

## **Sermon, Proper 28B, November 18, 2018, Jane A. Beebe**

1 Samuel 1:4-20

I love the story of Hannah. It comes at the beginning of the books of Samuel—originally one scroll in the Hebrew Bible. In Samuel is chronicled the shift in leadership for the people of Israel from judges to kings. Samuel is the linchpin: a prophet and an anointer of kings. Rather than a dry historical narrative, we hear a very human story of how God acts in the lives of one family. For me it almost has the mystery of a fairy tale. It's not that straightforward. If we take a close look at how it unfolds, there are some twists that are not entirely logical. That is where God enters in!

We do not hear the first three verses of 1 Samuel that introduce Elkanah, naming his ancestors back to his great-great grandfather. They establish Elkanah as a person of substance and clear lineage. In the first scene from our passage we learn that Elkanah has come to the house of the Lord to make sacrifice. Portions of the sacrifice are given to his wife Peninnah and her children. The number of children is not specified but we do learn that there are sons and daughters so there is sense that there are many children. However, we also learn that the Lord has closed Hannah's womb. Because he loves her, Elkanah gives her two portions from the sacrifice. And yet it seems a rather clumsy recompense for Hannah's lack, however sweet the intent. Nor can it make up for the constant provocation from

Peninnah. Hannah can only weep and is unable to eat. I think of a line from Psalm 42: ‘My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, “Where is your God?”’ (Psalm 42:3)

Elkanah again offers her awkward comfort: “Aren’t I more to you than ten sons?” Hannah’s sorrow goes on for years. One of my dearest friends was unable to have children. Ultimately, she and her husband decided to adopt, and their son became one of my godchildren. However, theirs was not an easy process or decision. Her pain was deep and raw. We would go for long walks along the railroad tracks near the church we attended. There was little to say... In the face of such sadness, what was it that spurred Hannah to rise and go to the house of the Lord and present herself? We do not know what was in Hannah’s mind in that moment. Ground down by years of suffering, she is in a vulnerable place. Still, she presents herself. The priest Eli is sitting on the seat by the doorpost. Either his presence does not bother her, or she is too intent on her purpose to notice him.

With what I think is great courage, Hannah offers everything to God, continuing to weep bitterly. Then she does a startling thing: she vows to give to God the very child she hopes for. One of my favorite brothers at the Society of St. John the Evangelist is Br. David Vryhof. I was lucky enough to have a seminar with him on spiritual direction through the auspices of the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge. He is a deeply wise and compassionate human being, so I

was delighted to find a short sermon of his on Hannah's story. He says, "Notice that Hannah's prayer includes a promise: If God will give her a son, she will dedicate him to God's service."

Br. David notes that "...this is not a bribe, a way of enticing God to give her what she wants. It is instead an act of selfless devotion. She is willing to give back to God what she will receive, and to offer up to God this child that has been the object of her longing for so many years." Br. David not only found this deeply moving. "It also prompted him to wonder whether we take enough time to imagine what we will DO with the blessings God gives us in answer to prayer." Perhaps it is the very depths of Hannah's prayer that allow her to be inspired by God's presence into making this vow.

Eli misjudges Hannah's fervent prayer, admonishing her for being drunk. She responds that she is woman deeply troubled. She has been "pouring out her soul before the Lord." (1 Samuel 1:15) We hear in Philippians 2 that Jesus did not exploit his equality with God, but emptied himself... (Philippians 2:7) I think, too, of the sacrifice made at the altar when the wine is poured out for all... This act of self-emptying is deeply holy. Perhaps Eli intuitively recognizes this. All that remains is for him to offer his blessing. He does not know what Hannah has been seeking, or what she has now found. He tells her to go in peace and expresses the certain hope that God will grant her petition. I find it interesting that *when* the

petition is to be granted is not part of the story. Hannah simply says, in words very similar to Mary's at the annunciation, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." (1 Samuel 1:18) Hannah goes to her quarters, eats and drinks with her husband—and I would have loved to be a fly on the wall for that dinner-table conversation!—and is sad no longer.

The next morning Elkanah and Hannah rise early to worship together before the Lord. As yet, nothing appears to have happened. The couple returns home and daily life resumes. It is then that God remembers Hannah. God remembers Hannah, and *then* she conceives a child. And because God is God, the consequences of Hannah's prayer and promise become so much more than she—or we—could have imagined. One woman, one prayer, one vow become a pebble thrown into a pond with ripples that continue to touch our lives today. Samuel anoints Saul as king of Israel (and finds three donkeys at the same time. I have never understood what the donkeys are all about). Ultimately, Samuel anoints David.

After a transformative event in our lives—and I don't think it matters whether the event is joyful or traumatic—we may notice that our priorities change. We may decide to let go of our sense of what is important, what is urgent to be done. On the other hand, we may take up some new commitment, or we may notice that there is simply more spaciousness in our lives. Our sense of time may open up showing us more possibilities. I think this a sign that we have shifted from

living in *chronos*, or chronological time, into *kairos*, or God's time. When we enter into *kairos*, we have dipped a toe into the waters of God's kingdom. God is at hand; God's purposes are fulfilled. When we live with an awareness of God's time, things that may have seemed random begin to make sense.

I had a birthday recently—but it wasn't just any birthday. I finally reached the age that my mother was when she died. Part of me simply wanted to get past it; part of me dreaded the day. Apparently, these feelings of being off-kilter and slightly panicked are not unusual. A year ago, in anticipation of what was beginning to feel like my "last" year, I shared this peculiar experience with some colleagues. Several in the group had had similar feelings. I felt less alone, yet the anxiety was rooted in my subconscious. I couldn't simply talk myself out of it. It just felt weird! When I woke up on the morning of my birthday, I still felt odd. It was as if I no longer had a map for my life. But then I began to feel a new sense of spaciousness. With God's help, I step into the unknown.

In a few minutes we will participate in a baptism and welcome a child into the "household of God." As much as we are here to celebrate Elaina's new life in Christ, this occasion is for us as well. Elkanah and Hannah complete Hannah's prayer through worship. This is our chance to renew our baptismal covenant with God and with each other. The prayers and vows of individuals are always rooted in

the worshipping community. Our time going forward is newly consecrated. We can then go in peace, knowing that in God's time our petitions will be granted. God remembers us.