

December 27, First Sunday after Christmas Day: 1 Samuel 2:18-20, 26; Luke 2:41-52

December 15, 2015

Which mother, I wonder, has more heartbreak?

I imagine Hannah's heart breaks even as it exalts when she realizes she is pregnant. She has longed for a child for years, and now this new life has finally come to her womb. But she remembers her promise—she knows she will have to give up her son.

Hannah takes Samuel to the house of the Lord at Shiloh as soon as he is weaned. She leaves him there with Eli the priest—a man whose judgment is so bad he can't tell a distraught woman from a drunk one, a man whose own sons are by all accounts scoundrels. But she leaves Samuel there anyway, because she promised God she would.

Hannah sacrifices the dailiness of raising her firstborn son—the hand-in-hand walks, the nighttime prayers, the rock collections and scraped knees and teary kisses. She has a son, then forfeits the joys of raising him, the privilege of protecting him.

Mary keeps her son with her. But I wonder if there is an indescribable distance between them. She does not understand his moods or his intellect or his strange passions. And as he grows she can surely see, as parents can, that her son is heading down a dangerous path—making the wrong kinds of enemies. Even though he grows up under her roof, she is powerless to protect him.

I imagine Mary knows from the beginning—from the angel's first "fear not"—that this child of hers will break her heart in a thousand different ways. Her fears are confirmed with Simeon's words when she takes Jesus to be dedicated: "a sword will pierce your own soul too." And then this trip to Jerusalem and the temple.

When Hannah brings the new, slightly larger robe with her to Shiloh, she expects to find her son, Samuel, ministering there. But Mary never agrees to leave her firstborn at the temple. Her plan was always to bring him home with her after their family pilgrimage.

In the canonical Gospels, the only story we have from Jesus' childhood is this incident when he is 12 and decides to stay at the temple. But I can imagine other times, as Jesus grows, when that sword slowly inches its way into Mary's heart: a look in his eyes that tells her his spirit is far away—somewhere she can never go. The shape of his nose that looks nothing like anyone's in her family or Joseph's. The words he speaks that reveal a wisdom far beyond what a child should possess. All those times he doesn't want her to mother him, when he refers to his *other* father.

It could not have been easy raising the Son of God. It is not easy to raise any child. Or to love anyone so deeply that your heart is connected to theirs in ways you do not choose or control.

Because what do you do when suddenly you turn around, one day into your five-day journey home, and realize that he's not there? Not following along behind you with his brothers and sisters. Not with his cousins or his grandparents or his friends. How do you endure that sudden sinking weight in your gut, that tightening of your muscles until your shoulders almost brush your earlobes, those images of your child's bloody body scrolling through your mind?

Does Mary sing psalms to herself as she and Joseph search the city? *I lift up my eyes to the hills—from where will my help come?* Does she replay the words from Gabriel over and over in her mind? *Do not be afraid, Mary.* Does she do deep breathing exercises, in . . . and hold . . . and out? Does she wind a strand of hair around and around her finger until it nearly cuts off the circulation? Does she fuss and snip at Joseph, even though Jesus' disappearance is no more his fault than hers?

I am certainly not raising Jesus Christ. But I do have a son, my oldest child. And he is living a life I would not particularly wish for him, making choices that I fear put him in danger. He refuses to do things that would make his life easier and more stable—things that would make my life, as his mother, easier and more stable.

And I have found what, perhaps, Mary finds—if not during that frantic Jerusalem search, then maybe at the foot of the cross. It's something I'm sure many parents and spouses, aunts and uncles and grandparents, friends and lovers, teachers and caseworkers and pastors come to know eventually: there is a point where you let go because you have to. You let go, not from some place of "giving it all to God" enlightenment, but just because you can't hold on anymore.

That knot in your stomach can't sink any farther. Your shoulders can't squeeze any closer to your earlobes. Your brain runs out of energy for creating nightmare scenarios. Sometimes faithfulness is something we consciously choose—Hannah taking her son to the house of the Lord at Shiloh and leaving him there as an offering. Sometimes it is something we stumble into—Mary raising the Son of God because she is too stunned to tell Gabriel to go find some other girl's life to ruin.

Sometimes we let go willingly, out of enlightened spiritual wisdom. Sometimes we simply lose our grip. I would rather go the route of enlightened spiritual wisdom. But for the many times deliberate faithfulness is not my path, I am grateful for the grace of exhaustion.