

## ***Sermon***

### ***From Distress to Prayer***

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Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

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The writer of Hebrews wants his readers to know for certain that what Christ has done in his death on the cross is a “once and for all” sacrifice that frees people, not only from their debts of sin, but also from the ritual sacrifices that once surrounded them. What the people were faced with was a significant shift in their reality...to no longer practice these rituals of sacrifice and offerings to God because these practices had become a thing of the past and something no longer required. Jesus had stood in for our sins – Jesus had paid our debt. So the Hebrews are left with this very poignant question – How shall they live in light of this new reality?

To understand the magnitude of this question – imagine how things were accomplished prior to the invention of electricity or the car – or think back to life before computers, before cell phones – when you couldn’t ask “Siri” the answer to any question your human brain could conjure up. For the Hebrews – giving up sacrifices and offerings was this impactful – planning for and going through the ceremony of sacrifices was a daily event. It was how they practiced their faith – how they lived their lives. If things weren’t going as planned or if they had committed a sin, they would make an offering. If they needed something – perhaps better health, a fruitful harvest, a child – you offered a sacrifice, an

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Inspired by [Feasting on the Word, Year B](#) commentary by Elizabeth Forney and Peter A. Wallace (Hebrews 10:11-25) and Martin B. Copenhaver (1 Samuel 1:4-20).

offering – maybe several. So now when these distressing things present themselves – what does this new identity offer? What do they do?

Well the writer of Hebrews does indeed offer some suggestions in this regard. “Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together...but encouraging one another.” Provoke...that’s not a word you hear within a positive connotation very often. For me, it conjures up memories of when I was a child and my brother would annoy me – which was pretty often – and my mom would yell from the other room – Bob, don’t provoke your sister! And while our passage is a positive take on the word, it indeed invokes the same meaning. Provoke – to stir someone to an emotion or response. With this new world that Jesus had created, the Hebrews may have felt there was no longer a need to gather at the temple where their primary reason for gathering was to offer these sacrifices and offerings...so why would we need to go and gather now? Jesus died for MY sins – and now I don’t need an intermediary like a priest to accept my offering – I can go directly to God – Jesus taught us that. So in this part of the scripture, the writer must have sensed that would happen among the people and made these comments to dissuade them from becoming individual followers.

Individual followers – you know who they are. People who choose not to be part of a church or synagogue or mosque because they don’t like “organized religion”. Maybe they’ve had some negative experiences with a church in the past and they have no use for it now. Or they are just too busy on Sundays to set aside a time for church. They are content with solitude and personal devotion.

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They don't need church to be close to God. But in this passage, in this context Paul might respond and I think we also would respond that the community has need of them – to bring fresh ideas and new ways of doing things. In many ways we have become a culture of personal piety, with little or no communal accountability for our Christian walk.

Our Old Testament scripture, 1 Samuel, - Samuel was born into a chaotic time when “all the people did what was right in their own eyes.” Within this difficult situation, the character of Samuel represents a hopeful transition. He is the last of the judges, and in his role as prophet he anoints the first kings of Israel. But the opening chapter of 1 Samuel does not focus on the birth of Samuel himself. Rather it tells the moving story of his mother Hannah.

Elkanah has 2 wives – Penninah, who has borne him numerous children, and Hannah, who has been unable to conceive because “the Lord had closed her womb.” And in society at that time, childbearing was a woman's only unique ability. Being unable to conceive is a shameful thing for Hannah and to make matters worse, Peninnah taunts Hannah and belittles her.

Elkanah very clumsily tries to comfort Hannah, “Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?” And there it is – those words people say in our grief that are nearly the opposite of what we need or want to hear. Basically he's saying – aren't I enough for you? Any couple, any woman who has tried to have a child and has not been able to conceive knows the pain Hannah is going through – and maybe there isn't

a second wife to taunt you but there are plenty of happy families having healthy babies – making it so hard to accept that maybe this isn't going to happen for you.

So Hannah in her pain and grief goes to the temple to beg God for His help – she ignores the priest Eli – marches right past him and goes directly to the alter and makes her appeal directly to God. She cries and weeps in her grief- and then she goes into a contemplative prayer where she mumbles her prayers with eyes closed...and what strikes me is that Eli – Eli the priest – the one who spends most of his time in the Temple – things have fallen away so much and people have fallen away from God to the point that he doesn't recognize Hannah's lament, Hannahs prayer – he thinks she's drunk.

The world today is a vastly changed place. Covid, politics, the Big Quit as its called with Americans quitting and retiring at rates never seen before and church attendance at an all time low – where this is headed, I don't know. But I've talked with several people over the last year and a half and before COVID even and they are hurting...so in these conversations, I might ask them and you have to ask carefully, gently as to not seem like a holy roller as they are called – have you prayed or said something like maybe God is trying to tell you something or place your cares in the hands of our loving God – God will answer – God will provide. And they look at me like I have 3 heads – but if I'd said, hey did you see that video on Tik Tok or that pod cast on how to make a million dollars and never have a job – they'd be all ears.

Eli didn't recognize fervent prayer. I don't think our world is that different today. I don't think most people understand just how powerful having a connection with your faith- having a relationship with a God who can do great things – and being around others who live that as well – it is powerful.

I brought this gorgeous stone with me today – this stone was uncovered in a very unique place, my sisters back yard. My sister had hired landscapers this summer to redo her landscaping and patio. Now her house was built 150 years ago and has stood there since the road in front of her house was nothing but a dirt road. Well, as they dug to redo these gardens they found this incredible creation. It was likely created by a combination of lightening and pressure under the soil. It is such a gorgeous, large stone that looks like glass really. Oh I'm sorry, this was made by lightening, pressure – and the hand of God who willed it to be there, who decided it should exist. And who uncovered it for us to look at today, in 2021 – when we need to see just how powerful our God really is.

Hannah knew – she knew God could do things like this – could make a stone out of dirt and lightening. She knew that Eli was not the answer for her – she needed to go directly to God. And her prayers were answered. All our prayers are answered – they might not be the answer we are looking for or expect but when we lean into God, whatever the answer is will be merciful and meaningful for our lives.

Living in a faith, living in community. Provoking one another to do good...I hope this stone provokes you. And I pray others who have turned away from God

will turn back so they can understand and appreciate the power of God in their lives – just like Darren and Cori who brought their beautiful miracle Zoey forth within our community to be blessed by God.

We know the power of community – when we come together as a faith family – we are able to create something like this (**point to Christmas Boxes**) with the power of the Holy Spirit. The Operation Christmas Child program is something that Bacon Memorial has been committed to for several years, growing its support year over year. These boxes are distributed by pastors in more than 100 countries around the world. Try to imagine the joy on a child's face when they receive one of these boxes and how that box connects us as a community of faith – that box provokes – that box blesses.

**Let us pray – Almighty God of grace, we ask that you carry these boxes into the hands of children in all parts of our world and bless them with health, education, love and joy. Bless this program and all who are responsible to ensure it develops and grows to service all those in need. Protect the volunteers as they travel throughout the world – keep them safe, keep them healthy. And May each child know they are special in your eyes and ours and know by this gift that you are an awesome God. Amen**

So I give you all permission to provoke one another and provoke this world into doing what Cori and Darren have done – to bring God into their child's life – to place God at the top of the list and to be part of a faith community. I'm sure you know someone who has wandered away or someone who has never known

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God – provoke – not with words – but with love and good deeds – and just like that magical rock – with God’s presence – we can turn something ordinary into something extraordinary. We are not mere spectators of God’s work or simple recipients of God’s grace – we are active participants.

Amen