

Today's readings are full of beautiful connections between the Old Testament stories, of prophets and ancient tribes of Israel, and Jesus himself. I find these connections and stories to be particularly powerful and helpful for us in this current church season.

Today is the end of the season of the church year called "ordinary time". Next week is Christ the King Sunday, basically the New Year's Eve of the church year, before we begin Advent. Advent is the start of the new church year and grounds us in hope and anticipation for Jesus who is yet to come. So as we are in this transitional period in the church season, let us be reminded of and encouraged by this old, old story that has the power to give and transform our lives. Even here. Even now. Jesus, our Savior and Lord, in all his power and promise and perfection and praise worthiness, is still both here and yet to come by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit connects us to Jesus and to all these faithful forebears who have gone before us in the communion of saints. And from that collective witness, the power of the human and divine, we gain our strength, our guidance, our peace, and our hope.

Our first reading today begins with the song of Hannah, from all the way back in the book of 1 Samuel. Normally we are used to hearing about the song of Mary, which we certainly will again through the course of the Advent season. But I love that we get this foundation for where Mary's song comes from by hearing Hannah's song as well.

Hannah is the mother of Samuel. Samuel is the prophet who chose and anointed King David by the will and instruction of God. King David's lineage is powerful throughout the history of Israel, and eventually leads to Jesus himself. Hannah is the one who bears life and raises one of the most powerful prophets in the Bible and her song is one of praising God for who God is and what God does. Hannah's song is the forebear of Mary's song, laying this foundation for what it is to be the mother of God's messenger, and eventually, God's son.

We hear echoes of what is familiar in Mary's song, the Magnificat, when Hannah praises God for lifting up the lowly and casting the mighty down

from their thrones. She praises and rejoices in God, whose strength she glorifies and finds her own strength in. She says a radical yes to be the one who bears a world-changing child of God and knows it is from God that she has the life and strength to do so. God is one who changes the world in powerful ways to exalt the goodness and holiness of the world, casting down the enemies of God, and making all things right and new.

Our third reading today, in place of the Gospel, comes from the New Testament letter to the Hebrew people. The letter to the Hebrews was written by a leader who knew his (or her) audience well. This letter is filled with nods to and direct quotes from the Old Testament, which would have been significant to a community of Hebrew, or Jewish, people who received it. These consistent references to the Old Testament also give us connections between Jesus and the prophets who spoke into the events yet to come in the world. The way Jesus' life was to go was often foretold by the prophets, and making these connections between the words of the prophets and what Jesus actually did affirms for this audience (and us) that Jesus is actually the promised Messiah, the foretold Prince of Peace, Son of God who came to earth. This letter, and especially this passage, give us, and the ancient Hebrew audience, confidence in Jesus. In Jesus' ministry, his sacrificial acts of death on a cross, and the life-saving hope from his resurrection, rising to new life.

This Hebrews reading begins with the assurance and reason why Christ is our true and sure foundation for our lives, the one who does make things right and new. The first verses describe the practices of the priests and church leaders of that time and culture - every single day these priests stand and pray at the altars and make sacrifices to God. Every single day, these leaders are making these sacrifices in an attempt to save and be saved. But Jesus, by giving his very life for us, through that one great and full sacrifice of his body, has saved us and forgiven all of us for all time.

The sacrifice of Jesus was perfect, the Hebrews text says. That all who are sanctified, or saved, are perfected through Jesus' sacrifice. But it's important to note that in this case, perfect means more than just our

understanding of blameless or faultless. Perfect also means complete, fully, entirely. The sacrifice of Jesus was complete for all of us who are now saved. We no longer need to make these same kinds of daily, repetitive sacrifices for the sake of being saved or forgiven by God. Jesus, in his sacrifice, in the death he died to sin and rose again in new life, has indeed given us a new life of grace as well. God's grace is perfect, it is complete, and from this place of grace and being saved, we are given a new life in Jesus. Because this grace, this sacrifice is perfect and complete, we can be assured that nothing we ever do will separate us from the grace and love of God, thanks be to God in Christ Jesus.

So now that we have connected Jesus, our friend, teacher, guide, Savior, and Lord, to this bigger Christian story throughout the Holy Scriptures, the Bible, what do we do about it? How and why is this talk of prophets and sacrifice still important?

Fortunately, the author of Hebrews gives us some clear and helpful direction in this regard too.

From this assurance of Jesus' perfect, complete sacrifice and new life, we are then able to encourage others with the hope we have gained. We don't need to be afraid or alone or abandoned, by the power of the Spirit, God and Christ Jesus are always with us in love. And we are joined with all the faithful people who proclaim Jesus Christ into His one body, as a community. The author writes, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

Being in community and in relationship with one another, as Christians, is nourished by what Jesus has done for us, and not our own valuations of each other's actions. Jesus Christ and the things He has done by the grace and power of God, are the foundation by which we live our own lives as Christians, as well as relate to one another in community.

Normally we hear the word “provoke” when it happens negatively, but here, we are instructed to provoke others to love and good deeds. To encourage one another and meet together as one body, working for the goodness and love of all.

What is true then and is true now, is that we find Christ in the people around us. We are true Christians, true Christian followers, when we join together in community, as one body, to act in ways of love and goodness. Because we are free from the power of sin and death from Jesus’ perfect and complete sacrifice, we are then able to share that hope we gain in Christ with all people. The hope we find in our own life in Christ by the promises of baptism gives us hope for a better world yet to come. Hannah’s song gives us this wisdom of who God and what God does that will bring that better world, that kingdom of God, even closer to us.

And so I pray, dear friends, that we will be encouraged by the hope given to us in Jesus. That we will be reminded of Christ’s perfect sacrifice for us all and find hope in being an active part of our community. That we will be the love and goodness we hope to see in the world. And that we will be strengthened and comforted by Christ Jesus, the one through whom all things are possible, and all our hope is found. Thanks be to God, Amen.