

**Monday, March 13 – I Samuel 1:1-20**

<sup>1</sup> There was a certain man of Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. <sup>2</sup> He had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.

<sup>3</sup> Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the Lord. <sup>4</sup> On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; <sup>5</sup> but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb. <sup>6</sup> Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. <sup>7</sup> So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. <sup>8</sup> Her husband Elkanah said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?”

<sup>9</sup> After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. <sup>10</sup> She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. <sup>11</sup> She made this vow: “O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.”

<sup>12</sup> As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. <sup>13</sup> Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. <sup>14</sup> So Eli said to her, “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.” <sup>15</sup> But Hannah answered, “No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. <sup>16</sup> Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.” <sup>17</sup> Then Eli answered, “Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.” <sup>18</sup> And she said, “Let your servant find favor in your sight.” Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

<sup>19</sup> They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. <sup>20</sup> In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, “I have asked him of the Lord.”

**Points of Interest:**

- The story of Hannah’s child Samuel is a prelude to the tales of Israel’s great kings; in our Bibles it comes right after the story of Ruth we looked at yesterday. Like Ruth, Hannah faces hard times. We’ve discussed the pain of infertility for Ancient Near Eastern women. For Hannah, this is magnified by comparison to her husband’s other wife, who has children. Her culture also has the perception – maybe shared by the narrator – that if you couldn’t have babies, it was a sign you weren’t favored by God.

- I find some comic relief in the two absolutely clueless men in this passage. Her husband Elkanah is well-meaning but obtuse – as if his extra food supply is supposed to make up for Hannah’s shame or her rival’s condescension. Later, when Hannah is praying in the temple, the priest Eli accuses her of drunkenness and almost throws her out. He’s apparently not used to seeing emotional passion or silent, extemporaneous prayer.
- The men in Hannah’s life tell her to behave and to be happy. Hannah’s dissatisfaction is viewed as inconvenient or unnecessary. Hannah doesn’t hear anything different directly from God. But the spiritual leader of Hannah’s community – after moving past his initial dismissal – wishes Hannah favor with God. Hannah chooses to trust this imperfect spiritual leader’s words as a hopeful message from God. She goes home in peace and is able to worship God – express her love and gratitude – before she sees any results.
- The narrator tells us and Hannah that God had not forgotten her. In Hannah’s case, she doesn’t experience God speaking this to her in prayer or through an angel. She experiences God in the expression of her deepest desire in prayer, in the assuring words of the priest, in her worship, and in the answer to her prayer she experiences weeks later.
- While Hannah was praying, you may have noticed her bargaining with God. Her promise is that she will make her son a Nazirite, a person who is particularly dedicated to God. The background to this practice can be found in the biblical law code in Numbers 6. The lack of haircuts and abstention from alcohol are both signs of the period of dedication. In Numbers, this looks like a temporary and voluntary practice, but Hannah implies that she’ll dedicate Samuel to God’s service when he is very young, either for all of his youth or all of his life.

**Spiritual Exercise** – God speaks through the deepest desires of our heart, where we long for growth, change, connection, and a fuller life. We’ve invited you during the 40 Days to name one of these desires and pray for it every day. Today as you do so, ask God to speak to you about what aspects of your desire God shares with you and wants to fulfill. Like Hannah, are there ways you can find peace and worship God even when you’re not yet sure how God will respond to your prayers?

**Prayer for your six** – Pray that your six will have freedom to speak their desires to God as prayer, and pray that they will experience God responding to their prayer with love, attention, and change.

**Tuesday, March 14 – I Samuel 3:1-18**

<sup>3</sup> Now the boy Samuel was ministering to the Lord under Eli. The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread.

<sup>2</sup> At that time Eli, whose eyesight had begun to grow dim so that he could not see, was lying down in his room; <sup>3</sup> the lamp of God had not yet gone out, and Samuel was lying down in the temple of the Lord, where the ark of God was. <sup>4</sup> Then the Lord called, "Samuel! Samuel!" and he said, "Here I am!" <sup>5</sup> and ran to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call; lie down again." So he went and lay down. <sup>6</sup> The Lord called again, "Samuel!" Samuel got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." But he said, "I did not call, my son; lie down again." <sup>7</sup> Now Samuel did not yet know the Lord, and the word of the Lord had not yet been revealed to him. <sup>8</sup> The Lord called Samuel again, a third time. And he got up and went to Eli, and said, "Here I am, for you called me." Then Eli perceived that the Lord was calling the boy. <sup>9</sup> Therefore Eli said to Samuel, "Go, lie down; and if he calls you, you shall say, 'Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening.'" So Samuel went and lay down in his place.

<sup>10</sup> Now the Lord came and stood there, calling as before, "Samuel! Samuel!" And Samuel said, "Speak, for your servant is listening." <sup>11</sup> Then the Lord said to Samuel, "See, I am about to do something in Israel that will make both ears of anyone who hears of it tingle. <sup>12</sup> On that day I will fulfill against Eli all that I have spoken concerning his house, from beginning to end. <sup>13</sup> For I have told him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity that he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. <sup>14</sup> Therefore I swear to the house of Eli that the iniquity of Eli's house shall not be expiated by sacrifice or offering forever."

<sup>15</sup> Samuel lay there until morning; then he opened the doors of the house of the Lord. Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Eli. <sup>16</sup> But Eli called Samuel and said, "Samuel, my son." He said, "Here I am." <sup>17</sup> Eli said, "What was it that he told you? Do not hide it from me. May God do so to you and more also, if you hide anything from me of all that he told you." <sup>18</sup> So Samuel told him everything and hid nothing from him. Then he said, "It is the Lord; let him do what seems good to him."

**Points of Interest:**

- Samuel is the son born to Hannah, in answer to her prayers. As Hannah promised, she has dedicated his life to God, so much so that Hannah's son is enrolled in an unofficial temple boarding school, apprenticed to Eli, the temple's chief priest.
- The narrator tells us that even folks in the temple aren't experiencing their world as God-soaked. They don't hear God talk to them, and God isn't showing them anything.
- All this changes in an instant, and it's pretty darn funny when it happens. Eli can't see well, and Samuel can't hear. Well, it turns out he can hear God, but he doesn't know that it's God. And God doesn't do anything to clarify things. Samuel – who's never heard God – has to rely on Eli – who's also probably never heard God speak – tell him what to do when God's trying to get his attention. A not especially spiritual man uses the best of his learning and spiritual tradition to interpret Samuel's first spiritual experience.

- Eli's advice is pretty good, isn't it? When you think God might be talking to you, don't self-edit or judge the experience. Just tell God you're paying attention.
- Samuel's first sense of God's word to him in prayer is a tough word. God tells him the juicy news that the members of Eli's household aren't fit to be priests and are going down. Wise people have advised that when we feel like God is showing us something bad that's going to happen to someone else, we should keep that to ourselves and pray for the people involved. And this is exactly what Samuel does, until he's pressured and threatened by Eli to spill the beans.
- After Eli's not particularly admirable pressure, he greets Samuel's revelation with an admirable lack of defensiveness. He doesn't dismiss Samuel and figures God's going to do what God's going to do, so why fight it? Whatever Eli's faults as a parent or spiritual leader, the passage begins and ends with some admirable testimony about him as a teacher and mentor.

**Spiritual Exercise** – We can assume that the greats of the Bible heard from God so much more clearly than we can. But even for them, the process required faith, patience, and learning and could be accompanied by some amount of confusion and anxiety. In this light, we give you an invitation to listen to God's voice to you today. Take a few minutes in quiet and stillness and invite God to communicate to you. Imagine God calling you by name twice as God did with Samuel, and say, "Speak, Lord, for your servant is listening." See if you feel or perceive anything unexpected. Take note of that. Tell somebody appropriate.

**Prayer for church** – Pray that your church would be an environment in which people trust God to speak to them personally and have the courage and faith to respond to God, with both humility and boldness.

**Wednesday, March 15 – I Kings 19:1-18**

Ahab told Jezebel all that Elijah had done, and how he had killed all the prophets with the sword. <sup>2</sup> Then Jezebel sent a messenger to Elijah, saying, “So may the gods do to me, and more also, if I do not make your life like the life of one of them by this time tomorrow.” <sup>3</sup> Then he was afraid; he got up and fled for his life, and came to Beer-sheba, which belongs to Judah; he left his servant there.

<sup>4</sup> But he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat down under a solitary broom tree. He asked that he might die: “It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life, for I am no better than my ancestors.” <sup>5</sup> Then he lay down under the broom tree and fell asleep. Suddenly an angel touched him and said to him, “Get up and eat.” <sup>6</sup> He looked, and there at his head was a cake baked on hot stones, and a jar of water. He ate and drank, and lay down again. <sup>7</sup> The angel of the Lord came a second time, touched him, and said, “Get up and eat, otherwise the journey will be too much for you.” <sup>8</sup> He got up, and ate and drank; then he went in the strength of that food forty days and forty nights to Horeb the mount of God. <sup>9</sup> At that place he came to a cave, and spent the night there.

Then the word of the Lord came to him, saying, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” <sup>10</sup> He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.”

<sup>11</sup> He said, “Go out and stand on the mountain before the Lord, for the Lord is about to pass by.” Now there was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting mountains and breaking rocks in pieces before the Lord, but the Lord was not in the wind; and after the wind an earthquake, but the Lord was not in the earthquake; <sup>12</sup> and after the earthquake a fire, but the Lord was not in the fire; and after the fire a sound of sheer silence. <sup>13</sup> When Elijah heard it, he wrapped his face in his mantle and went out and stood at the entrance of the cave. Then there came a voice to him that said, “What are you doing here, Elijah?” <sup>14</sup> He answered, “I have been very zealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the Israelites have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword. I alone am left, and they are seeking my life, to take it away.” <sup>15</sup> Then the Lord said to him, “Go, return on your way to the wilderness of Damascus; when you arrive, you shall anoint Hazael as king over Aram. <sup>16</sup> Also you shall anoint Jehu son of Nimshi as king over Israel; and you shall anoint Elisha son of Shaphat of Abel-meholah as prophet in your place. <sup>17</sup> Whoever escapes from the sword of Hazael, Jehu shall kill; and whoever escapes from the sword of Jehu, Elisha shall kill. <sup>18</sup> Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”

**Points of Interest:**

- A couple hundred years after Samuel’s death, I Kings introduces us to the royal couple Ahab and Jezebel, and their chief adversary, Elijah. Ahab and Jezebel are violent tyrants who rule over Israel, the northern half of what used to be one nation, since split by tribal division. The couple also worships the local Canaanite fertility gods above the God of Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, and Samuel. Elijah also has a violent streak in him, but he is loyal to the one true God and is deeply, publicly critical of Ahab and Jezebel’s rule. After a recent protest staged by Elijah, Jezebel puts a death threat on his life.

- Elijah had no clinicians available to diagnose him, but he exhibits signs of significant anxiety and serious depression. Fleeing for his life, he hides under a solitary tree, prays for his life to end, and falls asleep.
- We have angels – messengers of God – again. And before Elijah can experience God directly, he is given food and water and exercise and a pilgrimage to take to Horeb, the same place where Moses first saw the burning bush. God cares for Elijah’s body and restores his hope before talking to him at all.
- God begins speaking to Elijah not with a command or a song, but with a question. What are you doing here? What do you want? Elijah speaks his truth to God – he is faithful, he thinks, but lonely and afraid.
- After all this, Elijah stands on a mountaintop and witnesses the kaleidoscopic range of nature’s wonders. But God is most present, perhaps only present, in the sheer silence that follows. God isn’t always in noise or power or spectacle, but in still wonder.
- After Elijah experiences God’s presence, he is ready for more. He senses God’s inquiry and speaks his truth again. And then God speaks God’s truth. Elijah is not alone – he has thousands of unseen partners and a younger person to mentor. And he needn’t be afraid – he has good and important work to do.
- Based on the narrative that follows, this seems to be enough to nudge Elijah out of his anxiety and depression-induced paralysis. Good food, exercise, hope, companionship, good work to do, and an assurance that God is with him – all of this gets him moving again.

**Spiritual Exercise** – Ask yourself where you are in your own God-soaked 40-day journey? Does God have something to say to you today? Do you long to sense God’s presence in the sheer silence? Or are you just tired and empty, needing renewed hope? Consider eating a favorite food, drinking a favorite drink, exercising, or resting today and receiving it as God’s gift to you. Give it your mindful attention and enjoy this gift, thanking God for it. Ask God to build up your hope that you will meet God in this season.

**Prayer for your six** – Ask God to refresh the bodies and minds of any of your six who are discouraged, anxious, lonely, or depressed. Pray that God will give them hope, and give them a sense of God’s transcendent presence sometime today.

**Thursday, March 16 – II Kings 4:1-7**

<sup>1</sup> Now the wife of a member of the company of prophets cried to Elisha, “Your servant my husband is dead; and you know that your servant feared the Lord, but a creditor has come to take my two children as slaves.” <sup>2</sup> Elisha said to her, “What shall I do for you? Tell me, what do you have in the house?” She answered, “Your servant has nothing in the house, except a jar of oil.” <sup>3</sup> He said, “Go outside, borrow vessels from all your neighbors, empty vessels and not just a few. <sup>4</sup> Then go in, and shut the door behind you and your children, and start pouring into all these vessels; when each is full, set it aside.” <sup>5</sup> So she left him and shut the door behind her and her children; they kept bringing vessels to her, and she kept pouring. <sup>6</sup> When the vessels were full, she said to her son, “Bring me another vessel.” But he said to her, “There are no more.” Then the oil stopped flowing. <sup>7</sup> She came and told the man of God, and he said, “Go sell the oil and pay your debts, and you and your children can live on the rest.”

**Points of Interest:**

- Elijah’s similarly-named protégée Elisha is the best known of a class of a few dozen or more prophets. They are spiritual advisers to the monarchy and the nation as a whole. One of Elijah’s junior colleagues has died, and his widow is destitute.
- As is still true in many developing nations, the widow’s destitution leads to crippling debt which leads to the risk of child slavery. This progression of hardship leading to debt leading to enslavement has been a curse of the earth’s poor for millennia.
- Elisha begins with what social workers call a strength-based approach. In the widow’s lack, he asks what she does have, which in this case is a single jar of oil. From there, she’s told to borrow more jars from her neighbors, as many empty jars as possible. So before she becomes more full, she is asked to become more desperate, and publicly so.
- The widow’s empty jars look like a physical mark of faith. Each empty jar she gathers represents hope that God will in some way fill that jar. The more empty jars, the more unlikely they’ll all be filled, but the more possibility for God to work wonders.
- As it turns out, the widow’s oil goes a lot further than she could have imagined. She kept pouring. There is more and more oil. Behind closed doors, she physically sees the provision and love of God in this oil. She kept pouring.
- When her jars are all full, the oil stopped flowing. The moment ends, but the miracle has just begun. The widow has enough oil to pay her debts and so rescue her children, and to provide for their needs, both on this day and into the future.

**Spiritual Exercise** – Remember your deep desire of these 40 Days of Faith. Is it the deepest desire of your heart, or has any new longing emerged? Hold empty hands up, and speak your desire to a good and loving and attentive God. With your hands up, ask Jesus to reveal to you how they aren't empty. What jar of oil do you have? What step of faith can you take today, as your part in the thing you are waiting for God to do? Ask God for courage to take that step this very day, even if it makes you look a little desperate. And ask God to meet you in that step of faith, fulfilling your desire.

**Prayer for your city** – Remember in prayer the desperately poor in your city and in your world. Ask for them that God will provide an Elisha to turn to – a spiritually wise and creative comforter and adviser that will highlight whatever strength they have already and help them join with God in seeing that become enough. Pray that God will supply whatever miraculous help and provision is needed for them to survive both today and tomorrow.

**Friday, March 17 – 2 Chronicles 20:5-23**

<sup>5</sup> Jehoshaphat stood in the assembly of Judah and Jerusalem, in the house of the Lord, before the new court, <sup>6</sup> and said, “O Lord, God of our ancestors, are you not God in heaven? Do you not rule over all the kingdoms of the nations? In your hand are power and might, so that no one is able to withstand you. <sup>7</sup> Did you not, O our God, drive out the inhabitants of this land before your people Israel, and give it forever to the descendants of your friend Abraham? <sup>8</sup> They have lived in it, and in it have built you a sanctuary for your name, saying, <sup>9</sup> ‘If disaster comes upon us, the sword, judgment, or pestilence, or famine, we will stand before this house, and before you, for your name is in this house, and cry to you in our distress, and you will hear and save.’ <sup>10</sup> See now, the people of Ammon, Moab, and Mount Seir, whom you would not let Israel invade when they came from the land of Egypt, and whom they avoided and did not destroy— <sup>11</sup> they reward us by coming to drive us out of your possession that you have given us to inherit. <sup>12</sup> O our God, will you not execute judgment upon them? For we are powerless against this great multitude that is coming against us. We do not know what to do, but our eyes are on you.”

<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile all Judah stood before the Lord, with their little ones, their wives, and their children. <sup>14</sup> Then the spirit of the Lord came upon Jahaziel son of Zechariah, son of Benaiah, son of Jeiel, son of Mattaniah, a Levite of the sons of Asaph, in the middle of the assembly. <sup>15</sup> He said, “Listen, all Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, and King Jehoshaphat: Thus says the Lord to you: ‘Do not fear or be dismayed at this great multitude; for the battle is not yours but God’s. <sup>16</sup> Tomorrow go down against them; they will come up by the ascent of Ziz; you will find them at the end of the valley, before the wilderness of Jeruel. <sup>17</sup> This battle is not for you to fight; take your position, stand still, and see the victory of the Lord on your behalf, O Judah and Jerusalem.’ Do not fear or be dismayed; tomorrow go out against them, and the Lord will be with you.”

<sup>18</sup> Then Jehoshaphat bowed down with his face to the ground, and all Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem fell down before the Lord, worshiping the Lord. <sup>19</sup> And the Levites, of the Kohathites and the Korahites, stood up to praise the Lord, the God of Israel, with a very loud voice.

<sup>20</sup> They rose early in the morning and went out into the wilderness of Tekoa; and as they went out, Jehoshaphat stood and said, “Listen to me, O Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem! Believe in the Lord your God and you will be established; believe his prophets.” <sup>21</sup> When he had taken counsel with the people, he appointed those who were to sing to the Lord and praise him in holy splendor, as they went before the army, saying,

“Give thanks to the Lord,  
for his steadfast love endures forever.”

<sup>22</sup> As they began to sing and praise, the Lord set an ambush against the Ammonites, Moab, and Mount Seir, who had come against Judah, so that they were routed. <sup>23</sup> For the Ammonites and Moab attacked the inhabitants of Mount Seir, destroying them utterly; and when they had made an end of the inhabitants of Seir, they all helped to destroy one another.

**Points of Interest:**

- Jehoshaphat is a contemporary of Ahab and Jezebel in the 9th century B.C. Jehoshaphat ruled the southern kingdom of Judah. Judah's capital city was Jerusalem, the city of the great temple built under King Solomon. Judah's very existence is threatened by foreign armies, and in his prayer, Jehoshaphat refers to this temple as symbolizing God's protective presence.
- Jehoshaphat begins his prayer by asking God, "Are you not in heaven?" Perhaps this is a rhetorical question and a mark of faith, reminding himself that of course God is present and listening and ready to help. Or perhaps this is a prayer of doubt, asking God, "Aren't you there?" Perhaps Jehoshaphat is reminding God of what God has promised. Prayer can rise from both faith and doubt and serves to remind both God and ourselves what we know, believe, and hope to be true of God.
- Jehoshaphat speaks the un-defensive, unvarnished truth of his dilemma: "We do not know what to do." He doesn't pretty up – either for God or for his watching subordinates – how stuck he is. He simply says to God, "We are powerless, but we are watching. We are waiting for you, God."
- Then they wait. And wait. And then God speaks, through somebody else. This no-name priest isn't a person of particular prominence, but in giving his whole family lineage, I think the narrator suggests both the historicity of this event and also how much this person Jahaziel is known to God.
- Jahaziel's message isn't tactical. There's no solution in it. He says that God is with them, and that is good enough. They have nothing to fear.
- The warfare of this passage is likely distracting to us. Does God really take sides in competitions, be they sporting events or actual wars? My own theology lends me to tend to say, "No." But it is undeniable that the ancients, including Israel, tended to see God as backing a particular people and nation's welfare. So victory in war was a sign of God's presence and strength. However imperfect, this is the theological landscape this story drops us into.
- The unusual method of warfare Jehoshaphat and followers embrace seems more timeless. Knowing they are outmatched on human terms, they praise God. They sing and worship as protest. People with their backs against the wall have thanked and praised God in the middle of their trials, not just for comfort, but for strength. Spoken and sung praise, individual and collective, is a way of aligning our hearts and our fate with a God who is both within and beyond the limits of our circumstances.
- I don't know what to make of the unlikely ending, in which God himself ambushes the various opposing armies, so that they destroy themselves while Judah sings. In this particular case, faith and worship were the only acts of battle required.

**Spiritual Exercise** – Tell God where you are powerless and need help and simply wait. Don't try to make up an answer or solution. See if God sends a person or circumstance into your path over the next day to speak to you.

**Prayer for your six.** – Pray that God provides miraculous help in any situation in which any of your six are stuck or embattled.

**Saturday, March 18 – Nehemiah 1:1-11**

<sup>1</sup> The words of Nehemiah son of Hacaliah. In the month of Chislev, in the twentieth year, while I was in Susa the capital, <sup>2</sup> one of my brothers, Hanani, came with certain men from Judah; and I asked them about the Jews that survived, those who had escaped the captivity, and about Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> They replied, “The survivors there in the province who escaped captivity are in great trouble and shame; the wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates have been destroyed by fire.”

<sup>4</sup> When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days, fasting and praying before the God of heaven. <sup>5</sup> I said, “O Lord God of heaven, the great and awesome God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments; <sup>6</sup> let your ear be attentive and your eyes open to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for your servants, the people of Israel, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Both I and my family have sinned. <sup>7</sup> We have offended you deeply, failing to keep the commandments, the statutes, and the ordinances that you commanded your servant Moses. <sup>8</sup> Remember the word that you commanded your servant Moses, ‘If you are unfaithful, I will scatter you among the peoples; <sup>9</sup> but if you return to me and keep my commandments and do them, though your outcasts are under the farthest skies, I will gather them from there and bring them to the place at which I have chosen to establish my name.’ <sup>10</sup> They are your servants and your people, whom you redeemed by your great power and your strong hand. <sup>11</sup> O Lord, let your ear be attentive to the prayer of your servant, and to the prayer of your servants who delight in revering your name. Give success to your servant today, and grant him mercy in the sight of this man!”

At the time, I was cupbearer to the king.

**Points of Interest:**

- In our last narrative from the Old Testament, we fast forward to the fifth century B.C. Both Israel to the north and Judah to the south have been routed by neighboring superpowers to the North and East. Nehemiah is the descendant of one of the many families who were taken into exile in the sixth century when Judah was destroyed by Babylon. Now Nehemiah is a court official in the ascendant global power of Persia, where he serves in the government of the famous king Artaxerxes.
- One day Nehemiah hears the ancient equivalent of a news report. Friends and relatives visit him from the homeland to which he has never been. They tell him how awful the conditions are there. A broken down wall in this time guarantees a city’s vulnerability and poverty and also symbolizes national shame. Nehemiah lets himself be affected by this news – he weeps.
- Nehemiah directs his sadness toward spiritual practice. He fasts, and he prays. Fasting and prayer aren’t antidotes to grief or need. They’re next steps. Fasting gives us a way to embody and focus the hunger and need we feel inside. And prayer is what to do when we fast – it’s telling God our sadness and what we yearn for God to do.
- We’re allowed to vent and blame God and say whatever we want when we pray. We’ll see that next week. But in this case, Nehemiah takes partial responsibility for his culture’s ruin. “I and my family have sinned,” he says. He empathizes with the plight of his larger people group and takes a place of humble solidarity with their spiritual condition and physical need.

- We see in Nehemiah's prayer, as in so many other prayers of the Bible, Nehemiah reminding God of God's promises as Nehemiah understands them. Learning God's promises and reminding God of them seems like an especially recommended form of prayer.
- We don't see where in Nehemiah's prayer that he gains a sense of direction. Perhaps he comes into it as he's praying. But by the end of the prayer, his abstract request has become quite particular. Based on a personal reaction to news he heard, he's asking God to provide the right moment to talk to his very powerful boss about this and asking God to help that conversation go well.
- In the next chapter, Nehemiah repeats this prayer really quickly when the king asks him how he is doing, and Nehemiah realizes the moment has arrived. From the favorable conversation Nehemiah has with the king of Persia, Nehemiah's life and the fate of his nation change forever. But that's a story for another day.

**Spiritual Exercise** – What personal or public situation is causing you greatest sadness? If you're not sure, take a moment to ask yourself. If you're not fasting already for the 40 Days in some way, ask God if it would give direction to your sadness for you to fast and pray. If you're fasting already, pray about this sadness however your prayers lead you. In your prayers, consider Nehemiah's example. Take spiritual solidarity with others in pain, remind God of any relevant promise of God's you know. And see if anything else comes to mind for you to pray or do today.

**Prayer for your world** – Think of a group of people that you in some way identify with but who are suffering. Perhaps you live in the same city or nation. Perhaps your ancestors were related or you have other cultural ties to this place. Ask God to carry the burden of this people and place's suffering today.

**Sunday, March 19 – Jeremiah 31:31-37**

<sup>31</sup> The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. <sup>32</sup> It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. <sup>33</sup> But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. <sup>34</sup> No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

<sup>35</sup> Thus says the Lord,  
 who gives the sun for light by day  
 and the fixed order of the moon and the stars for light by night,  
 who stirs up the sea so that its waves roar—  
 the Lord of hosts is his name:

<sup>36</sup> If this fixed order were ever to cease  
 from my presence, says the Lord,  
 then also the offspring of Israel would cease  
 to be a nation before me forever.

<sup>37</sup> Thus says the Lord:  
 If the heavens above can be measured,  
 and the foundations of the earth below can be explored,  
 then I will reject all the offspring of Israel  
 because of all they have done,  
 says the Lord.

**Points of Interest:**

- Jeremiah was a prophet to the Southern kingdom of Judah in the early sixth century B.C., over a hundred years before Nehemiah but after everyone else we’ve met so far. Jeremiah is often called the weeping prophet, as he had sad things to say in sad times. Jeremiah interpreted what God was doing in Judah in the country’s final years, just before Babylon destroyed the city and its temple and dragged its best and brightest residents into exile.
- While Jeremiah’s insight into the present was overwhelmingly sad, he often sounds a cheery note about the future. Here Jeremiah says that God’s connection with people in the future will far eclipse any of even their best experiences in the past.
- A covenant defines the terms of a relationship between two parties, including the promises they make to one another. Our marriage vows are an example of a contemporary covenant, just as God is referred to as Israel’s husband in this passage. Generally, in the Ancient Near East, covenants set terms between a more powerful ruler and a servant of that ruler, or a kind of sub-ruler who served under a greater leader’s authority.

- In the waning days of his nation, Jeremiah sees God bringing an old relationship to a close. God brought Israel and Judah’s ancestors out of Egypt and gave the people laws to follow to live well as God’s people. In the destruction of Jerusalem, Jeremiah says, those days are over. But God will make a new covenant in the future. The new covenant will involve a different experience of:
  - Law: God’s ways will be inscribed onto human hearts rather than onto stone tablets or books.
  - Authority: All types of people will have direct access to and relationship with God, so that teachers and priests don’t need to mediate connection to God for people.
  - Connection: A rich relationship with God will be restored, with total forgiveness of all past wrongs.
- In ancient covenants, blood often played a symbolic role in marking or sealing the promises. In his final dinner with them, Jesus told his friends and followers that his death marked the beginning of this new covenant of God with people.
- Jeremiah ends this passage with poetry that celebrates God’s reliability and faithfulness. This is a good covenant partner, whose promises can be kept. Here the beneficiaries of this faithfulness are the offspring of Israel, who followers of Jesus understand to include all people on earth who connect with God through the person of Jesus.

**Spiritual Exercise** – Jeremiah and Jesus say that if we relate to God through the person of Jesus, God’s law will be written on our hearts, and we will know ourselves to be people known and loved by God. Choose one phrase from this passage. I recommend one of the following: “I will be their God,” “they shall be my people”, “they shall all know me,” or “remember their sin no more.” Sit quietly for a few moments, paying attention to your own breath and heartbeat. Then meditate on one of these phrases for a few more moments, seeing what it says to you today.

**Prayer for your six**– The new covenant vision is nothing less than all people, from the least to the greatest, knowing the goodness of God. Pray that each of your six will become aware of and appreciate God’s inclusion of and attention to them.