

Advent 2 B 2017

Dove of Peace Lutheran Church

Pastor Stephen Springer

December 10, 2017

1 Samuel 2:1-10; Luke 1:46-55

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends:

The reading for Christmas Eve begins: “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus.” That’s the first verse of Luke Chapter two. What precedes that Christmas Eve sentence, Luke chapter one, is the longest chapter in the longest book in the New Testament. You could not do much better, this Advent season, than to spend some quality time with Luke chapter one.

Luke does not merely inform us that Jesus was born to a virgin, as the creeds state. Luke tells us of *two* miraculous conceptions. John the Baptist was conceived by Elizabeth, who was old and infertile. And Jesus was conceived by Mary, who had no sexual relations with a man. And these miraculous births are framed by Luke in such a way that the informed reader of the Bible is compelled to remember

the miraculous birth of Isaac to Sarah,
the miraculous birth of the twins Esau and Jacob to Rebekah,
the miraculous birth of Joseph to Rachel,
the miraculous birth of Samson to the wife of Manoah,
and the miraculous birth of Samuel to Hannah.

Hannah. And the miraculous birth of Samuel. We constructed our worship service this morning so that the song of Hannah was read adjacent to the song of Mary so that you could see the inspiration for the one in the other. If the *Magnificat*, the song attributed to Mary, was a creation of the earliest Christians, it means that *they* saw the parallel between the birth of Samuel and the birth of Jesus. If the *Magnificat* is what it claims to be, the actual words of Mary herself, then Mary, herself, deliberately and irresistibly makes the connection with Hannah and Samuel.

Let us pause this morning and drink this in. Slowly drink this in. Hannah’s name in Hebrew means, narrowly, *gift*. It means *grace* or *gracious*. Perhaps Hannah’s parents chose that name because she was a gift in their eyes. Or perhaps her name indicated the gift that would be given to her— a son— and that her son would be a gift to God’s people and to world history. Let us all pause to remember what a lovely name this is. Pause to remember who has been gift to us, who has been grace to us. Female or male. Who has been Hannah. Or in the Europeanization of that Hebrew name— Anna. Anne.

After Jesus was born, Joseph and Mary went with baby Jesus to the Temple. There they met two

elderly people. Simeon and Hannah. The King James Version decided to make it Anna, even though the Greek word is Hannah. And all English translations have done it that way ever since. Martin Luther did not make that mistake when he put it in German: *Hannah*. Hannah is the only female prophet in the Bible. *Prophētis*. Nominative singular feminine noun. The informed reader of the Bible is *compelled* to see the connection that Hannah the mother of the great prophet is somehow connected to this prophetess Hannah-Anna and that connection is made through Mary. There are no coincidences in this story. Coincidences happen in detective novels, but they don't happen in the Gospel According to Luke.

And there with the prophetess Hannah and Mary who has already made the connection with Samuel's mother Hannah, old Simeon says: *This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel*. Rising and falling. Reversals. This is what Hannah spoke of when Samuel was born: *The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts*. Rising and falling. Mary speaks of this in her own song: *He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly*. Rising and falling. It is a holiday message.

Watch Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. The *Magnificat* is there. Don't laugh at me. I was born in 1964. My first Christmas was the first Christmas that Rudolph aired as a General Electric special on NBC. Two classics were born that year. Me and Rudolph. The reindeer who was mocked and scorned. Just like Hannah. The Island of Misfit Toys. "Rudolph with your nose so bright, won't you guide my sleigh tonight?" *The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This is the Lord's doing; it is marvelous in our eyes*.

Old Hannah and Old Simeon say to Mary: *This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel... a sword will pierce your own soul too*. This is a reference to the crucifixion. Mary will have the joy of a child, a first-born son, whom she will raise and he will do great things. And she will watch him die.

Our second reading today is very important. We read it on Ascension Sunday during the season of Easter. Jesus ascended into heaven. And who remained in Jerusalem, and prayed? A list of the apostles:

Peter, and John, and James, and Andrew, Philip and Thomas, Bartholomew and Matthew, James son of Alphaeus, and Simon the Zealot, and Judas son of James. All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus.

Luke wrote the Gospel that bears his name, and he wrote the Acts of the Apostles. And there is exactly one person who occurs both in the first chapter of Luke. And in the first chapter of Acts. Mary the mother of Jesus. On Christmas Eve, the shepherds visit Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus. And we will hear this as part of the Christmas story: *Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart*. The more literal translation is that she preserved these words. And she ruminated on them. It would not become clear until after the crucifixion what these things would mean. And Mary would remember. *Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart*. The meaning of that statement is that Mary would be continuity and memory. All

of these strange and wonderful things that happened when she was young would not come together until she was old, and widowed, and had watched her son die.

What a wonderful thing that is, too. A holiday message about life-long learning and wisdom. And what our elders remember. And how the old truths and the old stories come to life again and mean new things in the later years.

In the late second century– the late 100's– a gospel appeared. The Gospel of James. It appeared a hundred years after the other gospels, so the church fathers said it was unreliable and not apostolic so it's not in your Bible. The Gospel of James. But you can Google it. The whole thing is about as long as the first two chapters of Luke. It describes not only the birth of Jesus, but it describes Mary and her origins. And it claims that Mary was miraculously born to a childless couple: Joachim and... Anne. Hannah. The church fathers did not trust this story to be scriptural truth, to be the word of God. But the notion that Mary is the daughter of Saint Anne is an imaginative way that some Christians have found to preserve the *essence* of the Hannah connection. That Mary is not a coincidence of the story, or not just an interesting character in her own right. Rather, Mary is the vessel of continuity. Which carries Jesus– and Christmas– from the past into the future.

So you have three homework assignments. You can read the longest chapter of the longest book in the New Testament. Luke chapter one. A good read. Worth your time. You can Google the Gospel of James and read an imaginative story about the birth of Mary and the birth of Jesus. Even if it wasn't deemed worthy to be included in the Bible. And you can watch *Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer*. Which has many good songs. But not the *Magnificat*. But it does have themes that are similar to the themes of Hannah, and Mary, and Simeon, and the other Hannah.

May our Advent meditation and our observance of Christmas and all of our souls magnify the Lord. Amen.