

Happy Sixth Day of Christmas! I hope you're still celebrating (and of course that you got some great gifts!). What's the best gift you've ever received? My wife, Amanda, is an excellent gift-giver, and she's given me a lot of amazing presents over the years, so I had to think hard about what was my favorite. I finally decided it was an email.

So a little context: I'm a huge nerd, and my favorite genre of book is fantasy - that actually also started because one of my cousins gave me the first Shannara trilogy from Terry Brooks for Christmas when I was 13. I was hooked immediately.

In high school, I discovered Stephen R. Donaldson's *The Chronicles of Thomas Covenant*. Two trilogies that just wrecked me. They were the kind of books that peered into my soul and made me *deal with stuff, man*. I've read those six books through probably 5 or 6 times in my life. And then I learned Donaldson was putting out a final set of four books - the LAST Chronicles of Thomas Covenant! They came out slowly - one book every three years. And finally, in 2013, the last book came out.

It was everything I had been waiting for. I felt like my whole life had been building up to that last book.

2013 was also the second year of my podcast The StoryMen (which is now the Fascinating Podcast). We had done about 40 episodes, and had gotten to interview a few authors and artists.

So it's my birthday (which is in October), and I was getting ready to leave for work. Amanda and I were chatting going through our day, when her phone chimed and she screamed. She looked up at me, her eyes glowing, and said, "Your birthday present is here!"

She then proceeded to read me an email from Stephen R. Donaldson's publicist. She had reached out and invited him on our podcast, and he said yes. I was going to get to interview my favorite author of all time, a man whose words had deeply shaped my identity.

I had a panic attack. I geeked out hard. But the interview went great, and it remains a highlight of my life.

That gift was so great because I felt so seen. It's hard to imagine something more uniquely targeted to me. That's what makes a great gift - gift cards are great and all, but when someone knows us well enough to give us something that we didn't even know we wanted, but in retrospect is perfect, it makes us feel known, seen and loved.

Since it's Christmas, I want to talk about the gifts we receive today - especially from God - and I want to consider with you how receiving those gifts transforms us.

Message

Our Advent series this year was called Raise Your Voice. We considered together what it meant that God has come into the world, and that God will come again. And we asked what it means that God calls us to be proclaimers, announcing that God is not finished with the world.

Today, we're going to conclude this series by looking at the story of Hannah. Though she lived a thousand years before Mary and Jesus, her story was what gave Mary a sense of hope - the song Mary sang when she was pregnant with Jesus is based on the song Hannah sang when she became pregnant. And Hannah's story is all about giving gifts.

[Scripture Slide] Turn with me to 1 Samuel 2. Hannah and her family live in a village called Ramah, but Samuel - who is a young boy - lives not with his family, but in a village about 15 miles away called Shiloh. Shiloh was sort of the capital for that region because one of Israel's main tabernacles was in Shiloh. Samuel lived and worked at the tabernacle in Shiloh, learning how to serve as a priest.

Samuel worked for a priest named Eli. To say he was incompetent would be kind. In Eli's day, it's surprising anyone would think they could meet God at Shiloh. Eli himself wasn't terrible - he comes across as dismissive, maybe tired. But his two sons, priests following in his footsteps, were flat out awful. They exploited the offerings people made for their personal gain. And they took advantage of women who came to the tabernacle. Eli did nothing to stop them.

Now, if you're wondering why such a young boy is living a half-day's journey from his family being raised by an old priest in such a toxic environment, that story is pretty fascinating: Hannah's husband is a man named Elkanah. He has another wife, and before Samuel was born, Hannah was unable to have children (but Penniah had quite a few). Once a year, Elkanah took his whole family to the tabernacle in Shiloh to worship. And one of these years, Hannah prayed for a child.

Imagine with me what it must've taken for Hannah to pray at Shiloh. Her whole country was spiraling into hatred and faithlessness and God's house was leading the way! The priests of Shiloh were corrupt and abusive. They were as bad or worse than anyone around them.

And yet, Hannah finds the courage to hope. To imagine God might want to change things as badly as she does. So she prays - not for the world, but for her womb. God heard Hannah's prayer and opened her womb and gave her a child. For Hannah, her son Samuel was proof that God hadn't abandoned Israel or the world. If God could open her womb, then God could save the world.

Samuel was proof for her that God hears and responds to human pain. Samuel was proof that God was not finished with the world.

So when Samuel was weaned, Hannah brought him to the tabernacle in Shiloh, gave him to Eli to be raised to be a servant of God. Samuel was a gift from God to Hannah, and so Hannah gave Samuel to the world. When she dedicated her son to God's service, Hannah sings a

beautiful song about God's work in the world - that God will bring justice and peace to the world, that God is in the business of bringing life out of death (this is the song Mary's Magnificat was based on).

Hannah didn't send Samuel to the tabernacle so they could raise him. Hannah gave Samuel to the tabernacle so Samuel could save Israel, and by extension, all of us. He was like an antidote delivered to the site of the infection.

But can you imagine, as a parent, giving up your firstborn child (or any child!)? Can you imagine how hard Hannah wept as they walked away from Shiloh, back to Ramah? To know she'll only see her precious boy once a year?

Which brings us to our text this morning. It's brief, but as we read together note particularly Hannah's activity. Let's read together, beginning in verse 18:

Samuel was ministering before the Lord—a boy wearing a linen ephod. Each year his mother made him a little robe and took it to him when she went up with her husband to offer the annual sacrifice. Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife, saying, “May the Lord give you children by this woman to take the place of the one she prayed for and gave to the Lord .” Then they would go home... And the boy Samuel continued to grow in stature and in favor with the Lord and with people. -- 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26

Every year, Hannah made a robe for her son. For months leading up to their annual trip to Shiloh, Hannah would think of her boy, imagining how much he had grown, and work on a robe for him. Every year, when she saw him, she would wrap him in her arms, hugging him tightly, not wanting to let go.

But let go she must - she always must - and so because she could not keep her arms around him forever, she settled instead for a new robe, crafted by her own two hands, that would stay about his shoulders, keeping him warm because she could not. Staying always with him because she was not. The robe was a tangible expression of Hannah's love for her son. For Samuel, it was a constant reminder: no matter how awful things were in Shiloh, no matter how terrible Eli's sons, the corruption of God's tabernacle, no matter how impossible the task before him seemed, no matter what, the robe reminded him that he was loved, that he was a precious gift from God to his mother, from his mother to the world. The robe said, My love is with you, my son. God is with you, my son.

How often in the surely difficult years of his childhood did Samuel cling to his robe? How often when his future seemed impossible did the tangible love of his mother spur him onward?

Friends this is the power of the Gift. When we receive such a tangible demonstration of another's love for us, that person remains with us, and their love empowers us to be more fully ourselves.

In the Church, we have a long history of choosing to see the content of our lives as good gifts from God. We can choose to see our houses and cars and food and family and job as gifts from God.

I can choose to say, without the breath I breathe, I could not do the work before me today. Without the work I have, I would not receive the income I use to buy food and pay rent or the mortgage and the car payment. We can imagine how this chain can extend nearly to infinity, all of it rooted in the gift of God's presence in our lives.

If we reframe how we look at the world, see it as a place overflowing with good gifts from God, then at every moment of every day, we are surrounded by reminders that God is with us. We are enveloped in the embrace of a God who calls us into a world every bit as broken as Shiloh. We are assured that the calling before us is not impossible even though the road may be hard. A world of gifts is a world of robes, assuring us again and again that we are loved and that God is with us.

When we receive the world as a gift, we are formed to be gracious persons. Hannah received Samuel as a gift from God, and so she became almost unimaginably generous - giving her son to the world. It's no coincidence that when Mary discovers she's to be the mother of God's son, she sings a song based on Hannah's song. Because Mary recognizes that Hannah's generosity is the generosity of God, who gave his son Jesus to the world.

We can all be Hannahs today, looking at the stuff of our lives as proof God is with us, that God loves us. And we can allow that realisation to foster in us a generosity of spirit that makes us gift-givers. Hannah made coats. What is your gift to the world? What are the skills and talents God has given you so that you can give to the world?

Communion + Examen

[Communion Slide] That journey begins for us at the communion table. This table points us back to the meal Jesus shared with his followers the night he was betrayed. At that meal, he gave them bread, told them it was his body broken for them. Later in the meal he gave them a cup of wine, told them it was his blood poured out to begin a new relationship between God and humanity.

The communion table is God's gift to us. Much like Samuel's robe, this meal reminds us of how God gave his son to the world, to rescue us, to bring us into life. When we take these wafers and dip them in the juice, we remember that every good gift we have is from God, beginning with life itself. We are invited to participate in God's good giving by becoming givers ourselves.

You don't have to be a member of Catalyst to participate in communion. If you want to receive the world as a good gift from God, to join in God's love for the world, then you're invited to come to the table today.

Prayer:

1. What in your life can you receive as a good gift from God?
2. What in your life can you view as a means God has given you to bless the world around you?
3. How can you rest in gratitude this week?
4. How can you be generous towards others this week?

Assignment + Blessing

Prayer of Thanksgiving