

“God-sighted”

This is an unusual Sunday at least with regard to our readings. It is exceptional that we get to hear the story of Hannah from First Samuel and then get to hear or rather sing her song from chapter two. It is marvelous that we get her whole story in one Sunday. No having to wait to her the conclusion next week or event not at all. It is all here so let's make the most of it.

First of all, like the Ruth story we read a couple of weeks ago, this story is set at the time of the Judges. (In fact, spoiler alert, Hannah's son, Samuel, is the last of the judges. Part of his ministry will be to anoint the first and second kings of Israel—Saul and David.) One thing you may remember about the time of the Judges is that it was chaotic. There were times when the Israelites were faithful to YHWH that they were in ascendance. These alternated with times when they were subjugated to other peoples because they had strayed from following YHWH. The Book of Judges ends with the narrator saying, “In those days there was not king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”¹

With those ominous words we transition to the First Book of Samuel. It begins with a seemingly pedestrian story about a man, Elkanah, and his two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. One of the wives has given him many children. The other wife, his favorite, is, in biblical words, barren. She has no children.

Before we go any further with this story, we learned something compelling when reading the story of Ruth a few weeks ago. We learned that names are often important in the Bible because of what they tell us about the characters. In this story our main character is Hannah whose name means “favor, grace.” Her husband is Elkanah which means “God possesses” or “God creates.” His other wife is named Peninnah which means “pearl.” The priest is named Eli which means “My God.” This is an unusual name in that it would usually have another syllable e.g. Elijah or Elisha, indicating who his God is or some attribute of God. In this case it is simply Eli. Finally, we have Samuel whose name means “God hears.”

Now that we have the meanings of the names let's get back to our story. Hannah's barrenness is a burden to her. Her physical barrenness translates into her life. What other ways is barren used in relationship to a person? (empty, desolate, hopeless, and bleak are a few.) Her burden is aggravated by Peninnah, whose name might refer to her fecundity or that she is an irritant, who mocks Hannah's childlessness. It seems that Hannah is inconsolable because of her barren state. Elkanah tries to comfort her, but his words do not have the desired effect. She ends up running to the tabernacle to beg God for a child.

Eli the priest in charge of the tabernacle observes her praying and accuses her of drunkenness as she was mumbling her prayers. She denies this and tells of her plight. Eli gives her a standard blessing and she leaves. After some acts which appear to be ritual eating and prayer, Elkanah and Hannah conceive a child. The blessing is great, but part of Hannah's prayer was a bargain with God. She pledged that if she conceived a son she would dedicate him to God as a Nazirite. That meant that she would give up her son to serve in the Tabernacle. She was so desperate to have a son that she was willing to give him back to God.

¹ Judges 21:25

Her dedication of Samuel to God is followed by Hannah's Song. Hers is a song of praise to God and also a powerful testament to how God has change her life and the lives of those who are desolate, poor, powerless, or downtrodden. She talks of how the mighty are brought low and the weak lifted up. Of how the rich are made hungry and the hungry are filled with good food. This son is a powerful witness to the favor that God has for the poor and lowly. Hannah's song of praise is also the prototype for Mary's Song or The Magnificat in the Gospel of Luke.²

There is so much we can take away from this extended reading from First Samuel. We see another miracle story of a barren woman being given a child (remember Sarah and Rachel from Genesis. We see the power of faith and prayer at work in Hanna's life. We see how the dedication she shows to God results in the birth of a boy who will, as a man, working with God will change the course of Israelite history when he anoints the first two kings of Israel. We hear the joy of prayers answered and a life redeemed in her joyful song.

These are all important in their way. But I go back to the transition from Judges to Samuel. Judges ends with the ominous words, "all the people did what was right in their own eyes." Yet, in this tale of what might otherwise have been an unremarkable family we see a new beginning. The beginning comes out of Hannah's faith in God. Elkanah, whom by name God possesses, keeps the faith in his yearly pilgrimage to make a sacrifice to God with his wives and his children (Eli the priest's sons are a stark contrast to Elkanah's family.) Hannah in her distress prays animatedly in the Tabernacle. She receives the priest's blessing, and goes away trusting in her prayer and the blessing.

In a chaotic world where all sense of morality seems to have also become chaotic, one family makes a difference, especially a family of faith.

Your family makes a difference. Not just to you, but to the culture and the wider world. Your faith makes a difference. Your prayers make a difference. Your being here makes a difference. Our meeting here each Sunday makes a difference in a world that is groaning in agony from the political and social divisions we experience. The last line of the Book of Judges might lead us to believe that it is the lack of a king that made life at that time chaotic. But it is when everyone does what seems right in their own eyes, and not in the eyes of God that we are in trouble. One little family led Israel back to God. Our little family and others like us take a cue from Elkanah and Hannah when we remain faithful to God and do what is right in God's sight and not just our own.

² Luke 1:45-55