

1 Samuel 1:9-11, 19-20; 2:1-10

In our Bibles, the Book of 1 Samuel follows the very short Book of Ruth. In the Hebrew Old Testament manuscripts, 1 Samuel immediately follows the Book of Judges. And so in the Hebrew Bible the last words from the Book of Judges which precede today's text are: *In those days there was no king in Israel; everyone did what was right in his own eyes.*

“Those days” were far from the high water mark of Israel’s spiritual life as a nation. The Book of Judges describes chaotic days in which the Israelites were often oppressed by the surrounding nations. God would send a judge to deliver them, but their freedom lasted only as long as the judge lived. Even their judges were less than model saints. Samson, for example, was a man whose life was dominated by the flesh, rather than the Spirit. The writer of Judges links Israel’s spiritual decay and political chaos to the absence of a king. The book of 1 Samuel records the process by which God provided His people with a king.

By placing Hannah’s story at the beginning of the book, the writer hints that the story of Israel’s transition and subsequent events cannot happen, cannot be told without first telling her story. Hannah is an integral part of this transition. In order to understand Hannah’s story, we need to understand not only the intricacies of her story, but the context in which her story appears.

1 and 2 Samuel form a single story that depicts the difficulty involved in Israel’s complex transition from a loose system of judges to a unified monarchal system.

Knowing that the Bible seldom highlights a woman’s story, we are immediately put on notice that this is not business as usual. Hannah’s barrenness puts us on notice that her child will be a special blessing from God that will impact the story of Israel for generations to come.

In a world where barrenness was considered a curse, only the birth of a child could complete Hannah. Day after day, year after year, she had to live with a pain in her heart that would not go away. Her barrenness was an “unsettled ache”. In his book, *The Power of the Names of God*, Tony Evans writes, “the worst turmoil of all often takes place in one’s own soul. This happens when you can’t seem to live with yourself, when your own pain, anxiety, depression, and regret eat you up, leaving you with an unsettled ache. You are at war within.”

An unsettled ache lingers no matter what one does. Possibility thinking, positive psychology, words of affirmation, wishing, hoping, even praying don’t make the hurt go away, relentlessly meandering in one’s thoughts. Unlike hurts that are at least manageable, this type of hurt affects one’s entire life, leaving heart wounded and spirit broken. This type of wound impinges not only life circumstances, but also one’s sense of self as well.

Hannah’s husband Elkanah, is from a distinguished family line and is a man of some means because he has two wives. The only thing we know about these two wives are their names, and their respective reproductive statuses. Peninnah, which means fertile, has children; Hannah, which means gracious, does not. Thinking herself better than Hannah, Peninnah’s disdainful attitude and repeated boasts about her fertility left Hannah shattered beyond words.

Since barrenness was considered a source of disgrace in the ancient world, Hannah lived under a cloud of shame and pain. Those around her probably wondered what she had done to deserve such a punishment. This seems to be the reaction of her co-wife, Peninnah, who, “to make her miserable, would taunt her saying the Lord had closed her womb”.

Children, particularly sons, were not just tiny humans to love and nurture. They

represented the future - life beyond the present generation - in a very real and concrete way. For the ancient Israelites, the concept of life-after-death and heaven was nebulous, perhaps even non-existent. So, during the time in which the Hebrew Bible was written, Israelites imagined “life-after-death” as unfolding in the lives of their descendants. With this in mind, Elkanah’s future was assured through Peninnah’s sons. Hannah’s was not.

Even though Hannah was Elkanah’s favourite and he would give her a double-portion at the sacrifice at Shiloh, Hannah’s immediate future wasn’t secure either. If Elkanah died suddenly, his sons through Peninnah would have inherited everything, leaving Hannah dependent upon their goodwill, or lack thereof. She knew that without a child, and more specifically a son, she could end up on the street. Hannah was dependent not only upon Elkanah’s kindness and generosity, but his life as well.

Unlike the barren women before her, Hannah took her concerns to God. While David is explicitly described as a man after God’s own heart, Hannah, implicitly, is a woman after God’s own heart.

As year after year passed, we see Hannah’s ongoing suffering as she weeps and refuses to eat during the family pilgrimage to the House of the Lord at Shiloh. Given the enormity of Hannah’s predicament, it should come as no surprise. To add insult to injury, Hannah’s husband doesn’t get it either. “Hannah, why are you crying and why aren’t you eating? Why are you so sad?” he would ask. While he might have been a “nice guy” who truly loved Hannah, he simply wasn’t paying attention to the reality of her life. His love couldn’t remove either her shame or her vulnerability. His obliviousness is clear when he asks, “Am I not more to you than ten sons?” This statement says much more about him than it does about Hannah. It would have been far more reassuring if he had said, “Hannah, YOU are more

than ten sons to ME."

Hannah finally reaches the breaking point and decides to go to the sanctuary at Shiloh on her own to plead with God for a male child. As she prays, she makes a vow.

Hannah is not asking God for a child to increase her wealth. Nor is she asking for a child to protect her well-being in her old age. Instead, she promises the child back to God. She asks for a child for relief from her shame, an important point because for many who live with shame, it is as debilitating as physical starvation.

People need dignity and need to experience a baseline sense of honour as part of their well-being. Hannah prays within the frames of the old order of the judges, promising, like Samson's mother, that she will dedicate the boy as a lifelong Nazirite (like Samson, and later, John the Baptist, both children of formerly barren women). But her prayer also reaches beyond the present order. Hannah asks God to do a new thing.

At the entrance to the temple is Eli, the aging priest who embodies whatever is left of the virtues of the old order. He sees her mouth move but no sound comes out. He rebukes her, thinking she is drunk. But Hannah answers him sharply, "No, my lord. No!" And Eli hears her. He can still recognize Hannah's faith. He blesses her and adds his endorsement to her prayer. Hannah departs as if her prayer were already answered. She eats, drinks and shares the company of her husband. And, "in due time" - in God's time - she conceives and bears a son. She names him Samuel which means "God was heard".

The struggle of childbearing and rearing is not consigned to a largely sentimental 'private' realm, but is rendered integral to the great drama of salvation history.

The stories of the matriarchs of Israel and of women such as Ruth and Hannah are not romanticized - they are stories with much suffering and oppression - but they are stories of persevering and overcoming faith in dark places, and of quiet and unsung victories whose fruit will one day erupt into public consciousness.

They are also stories of unrecognized turning points in the tide of history, not least because God is a God who remembers and who attends to the people that others may ignore. God answers the prayers provoked by the personal struggles of faithful women such as Hannah in a manner that effects more public and radical social turnarounds through them. The many biblical accounts of women struggling to give birth and being answered by God casts childbearing as a profoundly active calling requiring stubborn and persevering faith. God regards and honours these women as prominent actors on the stage of his history, and never disconnects the dramatic socio-political harvest of his purpose from their unseen work in sowing and nurturing its seeds.

Samuel is the fruit of Hannah's faithful refusal to be comforted by anything less than a gift from God. He serves as a bridge between the old and the new. He is a culmination of the old order: from a distinguished family, blessed by Eli, all but conceived at the cultic centre of Shiloh, and dedicated as a Nazirite. But the author of the books of Samuel also wants to stress that Samuel represents a new thing that God is doing.

Samuel's birth is clearly a work of God, a fresh kindling of the spark of Hannah's faithfulness. God has remembered the covenant, but did not simply reestablish the old religious and political orders. Samuel will go on to play the decisive role in legitimating the new order that will culminate in David's kingship, the defeat of the Philistines, and the concentration of religious, political, and economic authority in Jerusalem.

While Samuel will come to play that role, this is not his story. It is first of all the story of Hannah. She is the one who drives the action. It is her voice we hear more than any other. She is the subject of the key verbs. Hannah refuses comfort, waits, prays, insists on her prayers in the face of priestly rebuke, and ultimately conceives, bears, and even names her son.

We start to wonder if Hannah's suffering is not perhaps more complicated, more profound than the surface of the story suggests. She is enmeshed in an unjust system that seems at every turn to be working against her desire for a better, more abundant life. From God and her taunting co-wife to her naive husband and accusing priest, Hannah would appear to have very little agency. Her only recourse, her only option within this system, is to return to God who closed her womb in the first place.

Is the author of this story aware of the acute injustice of a woman's circumstances at that time?

Is he giving voice through Hannah to the deep, systematic injustice that has caused untold suffering for women throughout history? While it may be wishful thinking, it is possible - especially when we look at Hannah's Song.

This just doesn't sound like the simple prayer of thanks we might expect from a new mother. This is a song of *revolution* where the bows of the mighty are broken and the poor are raised from the dust. Hannah's song penetrates the surface, pointing to the pillars of injustice that must be pulled down.

Hannah's song becomes the "interpretive key" to the whole narrative. We hear it as a story in which God is active, in and in spite of the horrors to come. It is important to remember not only Hannah's child, but her song as well. Hannah has

always been more than the “type” of the righteous, barren woman who ultimately conceives a child. She is a model for what it means to live faithfully in days that seem Godforsaken. She is a model for Israel, and even the church in our time.

This relationship is powerfully seen in Hannah’s prayer of rejoicing -- which provides the pattern for Mary’s Magnificat in Luke -- with its startling association of the reversal of the spiritual and political fortunes of the nation with God’s answer to the prayers of an unknown woman for a child. Hannah recognizes that the birth of Samuel heralded more than her own vindication against Penninah: it was a sign that the Lord was about to turn Israel upside-down, throwing down the oppressive rich and mighty and raising up the weak and the poor. She praises the Lord that he is about to tear down the corrupt house of Israel and re-establish it again upon righteous foundations.

Hannah’s prayer goes far beyond her own experience, focussing on the character of the one true God whom she worships and to whom she gives praise. It does not concentrate on her sorrow, her suffering, or even on her blessings. Her focus is on God. Out of her suffering and exaltation, she comes to see God more clearly, as she praises him for who and what He is. Her song speaks of God as holy, as faithful, as omniscient, as gracious, as all powerful, as sovereign, the great reverser of circumstances. We find so much of God in these few verses. Hannah’s prayer goes beyond the past and present, looking far ahead into the future. Hannah’s song, like Mary’s, is prophetic. It looks forward to the time when Israel will have a king.

While the connection between the quiet and private victories of obscure individuals and the grand turnarounds in history are generally only seen in retrospect -- on the rare occasions when they are seen -- faithful Hannah is able to recognize in God’s answer to her distress the faintest foreshock of forthcoming

seismic events in Israel's history. In God's gift of life to her dead womb, Hannah recognizes the working of a resurrection power -- 'the Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to the grave and raises up' -- that cannot but lead to radical social upheaval in the future.

We may be peculiarly vulnerable to the error of neglecting -- or even denying -- the significance of the obscure and personal struggles and victories of the faithful who do not assert themselves onto the grand public stage of society. When our eyes scan for the signs of social and political reversal, we wouldn't attend to the agonized prayers of a barren woman. Like Eli, the high priest who lacked spiritual perception, we may fail to recognize the importance of people and actions we have grown accustomed to ignoring. We can give people the false message that the capacity to make great social and political difference is the preserve of rich and prominent public figures, denying the value, necessity, and potential of quiet and private callings, pressing people into worldly moulds of influence. As we serve a God who attends to the weak and vulnerable and remembers the forgotten and ignored, the greatest social earthquakes can find their unseen epicentres in the most unexpected of places.

We could look at this story and conclude that this is another one of those "special" bible stories that shows how God used to work in the lives of key biblical characters, even though he mostly doesn't work that way for us anymore.

But if we look more closely, the working of God in even this story is a bit more mundane than we think. St. Teresa of Avila once noted that "Christ dwells among the pots and pans." It was Teresa's way of saying that if we don't bump into Jesus in the run of a typical day, we maybe won't run into him much at all.

Thomas Merton once tried to make a similar point when he observed that a

spiritual life is first and foremost just a life. If you want to be a holy or spiritual person, you need to be a person first, and what's more you need to be the very specific person God already created you to be. The “spiritual” part of being a Christian is not way out there somewhere beyond the horizon waiting for you to arrive. It is here! It is now!

Amen.

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE for OCTOBER 20, 2024

O God, our holy Friend, you invite us to be generous in sharing your love with others, for the sake of the world you love so much. While we are here praying for the world's healing, others are busy implementing that healing. And when we, in our daily lives are endeavoring to give of our best through our words and actions, may others remember to pray for us.

We pray for the end of bitterness and violence in its many forms: wars, conflicts, and violence, especially in the Middle East and Ukraine. Bless all peacemakers; those who negotiate between nations. We pray from our knees to you: help to bring about enduring peace in these war-savaged areas in our world. This world beats at a different pace now. Many live daily in a heightened state of anxiety and uncertainty. Many are afraid.

Let your grace support those who advocate for and accompany the many neglected and less privileged in our world; the working poor and those whose livelihoods are tenuous; those small ethnic groups with no political clout to change their circumstances, the hard-working people who are being ripped off by the rich and unscrupulous; for all whose lives are disrupted by violence; for the deserted wives or husbands who are raising a family alone.

Give wisdom and guidance to all of the newly elected political representatives in our province. May the numerous social and economic issues that impact our daily lives be given thoughtful deliberation to ensure that decisions are made that support the well-being of all people and our natural environment in this province now, and for future generations.

We pray for the thousands who are in terror or despair because of natural disasters: Floods and house fires, cyclones and earthquakes, avalanches or forest fires, drought or lightning strikes, storm waves or volcanic eruptions. We especially ask that you provide the needed resources and aid for the victims of Hurricanes Helene and Milton who are trying to rebuild their lives. For all who have lost homes and community and become refugees: that God will protect them, guide them to food and shelter and help them to develop new lives filled with ongoing support and loving relationships.

Endow the merciful with your sustaining grace; those who treat illnesses and diseases, bind up wounds, feed the hungry, re-settle the homeless and the refugee, care for the orphan, visit the prisoner, support individuals who live with physical or mental disabilities, and accompany and care for the dying and grieving.

Bless the work of this congregation with your enabling grace. Help us to discern your will for our congregation in the future you are preparing for us. Help us to envision how we may be a blessing to others in our community. Let us be joyful in worship,

hospitable and welcoming in our fellowship, inclusive in our outreach to others, open and honest in our decision making, humble and sensitive in sharing the good news of your love with others, and gracious and open to learning in our ecumenical relationships and collaborative work with others. Bless the ministry of The Place and guide them in their process of discerning their future.

Bless any servant of yours who is keeping the faith against the odds: those without the encouragement of other Christians at hand, or without even a distant congregation that can pray their names with affection. Please let your grace renew them daily, and may they know your Spirit as Friend and Counsellor.

Hear our prayers for all who need your tender touch of healing in their lives —those we name before you each day, and those who are known only to you in the depths of our hearts ... We pray for all who are discouraged, lonely, suffering and ill, especially Bishop Kathy, Pr. Kristen Steele, Jean McKain, and those who are homebound, that the Spirit of God's love will strengthen them and bring them to wholeness quickly. Be with those who mourn. May we all remember the love and grace that your faithful people have brought to our world.

We pray for the church, for all denominations large or small, that we may love one another in practice as well as in prayer. We pray for: Oakridge Lutheran in Vancouver; for Redeemer Lutheran in Vancouver - Rev. Katrina Vigen, our sister congregation in Peru, San Juan Camino d'Esperanza and Pastor Ana Maria Jara, the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Jordan and the Holy Land; for our Bishops Susan and Kathy, Bishop Anna, Anglican acting Primate Anne Germond, all pastors, priests, deacons, lay leaders, musicians, and volunteers. Bless all joint initiatives in worship, fellowship and service to the community.

Visit each of us with your grace, loving Friend. Dismantle our fears, build up our faith, deepen our love, clarify our goals, sharpen our insight, widen our compassion, and open our minds to the new words you wish to speak to our situation. May we be strengthened in our quiet places and led into the work of justice and peace.

God in Community, make us all one Body, as we pray,

Our Father ...