unique individuals.” [[2]](#endnote-2)

Hearts can be proud (2 Chron 32:26) or evil (1 Sam 17:28). A heart can be distant and alienated from God, as in the metaphor “uncircumcised heart” in Paul (Ro 2:29).

You can get a new lease on life, a redeemed life, what Ezekiel calls ‘heart of stone turned into a heart of flesh’ (Ezek 11:19) or he himself receives a “new heart” (Ezek 18:31).

In Samuel, when Saul is first anointed as king, it tells us that As he turned away to leave Samuel, God gave him another heart… and the spirit of God possessed him. (1 Sam 10:9-10).[[3]](#endnote-3)

In Genesis 6 God despairs of what he created because the “thoughts of their hearts are only evil all the time.” The heart is the seat of emotion, as we see in the Hannah song of this week, …my heart exults in the Lord (1 Sam 2:1). Our desires are seated in the heart in biblical parlance: Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart (Ps 37:4).

You can already anticipate where we will be going in the application of this remarkable idea as we seek to bring its truth into our lives over the course of the summer. That our journey of the heart is about the totality of the human anthropology.

The most remarkable thing is this; there are 26 references to the heart of God. God has a heart too. The heart of the book of Samuel, as it were, is that wonderful text in 1 Sam 13:14 where God finds Saul to have failed in faithfulness and seeks out a man after his own heart to be the ruler of the people.

The man of God says to Eli the priest in 1 Sam 2:35 I will raise up for myself a faithful priest, who shall do according to what is in my heart and in my mind. (Here he refers to Samuel)

This is such a significant idea - that we can come to possess a life that is in touch with the heart and mind of God! The project of the journey of faith is to do exactly that – know the heart and mind of God. We speak of a relationship with God, this is the

This affective lens is rather at variance with our comparatively sterile doctrines of the nature of God in Christianity. Today is Trinity Sunday. The trinity is a theological paradox and itself an impossible idea to fully grasp. It’s abstract, it’s difficult.

And then we have what I call the “ominous omnis” which dominate our western consciousness about the nature of God. God is omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent.

But these ideas, even though we confirm their worth as part of credal Christianity, remove God from the realm of personality and he becomes such a cold unapproachable being in western theological parlance. In fact, we find we can’t grasp it at all, and it seems as though those ideas were developed with just one part of our being, the intellect, to show us we cannot know him.

But the God of the Old Testament isn’t like that! He is a “personal being who thinks, feels, desires and chooses.”[[4]](#endnote-4) He changes his mind and grieves by about his own appointed king Saul, 1 Sam 15:26, 15:10).[[5]](#endnote-5) He has “great delight”: (1 Sam 15:22); he gets annoyed as in Job (38-41); he rests (Gen 2:2), he is jealous (Ex 20:5, I am a jealous God) and so on.[[6]](#endnote-6) There are innumerable anthropomorphic references to God in the Bible.

So in our language of God’s attributes we find ourselves grasping to understand Him and we see how imperfect language is to the task. Our theological language is so very inadequate to understand the God with whom we have to do.

Can a God who is omniscient change his mind? A good theological/philosophical question. But does it help us know and follow the heart of God?

I’m not saying we choose between the warm view of God in the OT and the more sterile view of God in western credal theology, I’m saying we learn from both. We do not discard, out of hand for the purposes of theological precision.

God has a heart and made us in his own image. “Moreover, by his own act of bestowing a name on himself, God chooses to be described as definable, distinctive, the individual.” And Eichrodt, reviewing the nature of God across the Old Testament, says his nature must be thought of in terms of analogy to the “…human will, that is to say, as a being which itself thinks, wills and acts after the manner of human personality.”[[7]](#endnote-7)

We should enjoy knowing that.

We have intellect, memories, emotions, desires and will because God has intellect, memories, emotions, desires, and will. And the project of a life of faith is to harmonize our all these aspects of our being with all the aspects of God’s being. That is the journey of the heart. And that is why the journey of the heart is a project of a lifetime. For myself over 50 years now.

Let’s consider Hannah, the mother of Samuel, the matriarch of the monarchy. Our reading for the week is her song of praise when God grants her a son, Samuel (note the intertextuality to the Song of Mary, Luke 1:46ff, our gospel passage for today). Elkanah, her husband, had two wives. Peninnah had children and Hannah was barren. It is a story about how Hannah suffers from inability to produce children, Peninnah’s cruel taunting of her, and Hannah’s emotional appeal to Eli the Priest to intercede on her behalf with God.

Hannah goes to the tent of tabernacle and prays to God in her heart (the Heb is lab, heart, even though NRSV says she simply prayed silently, moving only her lips.) Eli doesn’t know what the request is, but grants it and she eventually conceives. Understood in this way, Hannah’s prayer involves her intellect, her emotions certainly, her desires and her will. The totality of Hannah’s inner being is before God.

It is wonderful how God blesses her womb and she bears Samuel, the main figure of the early part of the story of the monarchy.

**From the Text**

In our journey of the heart, half-hearted is a thing.

Throughout the Bible the depiction of the faith journey makes reference to the ***degree of engagement*** with God. A couple of samples of the many dozens we could cite would be

Then Samuel said to all the house of Israel, “If you are returning to the Lord with all your heart, then put away the foreign gods and the Astartes from among you. Direct your heart to the Lord, and serve him only, and he will deliver you out of the han.d of the Philistines.” (1 Sam 7:3)

IMEDW! All come into play in the journey of the heart - ..with all your heart.

He said, “O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth beneath, keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart… (1 Kings 8:23)

The *degree of our engagement* we have with God is a biblical idea; not just a pietistic slogan. These texts refer to the entirety of the inner landscape of the human being, the totality of all the aspects which make us creatures of God. When it comes to the faith journey, half-hearted is a thing.

When we were in Sheffield University in England we attended a little Nazarene church of about 50 or 60 souls. It’s true you know, everywhere you go you have family if you are a Christian. This congregation wasn’t very big but they had heart! Pastor David Perry and his wife Pam. He taught me how to play squash! At Sheffield CoN they could sing the old hymns.

Miss Ivy, was an ancient Jamaican woman. She was in lots of ways larger than life; she took up the best part of one pew. She lived in one of the deplorable council apartment complexes in Sheffield. She would sing like you had never heard. She always had a small hymnal in her hand (although she never needed it because she know all the words to every song).

She would pound that on the back of the pew in front of her and sing at the top of her lungs, occasionally on tune. There was another lady named Betty, a great friend to us, but she could go too, and she had this really piercing voice. We learned pretty quickly to select a seat that wasn’t in front of either of these saints, because when things got up to a full cry you were looking for safe haven – an area of audio neutrality.

Miss Ivy was all in. There was not half a heart in her. When she came to worship the Lord all of Miss Ivy was present in the moment.

In 1 Samuel 25 we hear the story of Nabal, who we are told was surly and mean (v 3) and he was so ill-natured that no one can speak to him (v 17). Nabal means “fool.” Short story, Nabal offends David but his lovely and wise wife Abigail intercedes and the disaster is avoided. When she tells Nabal about this incident the next morning (he was drunk at his feast the night before),

In the morning, when the wine had gone out of Nabal, his wife told him these things, and his heart died within him; he became like a stone. 38 About ten days later the Lord struck Nabal, and he died. (1 Sam 25:37)

If there is half a heart when it comes to the journey of faith there is even such a thing as a dead heart in a living body. Your physical heart is still beating but you don’t know life – your soul is on life support. You need a resurrection in your life.

And, you know… this isn’t a message just the down and out. You may be very successful in life. You may have all the external appearances of success and happiness, but you know inside, in your heart, you are dying.

Here is the gospel this morning. The Risen Jesus is the answer to the death of the soul. We can go from spiritual death to spiritual life through the power of the Risen Christ. As Jesus said before his Ascension repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations. (Luke 24:47). Is your inner being broken, in need of a fresh infusion of life – By revealing himself to us by a name “…he has opened to them [us] a part of his very being and given them [Israel, us] a means of access to himself.”[[8]](#endnote-8)

Receive Christ into the totality of your being today.

Finally this. If the intellect were the whole of the matter we would all go get advanced degrees in theology and Bible and the church would be a perfect place, the Kingdom of God would be realized. But we all know that that isn’t what we need. If emotion were the whole of the matter then we would all go full Pentecostal all the time, and the Kingdom would arrive. But that isn’t what we need. If were all about will we would create a strict community based on obeying all the rules all the time and that would be the solution to the human problem.

My word for you to day is that it isn’t about believing harder or believing more stuff. You can’t will this oneness into being, you can’t even feel it most of the time. My word for you to day is it is all about the exhale. Releasing your whole self into the hands of a loving God. The walls, the defensiveness, the ego all must be laid aside in this sacred space of the heart.

How does this relationship with God work for each person? How does this intimate, sacred engagement with the Intellect, Memories, Emotions, Desires and Will happen with you and God. That is a matter you and your Lord to talk about.

Our Journey of the Heart will teach us that it is the whole being (mind, emotions, memories, will and desires) that God wants to indwell in our lives. And then we will come closer to the Kingdom of God. And we will, as Samuel 7 says, … walk before you with all our hearts.

Benediction

Now may the God who named himself before us and has opened to us his very being, and given us access to the divine presence, bless you and keep you in the week to come, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

1. In this section on the heart I’m relying on the marvelous little essay in *The Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, pp. 368-9. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See also, heart as the seat of intellect, Ps 77:6, Gen 6:5; the heart can be deluded, Is 44:20 or Jer 17:9; where we experience fear, Deut 28:6; sadness, Neh 2:2; trust, Ps 28:7; and the will, Ex 4:14 as in Pharoah’s hard heart. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. And yet, when Saul begs forgiveness Samuel declares God won’t change his mind on this. …for he is not a mortal that he should change his mind… 1 Sam 15:29. In other words, God is not capricious. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See also these references to the human-like qualities of God: Ex 32:14, 2 Sam 24:16, Gen 9:16; Gen 6:6, Ex 20:5, Judges 2:18; 1 Sam 15:35, etc. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol 1 p 206ff. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-8)