

“Not Thinking about God” by Amy Moffitt

January 17,
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The Second Sunday after the Epiphany

Thanks again for the opportunity to preach. A couple of things to note before I begin:

1. If you end up checking out or distracted during this sermon, Cynthia Burungi's children's message last week pretty much sums up what I'll say here, so you're good.
2. If I come across as a little overly animated or impassioned in my presentation today, that is both because that's how I talk, and because I'm preaching to myself as much as anyone. I know this sermon is going to land with at least **one** person, and that person is me.

One of the really great things about the Bible is all the little details about people in the stories that aren't absolutely necessary to what the story is trying to convey. They lend the Bible stories an air of authenticity and make them more relatable.

For example, I love the story of Nathanael. His friend Philip finds him, sitting under a tree taking a load off, and says to him "NATHANAEL, WE'VE FOUND THE MESSIAH. IT'S A GUY FROM NAZARETH NAMED JESUS." And Nathanael's first response is to crack a joke, "Really? Does anything good come from Nazareth?" I can almost read that in my head with the voice of any given character from Seinfeld. When I was a kid reading this passage, I thought Nathanael was not good enough for Jesus because he was skeptical about the Messiah. As an adult, though, I get it. That kind of reflexive, sarcastic humor is a way of dealing with repeatedly being disappointed. We can see from Nathanael's reaction when he meets Jesus that he really **did** want to believe. It just didn't take all that much to get him excited. Jesus responds to this attitude switcheroo with a crack of his own. "Oh yeah, you think **that's** good? Wait 'til you see the heavens open up and the angels surrounding me, man. THAT'S going to blow your mind."

I also love the amount of detail we get about Hannah, the mother of Samuel in I Samuel, Chapter 1. Hannah stands in a tradition of Biblical matriarchs who had to deal with long periods of infertility before eventually giving birth to a child who changed the course of the nation of Israel. We're familiar with Sarah **finally** bearing Isaac, and Rachel **finally** bearing Joseph and Benjamin. Hannah was tormented by Pennineh, her husband Elkanah's other wife, about her childlessness, and it bothered her A LOT. She cried and refused to eat. She went to the temple regularly to pray for a child and when we find her in I Samuel 1, she's praying silently, too upset and consumed with her misery to even vocalize her prayers even though that was the normal ritual at the temple. When Eli the high priest saw her praying silently rather than aloud, he assumed that she was drunk and told her to lay off the booze. She shot back at him that she wasn't drunk, she was in PAIN and was pouring out her heart to God. Eli was like ok, got it, may God give you what you're asking for. And she went away and she ate, and viola, she got what

she was asking for.

There is SO MUCH going on in this exchange. Having children was the point of a woman's existence in those times. Rabbinical law required that if a couple had not had children after 10 years, that the husband must marry another woman to fulfill the command to be fruitful and multiply. Some Rabbinic traditions state that Hannah facilitated Elkanah's marriage to Pennineh in the same way that Sarah gave Hagar to Abraham. Of course, Pennineh knew that she was the backup wife and that Elkanah preferred Hannah, so she taunted Hannah, which made Hannah upset, which made Elkanah work really hard to comfort her, which made Pennineh even more jealous which made her taunt Hannah more. Talk about a toxic family dynamic.

But that was nothing compared to Eli's family. We find out in I Samuel 2 that Eli's two sons, Hopni and Phineas, who were also priests serving in the temple, had amended the laws around what portion of the sacrifice they were to be able to consume as priests. The law stated that they were to receive the breast and one thigh of each peace offering. However, Hopni and Phineas came up with a rule that said whatever came up when their servant stuck a big three-pronged fork in the pot of sacrificial meat was theirs for the taking... which predictably was way more than just the breast and the thigh. They **also** made people wait for their sacrifices, requiring that the raw meat be brought up to them for their inspection, possibly so they could cook and eat the best bits before offering the rest for sacrifice. The text of I Samuel 2 also says that they lay with the women who came to the temple for sacrifice. The midrash of the medieval Rabbi Rashi asserts that rabbinical scholars believed they didn't literally sleep with them, but that the women who came to offer sacrifice because of events related to their reproductive cycle (ex. Giving birth) had to wait so long for their sacrifices to be offered while the priests chowed down on the best bits of meat

that to God it was just as bad as having sex with them.

Not only were Hopni and Phineas doing this, but Eli knew they were and didn't really do anything about it aside from saying "Guuuys, stop." At the end of Chapter 2, a "man of God" comes to Eli (who as the High Priest is supposed to be THE man of God in Israel) and tells him that his disrespect of God by failing to remove his sons from their posts has earned him an early death, and an early death for all his sons and grandsons, and poverty for the entire line of his family.

ALSO, his line would be taken over by a priest that God would raise up who *would* respect God and the sacrifice. Yikes. When we enter the story with today's reading from Chapter 3, apparently Eli still hasn't heeded this prophecy, because God has to give it *again* to the boy Samuel, who hadn't even ever received the voice of God before this. Rashi asserts that God actually passed from the Holy of Holies *over* Eli who was laying in the inner part of the temple to speak to Samuel who was laying in the outer part of the temple. Samuel, the child of Hannah the barren and bitter, received this first word in a long line of words from God that would result in *his* being the priest God chose for God's people.

I want to draw a parallel here between Hannah's tears and misery and Nathanael's cynicism. Hannah's depression and sadness didn't disqualify her from receiving God's blessing, and she ended up receiving it in a big way. She bore several children after Samuel and got to see her son rise to great prominence. Nathanael's cynical rejection of a Messiah coming from the other side of the tracks didn't get him criticism from Christ, either. Jesus simply seemed bemused, offered a wisecrack of his own, and welcomed Nathanael into the community of His disciples.

You know another disciple who was disappointed? Judas Iscariot. Judas, like the other disciples, joined up with Jesus expecting him to be the Messiah who would cast off oppressive Roman rule and liberate the Jewish people. He

expected a political revolutionary. Instead, he followed this guy Jesus around while he... TALKED. He talked endlessly. He talked in front of big groups and small groups. He talked to leaders of the synagogue and he talked to low status members of society. He even talked to the waves and to a fig tree and they responded. Oh yeah, and He healed people, which was really cool and made him popular. Also, he made all that food appear when the huge crowd that was listening to him TALK got hungry, which was cool, and He walked on the water... and this was all great but the Jewish people were still oppressed. And guess what? When He was asked about it, He told people they had to pay their taxes. To the occupying power. He actually said "Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's". WHAT WAS THAT ABOUT? WHERE IS THE REVOLUTION WE WERE PROMISED? So Judas gives up. He starts helping himself to the shared money, and he cuts a deal to betray Jesus (who was pretty disappointing, anyway) to the high priests for a nice sum of money.

That greed sounds a lot like Eli's sons, doesn't it? And Judas Iscariot's fate was a lot like theirs, dying an ignoble death way before his time.

But this isn't a message about the perils of greed. In both cases, greed was a byproduct of a lost connection to what God was actually doing that resulted in a mindless march to the tune of what these people *thought* was their role and purpose. Hopni and Phineas thought they were doing their jobs by offering the sacrifice so who cared if they took a little off the top. I'm sure in their minds, they were just living their best life now. Judas thought that Jesus was supposed to be a political revolutionary, so when He wasn't (or not in the way Judas thought he should be), why not sell him out to the official gatekeepers of the religion who wanted Him dead anyway?

All of us are capable getting things very wrong if we grow numb to God, and it's so, so easy to grow numb to God while

you're doing the "right" thing if you're not opening up to God and allowing God to interrupt and redirect you.

There's a poem called "Not Thinking About God" that I've been trying to find for years and tried to find for this sermon and can't. I read it somewhere between 15 and 20 years ago, so my memory of it is pretty rusty, but what I remember most vividly is that the poem is essentially a to-do list of what the writer was doing that day. Because I can't find the poem, I can't verify if the poet was indicating that this busyness was an intentional means of distraction, or if not thinking about God was an unintentional byproduct of all this activity... but I don't know that it matters, really. The point was that not thinking about God is very, very easy. You just have to be preoccupied with everything else. Even, I would argue, "God stuff" like charity work, activism, and church work. Maybe most especially that.

You may be familiar with the concept of mindfulness, a concept that has very much entered the bloodstream of the circles in which I travel online. You may also have heard it made fun of or criticized, or you may have thought it looked boring or shallow or faddish. The basic premise of mindfulness is this: Be aware of what you're thinking and how it's impacting you. Consider whether your train of thought is carrying you to a destination you don't actually want to go. The idea is reminiscent of II Corinthians 10:5 where Paul states "we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ." You can't control your thoughts if you're not even aware of them.

We live in a time of perpetual distraction, and it truly is different from previous time periods. There have been multiple studies talking about the effect of the internet and social media on our emotions and cognitive processing, and the changes are significant, real, and disturbing. I read a whole book called *Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to our Brains* written by Nicolas Carr in 2010. It's about how the internet, social media, and consuming information through screens is

literally rewiring our brains so that it's difficult to attend deeply to things. I'd tell you more about what it said, but I read it on my Kindle 4 years ago, and I can't remember much of what I read. The irony isn't lost on me.

Not only are we perpetually distracted by social media, but there's just so much to DO, and that needs doing. In a way, that's to be celebrated. We live in an interesting place and there are many interesting distractions, even during a global pandemic. The ability to physically get things done, and the mental capacity to think about many things is worth being happy about and grateful for.

But I've worshipped my own To-Do List long enough to tell you that you can pretty effectively stunt your own spiritual growth by being so busy you never have time to connect with why you're doing what you're doing, and certainly not enough time to hear the still, small voice of God. I'm not saying, by the way, that we should chide ourselves for not having "quiet time with God" every morning. I think one reason people stop having "quiet time" is because it can become one more thing on their to-do list, and it becomes ritualized and dead.

I'm saying let God interrupt you. Cynthia said it this way last week: Keep praying. Pray all the time. I say it this way: make yourself stop. Make yourself breathe. Give God a chance to get a word in edgewise among the constant internal chatter of your thoughts and the demands of your to-do list. Give God a chance to shuffle up your to-do list and knock things off it. Give God a chance to mess up your plans.

Hannah showed up to God angry, bitter, and distressed. Nathanael showed up cynical and disappointed. But they *showed up* before God, and God honored that. Hopni and Phineas and Judas all went through the motions of what they thought was right without connecting to God to find out if they were off track. Eli's sons were *literally* praying

without letting God answer, and the result was abuse of their positions and ruin for their family. Don't worry about getting everything done the right way, worry about being honest and open with God. The Bible is full of honestly messy people who tell God they can't do what God wants from them and who get it wrong and God works with them and does amazing things. God can do this because they end up doing what God tells them to do even though they feel out of control and have no idea how they'll do it. I *hate* that feeling, that feeling of lack of control and helplessness? But I'd hate to end up sleepwalking my way off the path, too, numbed by all the things I think I have to do. Stop. Breathe. Listen.