

A Request

1 Samuel 1:4-20

⁴ On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; ⁵ but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. ⁶ Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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?"

⁹ 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. ¹⁰ She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. ¹¹ 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."

¹² As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³ Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. ¹⁴ So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine."

¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." ¹⁷ Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." ¹⁸ 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.

¹⁹ 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. ²⁰ In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the LORD."

Have you ever been bullied? Have you ever been in a position that caused you great mental and emotional anguish? Have you ever poured out your heart to God in prayer? Have you ever made a request of God that you hoped would take away your pain; but in so doing have allowed your prayers to go deeper so that God's blessing will go beyond you and your family, but bless others as well? Our scripture is about all these questions and more.

Hannah occupies a space not unlike other women in Scripture who are raised out of the crowd for naming and narrative. For two Sundays we learned about Ruth, but her claim to fame seemed to be in the last verses of her story when the scripture says she born Obed, the father of Jesse, the father of David. This seemed to be the Biblical writer's ways of telling us Ruth was important, not because she was a woman, not because she was a Moabite, not because of loyalty to her widowed mother-in-law, Naomi, but because she bore a son. In our scripture today, Hannah's story begins the book of 1 Samuel, just to explain how she gestates and births a prophetic leader, and so attention is paid to her. Her story is groundwork for the construction of identity for Israel's monarchy. But we get ahead of ourselves.

Some people know that for some years I led women's retreat around the country, and even in three distant lands. My attempt is always to share the emotions, anxieties and fears; along with the joys and hopes of biblical women. Today we hear Hannah's story.

My name is Hannah and I married a man of Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name is Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. That might not mean much to you, but that means we are the nation of Israel, and our tribe is Ephraim, the youngest son of Joseph by a daughter of Egypt. I am the first wife, but I had not children. So he also took Peninnah. Peninnah has blessed our household with numerous children. I tried to be a second mother to them, but that has not worked well for us.

Each year we go as a whole family to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts at Shiloh. Although I am thankful for all my blessing, I have a problem. In our culture, childbearing is a woman's only unique ability. To be unable to conceive is a cause for great shame. To make matters worse, Peninnah uses my unfortunate circumstance as occasion to taunt me and bully me, increasing my distress. I am a woman with no child. What I want is a male child. I know the importance of such a

gift. You understand that I live with the humiliation of Penninah's fertility. Her children who inherit our name, our land, and be the future of our family. During our family's yearly pilgrimage to Shiloh, I especially feel the sting of my barrenness. Penninah has a way of saying things and looking at me, ways that provoke me severely. It feels like she does and says things to make me feel bad. "My son did this; or my daughter said that; and I got this from my children." Each word and gesture bring more and more despair because of my barrenness

Last year Penninah was especially cruel. I felt bullied! I felt despair. I felt misery. I felt dejection. I wept and could not eat. My dear husband Elkanah tried to comfort me and said to me, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" He wanted his words to comfort me, but to no avail! How can mere words substitute for a son? His words, were a clumsy response at best. Have you had friends or family members share well-meaning words of comfort that were singularly unhelpful and perhaps even irritating in the extreme. That was my experience of husband that day! I felt he was dismissive of me in my grief and loss, essentially telling me to be satisfied with my lot (along the lines of telling someone who is in grief that she should count her blessings, rather than focus on her loss)?" God deliver me from well-meaning family and friends!"

Elkanah did not understand I was in grief. I was in acute pain, which had become all-consuming. I could only think of having a male child. I was angry, and I directed that anger toward Peninnah. But I became angry whenever anyone said or did anything that I thought belittled me; my reaction was extreme anger, no matter how small the infraction. I know people do not do things to stir my indignation, I really know they are more the objects than the source of my anger, which springs more from my unfortunate fate.

Even in the midst of my tears, one thing I remembered; that God is involved in and concerned about my life. I can go to God in humble prayer. I left the banquet of

my household and went to the temple to be in God's presence. I prayed and asked God to remember me. I made my request for a male child. I remembered our fore-mother Sarah was promised a son, and waited 25 years, and God blessed her with the birth of Isaac when she was 90-years-old. I remembered that Rebecca waited twenty years before she was blessed with Jacob and Esau. Rachel asked God for a son and she was blessed with Joseph, our ancestor, after years of barrenness. I thought, I can also ask of the Lord and he will hear my prayer. I 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." I knew the extremity of my vow to offer this child to the Lord as a nazirite (v. 11), "consecrated one" who was "set apart" for the service of the Lord. This vow not only included: abstinence from alcohol; no cutting of the hair; but also included no defilement through the touching of a corpse (Num. 6:1-21). Usually the person taking such a vow did so for a limited amount of time. But my promise was to give my son to God all his life (cf. Judg. 13:7).

So I promised to acknowledge that the child is from God and I will dedicate him to God's service. If God grants my request the child will be a symbol of hope. When a promised child is born in desperate times, the pregnancy itself becomes a site of expectation. Many of the mothers within our Israelite tradition were confronted with this difficult condition. Is my barrenness a sign of divine punishment? In our culture, as in many others a female identity is tied to childbearing, the stigma is great for women who cannot conceive. But, we are taught that barrenness can also be a site where the Lord visits the marginalized; thus the opening of a womb becomes symbolic of God's miraculous intervention. When a formerly barren woman gives birth, the child is destined to be an important figure in history. Maybe my child will be like Samson, a great judge and leader of our people.

I know that God does not owe me anything. But I know that God allows me to be part of his chosen and recued people, and each of us have worth and a deep knowledge that God is concerned about us as individuals. I "poured out my soul" to God from an awareness of my connection to God's concerns. My prayers were sincere expressions of my anguish and my dependence on God. My anguish was real, partly from my yearning for a child and partly from the uselessness that I felt because my only worth is in my ability to bear sons. Mine was a "prayer of groaning" that came from a place where I felt most vulnerable. When I sought out God's presence in my state of anguish, I was aware of a divine concern for those who are of questionable cultural worth. I did not just come to God with formal petition. I did not come with traditional sacrifice. I came in loneliness, isolation, and despair. I lay bare all my emotion and all my pain. In that moment I knew myself to be known and loved by God. God was very present to me; God was close by.

I knew I was in the presence of God, but I had another person bully me and try to made me feel worthless. I already felt anxiety, powerlessness, and vexation! I was about to end my prayer before the LORD, when the high priest Eli observed me. I was praying silently; only my lips moved, because I was pouring my heart to God, words too intimate for other ears to hear. Eli thought I was drunk. So Eli said to me, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." But I answered and explained, "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 I said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." I find so often people misjudge and speak mean and hurtful words when they don't understand what is really going on.

Then I went to our family quarters, ate and drank with my husband and family; but now my countenance was sad no longer. I had peace that I had laid my request before the God who hears. Some way the cruel and thoughtless words of Penninah no longer bothered me. I had prayed to God, grieved, meditated, murmured, and stood in silent. I had laid before God my cultural baggage and broken dreams. I ascribed to God grace and love. I had made a request and a promise. I had audacious hope. Now I had hope that my prayer would be answered; hopeful with a male child of my own, or some other child that God would allow me to love and nurture.

We rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then we went back to our house at Ramah. Elkanah knew me and the LORD remembered me. In due time I conceived and bore a son. We named him Samuel, for I said to Elkanah, Penninah, her children, and the whole community, "I have asked him of the LORD." God granted me a male child. God's character is full of grace, full of compassion, and audacious enough to make fertile what is barren and make abundant what is scarce. God has blessed me in the same way God has blessed God's people. Barrenness, fertility, closed and opened wombs, ecstatic prayer, intense grief, social convention, cultural limitations, and so much more create the layers of existence that form our nation of God's people. We are given grace, miracles and surprise, from our pains and promises. **Marcia Mount Shoop, Martin B. Copenhaver, and Frank M. Yamada**

I hope you find in my story some treasure. It is part of the fabric that defines society, culture, and community. At the heart of all strife there is news of a meeting place and the promise of help on the way. I hope you heard my prayers of broken dreams, harsh treatment by those close to us, but also compassion even in seemingly hopeless circumstances, the avenue of grace found in a frail place of rigid traditions, and leaders with narrow-minded vision, clay feet, and last-minute flashes of brilliance.

In your faith community, strange seeds are planted in the soul. As they germinate, their hosts begin to look forward, beyond one life span, beyond one set of preoccupations, beyond one political agenda, beyond personal laundry lists of hopes and fears. Promised children wait in the wings of tomorrow. They are pressing to be born. They will need witnesses, nurses, and midwives. They will require protectors, singers of songs, keepers of our story, advocates to the broader community, and companions for the hills and valleys that are sure to come.

We do not know the names or work of promised children already born among us. There is no guarantee that they will serve our visions. But, the power of faith has always been found in the gifts of a living God, scattered among us on the move. We cannot hoard them, own them, or keep them, but only be open to their power. This is not easy because we do not know what tomorrow will bring.

I named my son Samuel, from a root word "to ask," because he was an answer to my prayers. His siblings like to call him "Name of God." This child, who came among us through human will and the miracle of life transformation, is not ours for our ends, but belongs to and carries the name of God. It is so of each life, whether bullied in families, alone amid tormented thoughts, awkward in the community of faith, or waiting in the wings for life to begin. Such children are not ours to control or own. They each carry the purpose and nature of God. Each one we meet may well be that mystical, hopeful, riveting and terrifying catalyst that fuels the ongoing story of God. **G. Malcolm Sinclair**

Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Year B, Volume 4: Season After Pentecost 2 (Propers 17-Reign of Christ).