

The Judge's Pardon

I Samuel 2:1-10
Hebrews 10:11-14

This week gave us yet another eerie convergence between my having planned this sermon back in mid-August and today's news. Our succinct theme today is "Christ's death pardons sinners." As we shall see when we work through our passage from Hebrews, by performing the one-time sacrifice of his body on the cross, Jesus earned a pardon for all sinners through all time. Meanwhile, this week many of us followed the Kyle Rittenhouse trial. Rittenhouse is the teen who took his rifle to the street protests in Kenosha, Wisconsin last summer. He testified that his intent was to protect people and property, saying he brought first aid supplies he meant to use if needed. I mean, what could possibly go wrong?!? A small group of protesters, seeing his gun, approached and tried to wrestle it away from him. One of them pointed a loaded gun at his head. In the scum that followed Rittenhouse shot three men, killing two. He is charged with homicide. If convicted he could serve life in prison.

The twin narratives about this incident and the subsequent trial are—as with most everything else that happens today—so different you might think they cover separate stories. I have no intention of defending either narrative. My purpose, instead, is to note how strange following this news story was for me when I knew I would preach on a judge's pardon the following Sunday. This feeling deepened when Rittenhouse's defense team moved for a mistrial with prejudice. Had the judge

granted the motion it would have amounted to a full pardon for the defendant. The judge did not grant that mistrial. Had he done so it would have profoundly changed the course of Rittenhouse' life. Pardons can be life-or-death matters.

Hannah's Song, which we read today in I Samuel, belongs to a long list of expressions of thanksgiving from biblical women about to have a baby. Sarah, Rachael and others belong to that list but of course the greatest example is Mary, the mother of Jesus. In fact, we will see that the connection between Hannah and Mary directly bears on the theme, Christ's death pardons sinners. But before we get to that, let us dive more deeply into I Samuel 2. First, the "I" and "my" in Hannah's Song refer not only to her individually, but to her entire people. On the one hand, she sings to praise God for her baby boy Samuel. On the other, she sings of "the adversaries of the Lord" whom the Lord will judge. "The barren" have borne children. But, "The Lord kills and brings to life." Scholars use these dualities—and other evidence that commonly appears in these songs and related Psalms—to show that the songs intentionally refer to both the individual and the whole people.

In fact, the textual integrity of the Samuels, as old as they are, is rather better than it is for most Old Testament books. For one thing, an intact scroll of them was the largest find among the Dead Sea Scrolls. For another, whoever wrote them used textbook, scholarly Hebrew that leaves scholars with precious few questions about their meaning. It is both a song of thanksgiving to God for the birth of a son, and a hymn of praise for the deliverance of the nation, Israel. Most importantly, it forms the

template for Mary's Magnificat, as found in Luke 1. It does not form an outline; Mary, inspired in the moment, did not produce an ode that used the same topics in the same order as Hannah's. But both share the same mood, the same faithfulness. And both cover much of the same ground. The Lord lifts up the humble and cuts the mighty down to size. The Lord's ways are inscrutable. The Lord's faithfulness and justice know no boundaries. And the piece de resistance: both speak of the Messianic king whom God will place "on the throne of his father David".

Scholar Kyle McArthur writes, "The central theme (of Hannah's Song) is joy over an elevation in condition, as embodied by the birth of a child understood as a divine gift." Whether or not Hannah understood her song as a prophecy of the birth of the Messiah, she certainly understood the birth of her son as a gift from God. And she felt inspired to speak of the exaltation of "(God's) anointed." Flash forward now to our passage from Hebrews. As the Oxford Study Bible says, Hebrews constitutes "the longest sustained argument in the Bible...the unknown author moves with confidence step by step through an elaborate proof that Christ has fulfilled every Messianic prophecy in the tradition." Its author is in fact unknown, but scholars have long agreed he must have been a Jew writing to his fellow Jews (Hebrews). He presumes they know a great deal about Old Testament covenant theology. He wants to persuade them, again, that Jesus Christ fulfilled the Messianic prophecies.

In our passage, the author has reached the point in his sustained argument where he addresses the atonement. Atonement is an action taken by an intermediary

to secure forgiveness of sin on behalf of others. In the case of the Hebrews, the priests performed the atoning sacrifices. The people brought animals to the tabernacles scattered across the land and to the temple in Jerusalem. The Torah specified what animal to use for which sin. The priest would inspect the animal (too many blemishes would disqualify it) and, if acceptable, he would slaughter it on the altar. The blood was collected and burned. After the poor animal had been “killed and cooked” (as the great professor of Old Testament Barnhard Anderson put it) on the fiery altar, priests' assistants would take the flesh to another room, where they would butcher and preserve the meat for the priestly community.

This grisly business would nauseate and infuriate us today. For the ancient Jews it was simply business as usual. Did not the Books of Leviticus and Numbers lay out the whole process in perfect detail? Did not the Lord demand a real, physical sacrifice for the sins of the people? Did God's law not explain with a precision worthy of the Book of Hebrews how exactly God saw these offerings as the only “holy and acceptable” way of canceling sin and restoring a right relationship between God and the people of God? In their minds the answers were, “Yes,” “Yes,” and “Yes!” But the author of Hebrews saw that in Christ, everything had changed. The priests stood at the altars day after day, repeating the sacrifices. They stood. In obedience to the Law they did not sit down for as long as they were on duty.

“But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins,” writes our author, “he sat down at the right hand of God.” Once Jesus sacrificed his body on the

cross he **could** sit down because his priestly work was done. No more sacrifice was needed. As the text continues, “For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.” He has not perfected his followers in the sense of making them incapable of sinning. He has perfected them in the sense that his atoning sacrifice applies to every one of them perfectly. (The author goes on three verses later with a quote from Jeremiah, God speaking: “I will **remember** their sins and their misdeeds no more.”)

As people trying to follow Jesus this is Good News indeed. It is the best news we could possibly hope to receive. No longer enslaved to sin, nor to a grisly method of atoning for our sin, in order to join in the benefits of Christ's atonement on our behalf we must do...what? We must have faith in Jesus as our Lord and **Savior**. Barnhard Anderson wrote a very popular book explaining the theology of the covenant, Understanding the Old Testament. In it he wrote, “While the atonement as accomplished on the cross can sometimes strike us today as primitive and even brutal, understanding it through the lens of the New Testament leads us to a new experience of the grace of God. It makes us thankful, so thankful we might feel moved to write a song about it.” In fact, quite a few Christians have. Amazing Grace, Now Thank We All Our God, Let All Things Now Living and Rejoice, Ye Pure in Heart—all in our hymnbook—are all songs of praise for God's grace and the salvation offered us through Christ's atoning sacrifice.

The chorus of contemporary Christian singer Chris Tomlin's song, Amazing

Love, goes like this: “Amazing love, How can it be? That You, my King would die for me? Amazing love, I know it's true. It's my joy to honor You, In all I do, I honor You.” The verse says that we're forgiven, he's forsaken; we're accepted, he's condemned. It concludes, “I'm alive and well, your Spirit is within me, because You died and rose again.” As I typed these words I saw the faces of people I've sung them with, people with whom I have served the Lord over the years. People like the woman who, in desperation, once stole \$40 from the offering plates before the counters could secure them. She wanted to buy more opioids. She has since gotten rehabbed and—I checked with her—now celebrates nine years of sobriety. She knows Christ's death has erased her sins and the loss of that guilt helps her stay clean.

One or two of you have asked me why I use so many personal illustrations. Others have wondered whether I'll be telling your stories once I leave this pulpit. Do not worry: I hope to retire from this pulpit, not any time soon, but that is what I hope God has in store for me. Any preaching I do then will come—as we say in the preaching business—from the barrel. I expect I will “recycle” old sermons. So your stories will not come into them. But I use personal illustrations because I want you to take these messages personally. I want you to be able to apply them to your concrete situations, your actual lives. If Christ's death pardons sinners, what does that mean for **you**? It means that the Good News of the Gospel applies to **you**. It means that if you have faith in the Savior, born a baby boy to Mary, and if you trust that he meant for his death on the cross to be for **you**, his atonement has erased your sins in the eyes of God. Now **that** is worth singing about!