

“Not By (Our) Might”  
1 Samuel 2:1-10  
Ephesians 2:1-10

On Monday night, Lori and I received an automated phone call from Bucks County Emergency Management. Those of you who live in the Chalfont or Warrington area likely got the same word that informed residents about some undefined law enforcement action happening at the intersection of Bristol and Lower State Roads. The recorded voice told us to stay inside and lock our doors, adding that more information would be shared when available. The intersection named is less than a quarter-mile from our home. A police helicopter began to hover overhead with a searchlight scanning the ground. Exterior lights flicked on all around us and the neighborhood Facebook page lit up asking if anyone knew what was happening. No one did.

I went to double-check our doors and turned on a spotlight. I regretted having left my car outside and made sure it was locked using a key fob. I thought of what I would do should an intruder enter our home and grabbed a weapon from my golf bag—a three-iron. If needed, it would mark the first time I had swung the club in several years and, if matching its last usage, suspect my aim would have been to the right, but I was ready even so. Thankfully, I did not have to utilize that plan, for after a night of inconsistent sleep, an early-morning phone call telling us that Central Bucks Schools were closed and two days of paying extra attention as I entered and left our home, the manhunt ended and a suspect taken back into custody.

Along with a renewed appreciation for law enforcement and the blessing of living in a community where such events are exceedingly rare, that experience lifted up for me those kinds of moments when there is little we can do. We can prepare by doing our part, but the outcome is beyond our control. There are all kinds of settings when we experience that truth in life, but this worship service lifts up that reality for us collectively as a congregation and as parents.

For as part of this morning we will celebrate two different milestones as 23 of our young people will profess their faith in Jesus Christ. After this hour, there will be a reception outdoors for 40 others from this community of faith to mark their graduation. Both are times of joy and pride, but they are also moments that demonstrate the limits to what any of us can do. As the reality is that no parent or congregant can force a young person to be confirmed or graduate. We can model faith and encourage education, but the ultimate decision on both matters is up to each individual. Which means that one of the most appropriate responses to such milestones is to gather in worship where our praise reminds us once more of how everything is a gift from God.

We heard such words from a mother of long ago whose song marks our Old Testament reading. We have been following the narrative of Hannah here for several weeks in worship and recalled how she desperately wanted to have a child, but for years had been unable to conceive. Tormented by her husband’s other wife who had borne him many children, Hannah had promised God that if blessed with a son she would dedicate him to the Lord’s service. Last week, we read of how her prayers were answered and the day she fulfilled that vow, leaving her son Samuel behind with the priest Eli at Shiloh. Our text today records her words of thanksgiving.

“My heart exults in the LORD,” she began “my strength is exalted in my God.” She goes on to celebrate not only what God has done in her life, but the reversals God brings in all kinds of other ways—the feeble becoming strong, the hungry being filled, the rich being humbled and the ones in need becoming princes. It’s a Scriptural song often compared to the words of praise offered centuries later by a young woman named Mary upon learning she had been chosen to

bear God son. The Magnificat was uttered before the promise was fulfilled. Hannah is speaking after the fact.

We could spend several weeks moving through her response and still not cover all of the wonderful themes she lifts up about God, yet on this day the key words to my ears come when she sings “for not by might does one prevail.” In that phrase, Hannah is naming human limitations and divine abundance; how our deeds can only go so far, but that God’s work knows no boundaries. It’s a lesson that she and every parent in this room has experienced first-hand.

As there’s a true story told of a boy who made up his mind that he wanted a wristwatch for his birthday. He broached the subject with his parents and they said “no,” explaining he was too young. Perhaps they were concerned that given his energy level he would break or leave it somewhere while playing. Whatever their reasoning, that answer didn’t satisfy as over the course of that day he repeatedly brought up the subject, wanting to know why. Each time, he received the same answer. Finally, they reached that point familiar to most parents where rational discussion ends and authority takes over. “We don’t want to hear another word about it,” they declared. “We said ‘no’ and mean it. If we hear the word ‘watch’ again, you will be punished.”

For several days, the boy was quiet. In that family, however, there was a practice at the dinner table where each of them would take turns reading a Bible verse before the blessing. When it came his turn, the boy was ready and offered his selection of Mark 13:37, even using the King James translation in which Jesus is heard to say “And what I say unto you I say unto all, Watch.” (Corcoran, Paul, “PKs.” *Presbyterian Outlook*. April 6, 1987)

It isn’t only parents who experience the limits to what we can do and not only when it comes to raising children, for as Christians we all celebrate the limitless love of God.

The words we read moments ago from Paul’s letter to the Ephesians proclaim that truth in a clear and memorable way. He was writing to Christians who had been Gentiles—non-Jews—and how their former life left them dead through their sin. “But God who is rich in mercy,” he writes “out of the great love with which he loved us...made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus...For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast.”

For Protestants, those words are among the key ones in the entirety of Scripture—first for Martin Luther and all the Reformers who followed—proclaiming how salvation comes as a free gift. That it is not due to our good works for we could never earn it, but rather comes through the gracious work of God. Paul is clear that salvation does require something of us, that being faith, but even that response starts and ends with God. As God’s grace comes upon us and leads us to respond—for Hannah in her prayer for a son and then dedicating the child to God’s service, for our confirmands and graduates to engage in the faithful work required for such a moment, and for all the parents and grandparents and church friends cheering along the sidelines; all of those moments reveal grace. They all come as a gift from God, something that becomes clear to us most of all when we recognize and accept our own limits as human beings.

Leonard Pitts, a columnist for the *Miami Herald*, told of that lesson in a piece first printed in 2000. There’s “an old joke,” he wrote. “‘If you want to give God a really good laugh, tell him your plans.’ The way I figure it,” Pitts added “I must have the Almighty rolling on the floor by now. See, I’ve never been short of plans. I planned to have my last child off to college in a few short years. After which, I planned to travel, planned to play, planned to walk around the house in boxer shorts whenever the mood struck. I didn’t plan to be raising a little boy with autism.”

The boy is his grandson. The child's mother--Pitt's daughter--was unable to care for him, so the grandparents assumed custody. That step alone brought change, but the next year they learned the boy is autistic. "I've been struggling with it ever since," he wrote. "Whining really. It's not fair, I moan. Don't I have a say in what happens in my own life? I had plans God!"

Pitts went on to describe the child. "He's a happy little boy. He sings the 'Power Rangers' theme song. He loves chicken nuggets and broccoli...He beams when he shows 'Paw-Paw' drawings he made in school. He learns new things all the time. And he teaches, too. Indeed, though he has no way of knowing, Paw-Paw is his No. 1 student. An autistic child demands patience [for he] perceives the world differently. Where you see the forest, he sees a tree. And then another tree next to that. And another tree next to that. A hundred individual trees, each exerting its own pull upon his attention. So you're walking over some landscaping rocks and suddenly he pulls up short because he has spotted this one rock out of the thousands and it fascinates him. What can you do? Simple. You stop and admire the rock. You take a few more steps, then stop and admire another rock. And next time, you keep to the sidewalk.

"The lesson is patience," Pitts said "but not only that. It's also surrender. It's learning to release something that was never really in your hands anyway--meaning control of your own destiny. And it's faith, too...I think it will make me a better person. But the process is not easy. It's hard to accept that sometimes, you just have to surrender the wheel and see where it takes you. And that when God is laughing, you might as well start laughing, too." (Pitts, Leonard. "Raising Child Builds Patience, Faith." *Atlanta Constitution*, August 10, 2000, p. A19)

"For not by might does one prevail," Hannah declared. "This is not your own doing," Paul added. "It is a gift of God." Both affirm how this day and all that it holds are perfect opportunities to celebrate again every gift of grace. To acknowledge once more that while we are limited human beings we serve One whose love and grace know no boundaries. Which is why we join in that hymn from a grateful mother of long ago and offer our praise to God once more, knowing that we, too, have not prevailed by might or, at least, not by ours.