

“For This Child I Prayed”

Valley Presbyterian Church – October 18, 2020

20th Sunday after Pentecost

Rev. John Wahl

I Samuel 1:1-28; 2:1-10

In our journey through the narrative of the Old Testament, we have come a long way since last Sunday when we looked at the story of the Golden Calf in Exodus. After the Israelites, led by Moses, left Mt. Sinai, they wandered through the desert wilderness for forty years; before finally entering into the Promised Land. Over the next three centuries, they lived as tribes – led by priests and judges. Over time, that political system began to collapse and the lament arises that the people have no king to lead them.

First and Second Samuel tell the story of this transition from a loose system of tribal judges into a unified monarchy. The first main character in this story is Samuel, the priest, who will one day anoint Saul and David as Israel’s first two kings. But Samuel’s story begins here – as do all people’s stories – with his birth, with his family, and – in particular – with his mother, Hannah.

Hannah is the wife of Elkanah. We are told that Hannah is barren, and that she longed for a child more than anything else in the world. Her husband has another wife, Peninah, who had many children and used her status as a mother to taunt and bully Hannah. Elkanah loved Hannah: “Why do you weep? Why is your heart sad?” “Am I not more to you than ten sons?” he asks her. But she could not be consoled.

In a patriarchal society, where a woman’s worth is linked to her ability to have children, Hannah is particularly vulnerable. She is scorned and belittled not only by her husband’s other wife, but likely by society at large. Though her husband loves her, she will have no security for herself once he dies. It is no wonder then, that when the family goes together to make sacrifices to God at temple in Shiloh, and Elkanah offers Hannah a double portion of food, she could not bring herself to eat.¹

Instead, Hannah goes to the temple to pray. Weeping bitterly and deeply distressed, she promises to God that if she is granted a son, she will dedicate him to the Lord: he would be a Nazirite and never drink wine or cut his hair. She been waiting so long for a child that she vows to give him up to be trained by the priests.

None of us, of course, like to wait. We all know what it means to have wanted something for so long; with no promise or timetable for an answer. Though not every person struggles with the anguish of wanting, but not being able, to have children; we

¹ Kathryn Schifferdecker from *WorkingPreacher.com*

all can imagine – at least to some degree – that feeling of barrenness: that what you desire most is out of your hands; and that your worth – in your eyes and the in eyes of others – is beyond your control. Nothing, not even the love of her husband, could relieve her pain.

Ironically, just as Hannah is vowing that her son will never drink, the priest Eli sees her lips moving but no words coming out and thinks she is drunk, commanding her to put away her wine instead of making a spectacle in the temple. A more sensitive priest might have thought to ask first what was wrong with her, why she had tears in her eyes. But Hannah graciously seeks to explain herself; saying that she has not been drinking, but instead “pouring out (her) soul before the Lord.” She likely fears that before her stands yet another person who judges her to be a “worthless woman.”

Although Hannah does not share all the details of her situation, Eli eventually understood that hers was a heartfelt cry. The priest assures her that God has heard and indeed would answer her prayer. This assurance fortifies her enough that she is able to go back home, to eat, and to no longer be sad; because her pain and her prayer has been acknowledged. Gods’ answer comes when she gives birth to Samuel; and the history of Israel is forever changed.

And so, the founding of the nation of Israel – with the God’s call to Abraham and Sarah – begins with an infertile couple living in a foreign land. The salvation of Israel begins with the birth of a baby boy – Moses – despite an edict from Pharaoh to kill all such babies. Moses is saved from death by the brave exploits of women, including Pharaoh’s own daughter. With the birth of Samuel to a barren woman, the path to a monarchy is set into motion. And, of course, most famously for Christians, Jesus is born to an unmarried and powerless woman, Mary, who with Joseph must escape another edict of genocide by going back to Egypt.

The struggles of childbearing and rearing are not consigned in scripture to a sentimental, private realm, but are integral to the drama of salvation history. The many biblical accounts of women struggling to give birth and being answered by God reveals that childbearing and the protection of those children as a profound calling which requires a stubborn and persistent faith. The frequency and prominence of such accounts makes it clear that – despite the hiddenness of their labor – God regards and honors these women as prominent actors of the stage of history. And so the harvest of God’s grand purpose – through Abraham and Moses, Samuel and Jesus – is never disconnected from unseen work of sowing and nurturing its seeds.²

The end of the chapter narrates how Hannah makes good on her vow to dedicate her son to God after Samuel is weaned. His parents bring him to Shiloh,

² Alastair Roberts, “The Politics of Hannah’s Opened Womb”

where they make offerings to God and present Samuel to Eli. Hannah reminds the priest that she was the one who prayed for a son and, since God answered her petition, she is now offering Samuel to God.

Mothers – as well as fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, mentors, neighbors and friends – are constantly in prayer for the children they love: children who are yet to be born, those who are dependent on nurture and care, as well as those who may have gained some level of independence, but are still in need of guidance and support. When we hear Hannah saying, “for this child I prayed,” she is expressing her deep longing not only to bear a child, but also for that child to grow and develop physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually. Like her, we pray for these children to find and fulfill their purpose, to be happy, healthy, and safe. We pray that they would be dedicated to strong values and relationships.

Hannah’s Song – which was our first reading today, and is found at the beginning of chapter two – describes some of these prayerful longings. Hannah offers praise for God’s care for the poor, the weak, the downtrodden, and the vulnerable. In the song, the world’s expectations of “same old, same old” are upended and the world itself is turned upside down. The poor are lifted up and the powerful are humbled. The hungry are fed and the rich are made to work for their bread.

The last word of the song – translated “his anointed” – is literally “his messiah.” The song ends by pointing towards God’s anointed one, David, whose story will be the focus of the rest of First and Second Samuel. Even more importantly, Hannah’s song points towards the promise given to David that God would “establish the throne of his kingdom forever;” a text that we will examine next week and a promise that will lead to the hope for a Messiah.³

In Hannah’s story – of her persistence in prayer that God will grant her a son – we see yet one more example in scripture where we are told that the unexpected, the marginalized, and the overlooked may become – through God’s power and grace – the means through which salvation comes to the world. We will see it happen again when another unexpected woman – Mary – is chosen by God to bear and then raise a son that will change the world. Though it comes about in a different way – Hannah’s transformation into a mother is almost as miraculous as Mary’s. All things – great and small – are possible with God.

Therefore, amazing things are possible as well with our children: those we bear, those we raise, and all those we help to nurture and love. Our fervent prayers – and the way that we act on those prayers through policies and practices and individual actions – can play a huge role in how the future looks for our children. The poor can be lifted up and the hungry fed. Access can be provided to education and health and

³ Amy Robertson and Robert Williamson, *Bibleworm Podcast*

public safety. Let us resource and encourage and support our children with all the passion that Hannah brought into the temple that day.

And in those times when we must wait – sometimes seemingly unendingly – remember that God sees you and hears your prayers and can relate to how you feel. Like Hannah, it may seem like everyone else around you is getting the thing you are waiting for. But, in prayer, we can bring all of our emotions to God: sadness, anger, jealousy, or frustration; God wants our honest and complete selves.⁴ In doing so, we can maintain hope; and live into a promised future even before it is made real. All thanks be to God. Amen.

⁴ Amana Brown, “Hannah” from *Twelve Women of the Bible*