

November 15, 2009

1 Samuel 1:4-20

On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the LORD. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. She made this vow: "O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a Nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head." As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk.

So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer. They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her.

In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the LORD."

Sermon by Susi Kawolics

The story about Hannah may seem like an unlikely reading for Stewardship Sunday, however, I believe this woman offers us insights into Stewardship as well as into other areas. To better understand this reading from Samuel, it is helpful to place it in context. This story took place after the exodus from Egypt, when the Israelites had settled into the promised land. They are being ruled by judges, and are a loose federation of tribes. They are facing both external and internal problems, however. External threats come from military powers of the neighboring lands. Their internal crisis comes from corruption in the temple. The temple priest was Eli, and his sons were using their power to satisfy their own greed, instead of fulfilling their temple duties.

These circumstances befalling the Hebrew people parallel Hannah's situation in a number of ways. Her barren condition reflects the barrenness of Israel's future. The Hebrew people were losing hope amidst their problems. Just as there is internal conflict in Eli's household in the temple, there is conflict in Hannah's household as well. Hannah, the favored wife, is being tormented by her husband Elkinah's other wife. Penninah,

who has been able to produce sons for Eli, taunts Hannah at every opportunity because she does not have children. This situation also mirrors Israel's external conflict with the neighboring nations. Just as Peninnah taunts Hannah for not having a child, the other lands are taunting Israel for not having a King. The Israelites are supposedly God's chosen people, just like Hannah is Elkinah's favorite wife. Neither can understand why they are not receiving what they most long for. Hannah longs for a child in the same way that Israel is longing for a King.

We can all relate on some level to Hannah's situation. At one time, or other, all of us have experienced a feeling of profound emptiness, of barrenness, of longing. This palpable emptiness may come from loss: loss of a dear friend or relative, loss of a job, loss of our home. It may come from a downward change – perhaps the experience of a decline in health, physical fitness, or mental agility. It may also come from grief- over the end of a relationship, the death of a dream, the slipping away of a sense of security and peace of heart.

This passage really spoke to me this week in light of the many deaths that have touched my life and the life of this community. I was at two memorial services Friday, and am working on one for this coming week. We are aware of the loss of Kathy's Fudella's father, Al Phan's brother, and Lynn Giles. There are probably others that I don't know about that have touched your lives. These deaths create empty places in lives, which long for healing and wholeness.

Well-meaning people may try to comfort us by reminding us to count our blessings, or telling us to look at the bright side, but this does not help. Such is the case in Hannah's life. When she is taunted by her rival, her husband Elkanah tries to comfort her by asking, "Am I not more to you than ten sons?" This does not make the grieving Hannah feel any better. In ancient times, a measure of a woman's worth was in how many offspring she could produce. If she was barren, it surely meant that she had sinned, and that God was angry with her. She was judged by society, and she and others wondered what sin had been committed in order to incur this punishment from God.

So how does one go about filling the emptiness, bringing life out of loss and barrenness? Hannah models a way for us. During the pilgrimage that Elkinah makes with his family to Shiloh, the major sanctuary where Eli is priest, Hannah can no longer tolerate the taunts of her rival. She has been putting up with them for years, and now she is so upset, she cannot even eat, and she decides she will go to the temple and pour her heart out to God.

She goes into the temple, and begins to pray fervently. She is so openly distraught and emotional, that Eli is sure she is drunk. When she explains that she has been praying, and not drunk, Eli blesses her as she leaves.

We are invited to follow Hannah's example when we are at a point of despair, of dealing with a loss, and wishing to move towards fulfillment. Emptying ourselves out before God is the first step. We may choose a holy place to pray, like a church, or simply find our own space in which to be with God and pour our hearts out. Or perhaps we long for support from a loved one or friend as we pray. Whatever works best, we believe in a God who listens to our heartfelt grief, anger, and despair.

But can we really trust that God will hear and answer our prayer – like God heard and answered Hannah's prayer? Will God grant us our desire, or heal our loss? I think the answer is Yes ...and No. No, we may not receive exactly what we ask for. And losses that we feel acutely will never completely go away. The healing that does take place, takes time. But I do believe that God desires to fill our emptiness, that God will

bring new life to be born from us. God will renew us if we are willing to let new life grow within us.

New life, gestation, is a process. Though sometimes we may receive an immediate, obvious answer to our prayers, more often, we are given a seed of promise so small, that we can barely sense its existence. Yet if we are willing to wait in hope, with an open mind and an open heart to what God may be birthing in us, eventually new life will come out of barrenness. It may not be the answer that we seek, but God is in the business of always creating, of bringing forth life.

Our gospel reading (**Mark 13:1-8**) also reminds us that God brings new life out of chaos. Disasters like wars, earthquake, famines – Jesus says they are birthpangs. God will create something new. This is the heart of the Christian story. Out of death comes resurrection. It may not look like what we expect. For us, new birth from loss may come in the form of a more compassionate heart, a calling to care and serve that we never had before, an unexpected opportunity, or a closer relationship with God.

I had a conversation with a very wise and dear woman who shared with me this story. She and her husband had lost a teenage son to Leukemia. This was obviously devastating for them. But then she went on to say that exactly one year later, they were asked to care for a teenage boy whom they knew, who had lost his parents, and had no one to care for him. She was very clear that this child did not replace her son in any way, that she still acutely feels the loss of her son. But she and her husband had space in their lives to take in this other boy. She felt as if God were calling her to this, and a new relationship was born from her loss.

I want to be very clear that I don't believe that God causes tragedies in order to bring about these opportunities for new growth. But I do believe that God can always bring grace out of any situation if we are open to seeing it, and to waiting for it.

Hannah promised God that if she bore a son, she would give him back to God when he was weaned. He would become a Nazarite priest, being raised by Eli in the temple. It may seem strange to us that she would give away the very thing she so longed for.

She was able to make this promise for two reasons. First of all, just having the child would stop the taunts from Penninah and would establish her worth as a woman at that time. The other reason she was willing to give up her child was so that, through this act of sacrifice, she might receive more children. The Hebrew people believed that if they gave to God their "Firstfruits" – the first part of their harvest, that God would bless them later with an even more abundant harvest. So if Hannah gave to God her firstborn, she believed God would give to her more blessings – more children. And, reading further in the book of Samuel, we find that Hannah does indeed give birth to an additional three sons and two daughters.

These may seem like self-serving promises, self-serving actions on the part of Hannah. Yet whenever God acts to bring life out of barrenness, whenever God gives us gifts, we are called to give these gifts back to God in some way. When Hannah gave Samuel back to God, he was used in a special way. Samuel became the prophet who would transition the Israelites from rule by judges to rule by Kings. He was the one who anointed Saul and David, the first of the Kings to rule over the Hebrew people.

Our gifts are given to us so that we may share them with the world, to do God's work to help bring about God's realm. So in returning to God what God has given us, we will also be blessed with more.

Does this mean that if we give a large pledge, that God will give us more money back, that perhaps we will win the lottery? I wish I could promise that, but I don't

believe it. I do believe that gifts from God come in many shapes and sizes, and God promises a good return on our investments. We may not always recognize this return, but God is invariably able to use all our gifts that we give and multiply them.

In a little while we will be giving our pledge cards. These are our promises to God, our returning to God a portion of the gifts God has given to us. May we believe in the promise of hope of new life as we wait for the seeds of God's answers to prayers to come to fruition. Then, may we return the blessings of our lives to God, believing that God will multiply them – using them to their fullest in building God's Kingdom on earth. Amen.