LET US PROVOKE ONE ANOTHER
Scripture: 1 Samuel 1:4-20, Mark 13:1-8 and Hebrews 10:11-25

FOCUS: We are called to pay attention to the movement of the Spirit, listening for unexpected answers to questions, writing God’s truth on our hearts and living it out in our daily lives.

Three very different scriptures this morning. One remarkable lesson in what it really means to be children of God and genuine followers of Jesus Christ. I’ll give you one clue, it doesn’t have much to do with what you think of Starbucks holiday coffee cups. Scratch that, it has nothing to do with what you think about Starbucks coffee cups.

We heard a rather sad portion of the story of Hannah. In a society which placed enormous pressure on all women to marry and to produce children, especial male children, Hannah was barren, a fact she was constantly reminded of by her chief rival, Elkanah’s other wife, Peninnah. Hannah’s distress was visceral. She found herself constantly in tears and frequently unable to eat. Many of us have known similar feeling haven’t we. We can identify with this ancient suffering saint. Who here has never struggled to move past some painful or tragic period in your life? Who among us has not dealt with grief or sorrow so deep that we don’t want to eat? If you haven’t yet faced such, good for you, but I guarantee you, the time will come. And for those of us who have suffered loss, abuse or hardship and moved on, beware, for there will be difficult days again. God doesn’t promise us an easy life, God does promises to go with us through it all and to sustain us in good times and in bad. Like Hannah, we will at times be called upon to struggle through in spite of the tears, despite the nauseous feeling in the pit of our souls.

In our gospel lesson we again encounter those hard headed disciples. We pick up where we left off last week. Jesus and the twelve have been to worship in the temple. There Jesus called out the religious authorises for their arrogance and inattention to the needs of those they were called to serve. Then he honoured the poor widow for putting all into the offering while chiding the wealthy for making a show of contributions which representedc little, if any, sacrifice. Clearly the message had been about more than currency. Jesus was all about total commitment to the work of God’s kingdom, about giving all of life back to God and to God’s people in response to God’s grace and love.

So as they are leaving the temple what is on the minds of the disciples? Architecture! ***“Wow Jesus, look at the size of those stones, what a magnificent structure. It is truly amazing. We stand in awe of such an accomplishment.”*** What irony! Having just been taught by the master about matters of eternal importance, what sticks in the minds of his followers is how cool the church building is. It is as if they never even heard the message. There is a lesson for all of us here. When we gather as the church we ought to be here to receive a message from God. I’m not talking primarily about the sermon. What matters most to me is not how well you can remember what I have to say this morning. I confess that some weeks as I go to post my sermon on the website I have to look at the bulletin to remember which sermon I preached the day before.

These sermons are not what is most important. We ought to come here every week anticipating a time of real communion with God through the Holy Spirit, nothing more and nothing less. And that can happen even when I preach a lousy sermon, and I know I am capable of doing that! But if we show up here in an expectant state of mind and truly desire to meet God, it will happen, for the Spirit is in the midst of us whenever we gather in the name of the Father and Son. That Spirit might speak through a hymn or a prayer or a call to worship when the sermon fails to speak at all. You may not remember anything I said or any of the hymns on a Sunday morning yet you might well experience the undeniable presence of the Spirit of God in the kind word or warm smile of a brother or sister in the faith.

The disciples were in the presence of the Son of God. They had the privilege of being taught by one whose life was perfection and whose words were truth from God, but they were too busy admiring the architecture to hear the message. In a real way we are sometimes the disciples. We gather here, we are glad to be here, but we don’t fully open ourselves to the miraculous presence in our midst. We are scattered, unfocused, thinking about where to eat lunch or what football game is on or how much work is waiting for us come Monday morning. Or we are distracted by our own thoughts and worries, the troublesome relationship. The overcommitted calendar for the coming week. There are so many distractions, there is always something and if we are not careful we, like the disciples, might well ignore the voice of God without even realizing what we are doing.

We also heard today from that pesky and insistent Paul fellow. Paul was writing to an unidentified young church which was experiencing hardship and was wavering in their faithfulness. Do you get the theme here? We are looking at three very different situations, a bunch of different folks living in different times, but there is a common thread of restlessness, confusion and inattention. They sound a lot like us!

Hannah knew what she wanted more than anything else in life. She wanted that son. By the social code of the day, that was what was required for her to be complete and productive. Her husband, Elkanah, to his credit, was supportive of her despite her barrenness, an uncommon reaction in that day. Every year he and his family made a pilgrimage to the tabernacle at Shiloh, there to worship and to offer a sacrifice at. A sacrificial meal would then be shared and Elkanah would offer Hannah a double portion. It was an expression of favour and of a desire for her dream to be fulfilled. But it seems it was not to be, and Peninnah, the other wife who had both sons and daughters, was more than happy to regularly remind Hannah of her failure.

One year, after the familiar trek, the worship, the sacrificial meal and the goading by Peninnah, Hannah could not console herself. The double portion meant nothing to her, she would have gladly given both portions back for the promise of a son. The tears began to flow and this godly woman began to express her frustration in silent prayer. She was overcome by a deep sense of hopelessness. So she prayed to God in desperation. Her plea was so fervent that Eli, the priest, was convinced she was drunk. Hannah was confused, restless and convinced God had abandoned her.

Then there are those disciple fellows. I can’t remember who it was that I heard refer to them as the **Duh** ciples, but they really did hit the nail on the head. Yet before we get too smug we need to face the fact that the same could at times be said of us, those who are twenty-first century disciples. Our human nature is to be a bit oblivious to what God is trying to tell us, to what God is doing in our lives, to how God is preparing us for that which we don’t yet see.

In response to the disciples’ gawking at the wonderful structure in which they worshipped Jesus has told them that one day it will be nothing more than a heap of rubble, a truth which would soon come to fruition at the hands of the Romans in the year 70A.D. The disciples didn’t know that of course. So they ask, as we most likely would have as well, ***“Tell us when that is going to happen, and give us a word of warning so we can be prepared.”*** Notice what Jesus does and what Jesus doesn’t do. Jesus speaks words of wisdom, but he doesn’t directly answer the question. How frustrating, and isn’t that the way we sometimes feel when dealing with matters of God’s kingdom, a bit frustrated. We really would prefer direct answers, instead we often get veiled truth.

Someone has done a graduate thesis on the questions Jesus was asked throughout the New Testament. They found 113 direct questions. They also discovered that, in 52 cases, rather than offering any kind of answer Jesus asked a question in response. Many of the answers he did give were similar to what he had to say to the disciples in today’s text, they were what we might well call ambiguous responses, not exactly answers at all. Another source I read this week reports that there are really only 2 times that Jesus directly answers questions put to him. I didn’t do the research and my source didn’t identify them, but the point is pretty clear. Jesus is not in the business of being the answer man, though he has the credentials. He is focused on dispensing God’s truth, in this case to the disciples. He was trying to prepare them for ministry and for the carrying forward of his message of grace and peace. But the disciples were restless, confused and inattentive. They wanted answers.

Those to whom Paul was writing appear to be struggling to free themselves from the legalistic spirituality which had marked their ancestors worship for millennia. So Paul reminds them that Jesus made the once for all sacrifice we talked about last week. You can’t really blame the people. For their whole lives and for the lives of a long line of ancestors they were people of the old covenant. You just didn’t miss any of the required sacrifices, you couldn’t commune directly with God, and you had to rely on the Levitical priesthood to do your bidding. The people to whom Paul was writing were confused, restless and perhaps even a bit afraid. Isn’t fear often the close companion of change?

Three stories, three very different times, three different reactions, but that common thread of confusion. So what do we learn from what we have heard today? Let’s begin as we return to the plight of that barren woman way back there more than a thousand years before Jesus was born. Can’t we all identify with one who is struggling, one who has unfulfilled dreams, one who wonders if they have been forgotten by God? I am struck by verse 10. We read that Hannah was deeply distressed. The more literal translation of the Hebrew is more descriptive “she was bitter of soul” We are told that she wept copiously. Her outpouring was so dramatic that she could be accuse of inebriation. And indeed, in one sense she was inebriated, severely affected by her grief, so much so that it changed her whole demeanour and caused her to lose all inhibition. But it didn’t cause her to lose faith.

In the midst of her sorrow and grief she did what I am certain she had done many times before, she cried out to God in prayer, spoke her mind, honestly expressed her frustration. She kept the faith and when she got an answer she trusted. Did you notice that she didn’t wait for the positive pregnancy test to be comforted? We are told she went up to where she was staying, eat and drank for the first time in days and that her countenance was no longer sad. Hannah had not yet conceived, but God had assured her and she trusted in that assurance. We learn from Hannah the importance of having and keeping the faith no matter how dark the days or how hopeless the situation. We learn to trust that in God’s perfect timing all will be well. We learned the importance of prayer. Hannah got the son she desired. That doesn’t mean that we can count on all being well in this lifetime. Hannah certainly struggled and would struggled again. We have an advantage over Hannah. We have New Testament hope and we know that no matter what we might endure in this life, our greatest reward comes only after it is over.

And what do we learn from the disciples? We learn that we are not going to get all the answers we want this side of eternity. And we learn, if we are wise, to recognize the hard truth that one of the problems is we are asking the wrong questions. Jesus was desperately seeking to prepare his disciples for the ministry which they would be charged with carrying forward. Jesus was all about the present, about making the kingdom of God real in the here and now. But the disciples, like some disciples today, wanted to focus on figuring out the future. They wanted signs. Jesus warned them. ***“There are going to be folks on TV and posting to social media all sorts of falsehoods. A few will even claim to be me and many more will profess to have received special words from my Father. But beware! There will be those who make wild claims about how current wars mean the end is in the immediate future, that natural disasters and famines are sure signs of an imminent collapse of all civilization. Relax this is routine history, not the sign they claim it to be.”*** Later in the chapter Jesus says that neither he nor the angels know when the end will come. We learn from the disciples how foolish it is to focus on what we cannot know and are challenged by Jesus to be about doing what we can do to build up God’s kingdom. You know what that is, we talk about it all the time, but talk isn’t good enough, we are charged to love God and love all God’s people all the time. Do that we can rest assured that when the end does come, we will be OK and we will be made whole.

Finally, what do we learn from the letter to the Hebrews? We learn that we are called to provoke each other. Now you husbands and wives know about that don’t you? And I am sure that I have on occasion provoked some of you, and yes, some of you are capable of provoking me. We read earlier that Peninnah was adept at provoking Hannah. We all know what was meant there, she was stirring the pot and pushing all the hot buttons. But it is not always a bad thing to be provocative. The second definition Webster offers for Provoke is ***“To stir to action or feeling.”***  That is exactly what Paul was calling on the church to do, to stir each other up, to call each other to action. But not to wage war against those with whom we disagree, not to bitterly complain about how bad things are. We are called, as was that early church, to provoke each other to love and to carrying out good deeds.

Paul was writing to a congregation which was confused, restless and inattentive. Folks a lot like us. To them, and to us, he speaks words of comfort and challenge as he reminds us that legalism is not the way to go. That we need not have a liaison, save for the Holy Spirit, between us and God. That as people of the new covenant we need not remember too many rules and regulations. Neither do we have to continue to worry about past failures, only about future faithfulness. So in closing this morning I offer to you the antidote for your restlessness, your confusion. Pay attention to Paul and enter into the new covenant. Hear his words as I believe he would speak them to us, ***“God says, this is the covenant that I will make with you. I will put my laws in your hearts, and I will write them on your minds and I will remember your sins and lawless deeds no more. Stop worrying about the past, don’t fret about the future just be about provoking one another to love and good deeds and you will be OK and the world will be a better place.”***

For your sake for the sake of an often provocative world which is crying out to be provoked, and for the sake of the kingdom of the one who provokes us to good deeds and faithfulness, let it be so. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy spirit, AMEN.