



Archdiocese of San Antonio

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Hannah is brokenhearted. She has been unable to bear children. In desperation she appears at the shrine of Shiloh where she pours out her heart to God before the ark of the covenant. At first, Eli the priest misunderstands her condition and scolds her. But when he hears about her plight, he blesses and reassures her that God will hear her prayer. At the heart of the passage is the deep faith that both people have in the God of the covenant. Hannah believes what she has heard, and God remembers her and the promise when she returns to marital life with her husband. She conceives a son!

The narrative is very brief, but it unfolds dramatically. God listens to prayer; God promises to be with us; God can turn seemingly impossible situations around. But we need to trust him even as we do all we can to help ourselves. God will answer our prayer through our actions, our creativity, our God-given gifts.

Jesus comes to Capernaum at the beginning of his public ministry. He enters the synagogue and teaches. The congregation is astonished and amazed. We do not hear about the content of his preaching but only how he taught – with authority. Jesus encounters a man with an unclean

spirit. In the first century unclean spirits were understood to be evil, mysterious powers that were hostile to God, goodness, health.

The arrogant spirit addresses Jesus defiantly – calling him by name and trying to overpower him because it knows his name. Jesus, however, orders the evil spirit to shut up and come out of the man. The spirit rages and howls but he obeys...for now. This is not the end of the story of evil in the world although it does tell us that Jesus will eventually be victorious over all the forces of evil. Those who experience this encounter – Jesus' teaching and the exorcism – are astonished and amazed. Will this amazement endure, or will the forces of evil continue to conspire to get rid of Jesus?

There are echoes of this gospel passage in the Petrine ministry of Pope Francis. In his very first homily with the Cardinal Electors on the day after his election, he said: "When we do not profess Jesus Christ, we profess the worldliness of the devil, a demonic worldliness." He has returned to this theme many times in the last ten months of his papacy.

Pope Francis does not merely talk about the New Evangelization. He shows us how to do it – not only by mere words or traditional formulas – not only by powerful sound bytes or photo ops – not only by eloquent gestures – but, above all, by his honesty, his compassion, his freedom to be himself and to share God's love and joy with everyone he encounters, directly and indirectly.

There is a new springtime in the Church, but we must be on guard against the forces of evil which still lurk in the shadows. Let us have faith in God who promises to be with us. Let us be amazed and astonished by

God's work in our midst, and let us walk with the Lord Jesus as faithful disciples.