n today’s first reading we find Hannah and her family on a pilgrimage to make a sacrifice to the Lord followed by a meal in Shiloh. Elkinanah Hannah’s husband gives Hannah, his barren wife, a double portion of the meal. His love for her is great. He doesn’t seem to mind that she cannot bear him children, he doesn’t hold this against her. Hannah however, has been living in community with his other wife, Penninah, and all of her children with Elkinanah and Penninah has not been so kind. Hannah herself wants children desperately. I know that many of us have had hopes and dreams for our lives that have not panned out as we might have hoped. We like, Hannah wonder why some are blessed with seemingly everything they need and some are barren or without things they long for and hoped would be in their lives. Disappointment can be a barrier to knowing God, particularly if it turns to bitterness. What do we do if our needs and desires remain unfulfilled? For Hannah, she went to the temple and prayed. The text does not tell us why, but Hannah prayed without sound. Perhaps wanting only herself and God to hear the desire of her heart which was to bear a son. One can imagine what it must of have been like for a woman in this day to not be able to bear a son. Society regarded the task of reproduction as practically a necessity. Sons were needed to carry on the family name, the family property, the family business and daughters were just not considered capable of these things, were property and women were needed to bear sons, raise children and do the cooking and cleaning. So one can see how Hannah felt that a son was essential to making her life bearable and for her to feel that she had fulfilled her duty. Hannah prayed and the priest Eli accused her of being drunk but realized his error when she answered with great clarity. Then Eli knew her request was legitemite and was an intercessor on her behalf to God. We know the results are that Samuel was born to Hannah and she gave him back the Lord to become a nazirite as soon as he was weaned. This is the part that really takes me aback. Hannah doesn’t keep this precious gift of life to herself but immediately turns him over to God. Samuel is to be a man of God and serve the community in this way. It’s only fitting if you think about it that all that we have and pray for that is brought into our lives should be dedicated and given back to God. This is easier said then done. We humans often want to keep these precious gifts of life to ourselves and under our control and for our own enjoyment when they are meant to go out and benefit the world. We too are meant to go out and love and serve the Lord, just as we are. Now we may consider this practice of placing the males of society as having greater importance than females to be archaic, it is not the only stone in society or church that needs to be overturned. Just today as I write this sermon, I heard that there is a huge element of Christianity that still insists that this system of men having the role of breadwinner, power, and the woman being submissive is what God intended. When we think of other stones that Jesus might think to overturn, we have to consider not only buildings which can inhibit us from doing the work of the church if they become too insular, but all those things that act like stones or barriers to us knowing the work God has given us to do. Part of our work is to be like Hannah and pray for what we need in our lives and also to pray for the needs of the greater community. We too must be intercessors in prayer for one another as Eli is for Hannah. It can be intimidating to think of the many stones we build into our daily lives, into our ministries, into our community settings. What words have we heard from those outside our communities that may make us feel unwelcome or may prevent us from taking the first step to reaching out to those different than us? Hannah endured years of underhanded comments from Panninah about her failure to become a mother. They clearly affected Hannah’s ability to live life to the fullest until Hannah decided to reach out to God in prayer. Bitterness and despair can be stones in our lives which prevent us from moving forward and unkind and abusive words are powerful. The other types of stones are the literal ones that form our church and all the buildings we inhabit. The past almost two years we were forced to give up worshiping in our buildings. It was really difficult for all of us and I think being back in our building has helped us to get reconnected after this time of separation. Hearing the prayers of this community and your voices reciting them in unison seems like a miracle and it may be just that. It is also miraclulous that God has continued to work in this community outside the walls of the building itself. I have spoken about this before but the coming together of the NBCFA probably would not have been possible if we had decided to meet in someone’s building. This group has brought together people and organizations that have not typically been able to work together in such a capacity to serve the community and that is miraculous too. As we think of the pledge drive and what we can afford to give and the real needs of keeping a church community running and doing ministry I hope that we can do it through a lens of hopefulness. Through a lens of knowledge of what this perfect gift we’ve been given is and could be. This community has overcome adversity, personnel changes, losses and it continues to do the work of worshipping God every Sunday and Wednesday and doing the work of fighting climate change, working on social justice and feeding our neighbors and much much more. We, like Hannah, have gone to God in desperation and hopefulness and we like Hannah have known God’s presence and encouragement in our lives. We, like Hannah want to work with and through God so that at the end of our lives even though we may not have done everything we wanted, made enough money, or had every dream fulfilled if we have really focus on living and not just maintaining boundaries and bitterness we will truly know the life God has prepared for us. Last week we celebrated the saints. I think that those names we read and add to every year show us people that lived their life to the fullest. Hannah does this too, she advocates for herself and God answered. If we do this then we will experience what Mary Oliver shares in this poem, when death comes. If we do this than it won’t matter if the stones are still standing but all that matters is that we continued to live as children of God.

When death comes  
like the hungry bear in autumn;

when death comes and takes all the bright coins from his purse

to buy me, and snaps the purse shut;

when death comes

like the measle-pox

when death comes

like an iceberg between the shoulder blades,

I want to step through the door full of curiosity, wondering:

what is it going to be like, that cottage of darkness?

And therefore I look upon everything

as a brotherhood and a sisterhood,

and I look upon time as no more than an idea,

and I consider eternity as another possibility,

and I think of each life as a flower, as common

as a field daisy, and as singular,

and each name a comfortable music in the mouth,

tending, as all music does, toward silence,

and each body a lion of courage, and something

precious to the earth.

When it’s over, I want to say all my life

I was a bride married to amazement.

I was the bridegroom, taking the world into my arms.

When it’s over, I don’t want to wonder

if I have made of my life something particular, and real.

I don’t want to find myself sighing and frightened,

or full of argument.

I don’t want to end up simply having visited this world.

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