

Homily Feast of the Holy Family December 29, 2024 ©Teresa Elder Hanlon

(Samuel 1:1-28 abbrev); Psalm 128; (1 John 3:1-2, 23-24); (Luke 2:41-52)

In January 2003, Vincent was working in the emergency room for a week or two in Thunder Bay, ON when he phoned to tell me that he himself had had not one, but two serious health issues.* He had received a call from a Lethbridge pathologist to tell him that his prostate biopsy came back positive for cancer. The evening earlier he himself, while working, had to be worked up for an irregularity in his heart, which we knew was already at risk because of mitral valve disease.

I was somewhat overwhelmed, very concerned and not sure where to turn, being home alone in the middle of the afternoon. Now sad and upset that so much was going on with him while I was half way across this large country, I tried to pray, but it was difficult. I thought I would go to the church to find someone to talk to. I went, but alas the priest was out and the secretary busy, so I went into the chapel to pray and ended up crying there for a while. I was grateful for the space and just as I was leaving, a friend came in who could pray with me before I left for home. It made all the difference to hear someone reassure me in prayerful words.

I empathize with Hannah today, whose distress reached a point at that particular meal time that she physically got up and walked away. She left for a space where she could cry out and implore God directly. She went to the tabernacle in Shiloh-home of the ark of the covenant. Eventually, after a short struggle with him misinterpreting her as a drunk, she shared her pain with Eli, the priest there, and heard his reassurance. Her act of crying and imploring her God was an act of trust that something could change. She believed in a God who walks with us. Jesus' birth, life, death and resurrection continues to reinforce this trust in a giving, loving God.

We hear this in the second reading from the 1st letter attributed to John, *Gift of Goodwill*: "This is Creator's instruction to us, that we trust in the name of *Creator Sets Free*, the Son, the Chosen One, and love each other as he taught us to do."

Part of loving one another is in the listening ear, like Eli, who stopped judging Hannah, like my friend who came into the chapel and offered an understanding response.

Jesus in the temple in Jerusalem also found a place of belonging where he was comfortable asking questions at a level that his peasant parents may not have been able to fathom. He felt heard. He was understood among the teachers there. And there, too, he could share *his* ideas, his experience of the Holy One's love. This is a setting similar to Shiloh, in the tabernacle, where Samuel, Hannah's son grew up and heard the voice of God speaking to him several times as he fell asleep one night.

We have places like this, set aside in various cultures throughout the world, like synagogues in the first century whether an open or closed structure. Places conducive to prayer, to pausing, studying and asking questions about our faith. The boy Jesus' desire for relationship on terms that met his needs was met that day while he was oblivious to the commotion and the pain he caused his parents. He was in a safe place that felt good, and "lost" for a few days in a reverie of joy and belonging.

So where is your safe place or person or animal or activity? However we meet up to confide in someone, to share our questions and concerns whether in a chapel or by the water or in the woods or a park, over a cup of tea or in a prayerful setting, it *is* an important part of our faith life to be free to cry out, to ask for clarification when we fear, or to receive confirmation and affirmation of hope when the tension is too much to bear, alone, in pain, confused or tied in emotional knots.

Spiritual companions journey with people in confidence. Some churches and chapels are still open in airports, hospitals, or in cities. However you might interpret your family of faith, your holy family, I hope it features a place or a person in whom to trust to listen and perhaps bring about a calm or a sense of belonging in a time of disorientation or crisis.

QUESTIONS

What struck you in the readings/prayers? Where or what activity is your "house of God"? or When do you live "deeply and surely in the Christ"?

*Vincent is presently cancer free and has had a valve replacement. His story of that health episode can be read here:

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