

Welcome

Nathan and JR. talk about the best gifts they've ever received. JR. will also have a gift for Nathan that he'll get to open at the end of the gathering.

Message

Merry Christmas! Today is the second day of Christmas, barely at the beginning of our Christmas celebration. We've spent four weeks preparing for this season, anticipating and hoping, learning to see where God is present among us. Which brought us to Christmas Day, to the celebration of Jesus' birth.

This year, our series is called O Christmas Tree. There's no more universal symbol of Christmas these days than that very particular tradition from Northern Europe: an evergreen tree, decorated with lights and tinsel. That tree, twinkling in the darkness, the mystery of gifts hidden beneath wrapping paper and bows promising that good things are on the horizon.

Today, I want to focus on what's *under* the tree. That's right... the presents. What embodies *anticipation* more than a box covered in paper and topped with a bow? Sitting there under the tree, the sight of presents fills us with anticipation and excitement because we know that the person who filled that box loves us. They want good for us. And they

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:

But Samuel, though he was only a boy, served the Lord. He wore a linen garment like that of a priest. Each year his mother made a small coat for him and brought it to him when she came with her husband for the sacrifice. Before they returned home, Eli would bless Elkanah and his wife and say, "May the Lord give you other children to take the place of this one she gave to the Lord." -- 1 Samuel 2:18–20 (NLT)

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 realization 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

Jesus is our gift, our proof that God is with us every day.

one

two

three

four

Assignment + Blessing

Nathan opens JR.'s gift!