

1Samuel 1:4-20

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.”

THE TEENAGER FROM HELL

William Willimon when he taught at Duke Divinity School used to have his first year students write an essay entitled, “My Life With God.” He said, “Tell me how God accounts for who you are.”

One of those papers began,

“I was the teenager from hell. I made my parent’s lives miserable.

They weren’t surprised after I flunked out of the University of Texas after only a year. I spent my time drinking and partying myself into oblivion.

I hung around Austin for a while and strangely got involved in a nearby Methodist Church. I was rebelling against the church but I loved this church and adored the pastor. I got more and more involved.

Then one Sunday afternoon I drove back to my little town in Texas to tell my parents the astounding news. I was going back to school, and I wanted to become a Methodist minister.

When I sat my parents down and told them the news

my mother immediately broke into tears and said, 'I'm so ashamed. I'm so embarrassed.'

Ashamed? Embarrassed? What did my mother mean?

She said, 'I had two miscarriages before I was pregnant with you. When I got pregnant with you I prayed to God that if He would only help me bring this baby to term I would dedicate him to the Lord. I would call his name Samuel like in the Bible.'"

The son replied, "You did what? You sure could have saved me a lot of trouble if you had told me that story sooner."

And mom said, "I didn't know it would work. We're Methodists. We don't take that stuff literally."

That was a Methodist story, but it could have very well been a Presbyterian story.

Do we take that stuff literally? Does this ancient story have anything to say about our story?

I think it does, but we first need to understand how this story is different from our story.

LONG, LONG AGO

Suffice it to say that these events did happen long, long ago in a place far, far away. It might not have been in another galaxy, but it might as well have been. The customs and beliefs in those days were quite different from ours.

It was a tribal, patriarchal society in which polygamy was common. Women were valued for one thing, child bearing.

A good woman proved her worth by having children; hopefully male children who could carry on the family line and contribute something to the family by working in the field.

For the Jews of ancient Israel having a son was particularly important. Every time Elkanah introduced himself he was reminded of the importance of offspring.

He was Elkanah, the son of Jehoram, son of Tohu, son of Zuph an Ephraimite. His story was part of a greater story. And in order for that story to continue Elkanah needed to have a son to carry on.

Sometimes we forget that for ancient Israelites, the

concept of life-after-death was very nebulous, perhaps even non-existent. So, during this time 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 the text tells us that Hannah was Elkanah's favorite, 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 of it).

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.

To put it in a nutshell, if a woman in the ancient world had no children she had no worth. It was just that simple.

According to society, if a woman was barren, God had cursed her.

PAINFUL MEALS

Today there are still many couples that struggle with infertility. That can be a very real and painful problem.

But, can you imagine how painful it would be to have that problem in the ancient world and have people say that it was somehow your fault? Can you imagine what it would be like to have your romantic rival in the family, a second wife who had many children? This was Hannah's situation.

Every year the family made a pilgrimage to Shiloh to worship God. It was the custom for the family to eat a portion of the meat sacrificed to God, a kind of Thanksgiving feast if you will. As Peninnah produced more children her portion naturally grew larger. But, Hannah's portion remained the same because (as she put it) "the Lord has closed my womb."

For Hannah these yearly trips were a reminder that time was passing and her biological clock was ticking. The hope for a child grew dimmer.

Peninah, the other woman, the second wife gloated over the fact that she had children and Hannah didn't.

Year after year she gloated, and one year it got so bad that Hannah just wept and refused to eat.

Elkanah tried to comfort her. He said, “Hey, you’ve got me. Isn’t that better than having ten sons?” No, Elkanah that is not better.

It would have been somewhat better if Elkanah had said, "Hannah, YOU are more than ten sons to ME." Apparently guys weren’t any more sensitive back then than they are today.

But, Hannah dutifully returned to the table, and the family finished the meal. And when the meal was over, Hannah left the family and went to the temple to pray.

THE VOW

She prayed and cried and prayed and cried. It was quite a sight. And finally she said, “Lord if you give me the gift of a son I will give him back to you.” As a sign of faith Hannah promised to give away the son she wanted more than life itself.

Hannah continued to pray. Her lips moved but the words came from her heart. The old priest, Eli did not understand. He thought the woman had one too

many glasses of the sacrificial wine.

He said, “You’re making a fool of yourself woman. Quit drinking so much.”

But, Hannah responded, “I haven’t been drinking, but as the sacrificial wine is poured out on the altar I have poured out my soul before the Lord.”

I’m not sure if Eli believed Hannah, but maybe just to get rid of her he gave her a quick blessing and sent her away. He said,

“Go in peace. May the God of Israel give you what you want.”

And this is the turning point in the story.

Hannah is no longer depressed. She trusts in God’s care. She places her life in God’s hands. And she places the life of her future son in God’s hands.

She goes back to her husband and eats a meal. She no longer has a sad face. There is no more weeping.

And Hannah conceives a son and she names him Samuel.

THE REST OF THE STORY

That's where our lesson for today stops, but this is by no means the end of the story.

Hannah makes good on her difficult promise. She leaves her young son with Eli in the temple. And Samuel grows up to be a great prophet. He anoints the first kings of Israel.

But, the people never forgot how the story began. The story began with a woman who was barren, a woman who had no hope.

God's people told and retold this story because they saw themselves in Hannah. Surrounded by enemies the future looked dim. But, they remembered Hannah's story.

And that gave them hope for the future.

Hannah even sang a song about her life. In 1 Samuel chapter 2 she sings about how God lifts up the poor and rescues the needy from the ash heap. Hannah sang a song about how God judges the hubris, the pride of the high and mighty.

Hannah saw a salvation that was greater than just the

fulfillment of her own needs. It was a salvation that promised God's justice and mercy for years to come.

And others sang her song. Hannah's song became an all time hit with God's people. They believed that God would continue to save His people in unexpected ways.

And God did.

Years later another barren woman by the name of Elizabeth miraculously had a child. His name was John, John the Baptist. And this prophet of God anointed another king. His name was Jesus.

And when Mary the mother of Jesus heard that she was pregnant with this special child, she too sang a song about the world being turned upside down, about the justice and mercy of God.

And her song sounded a lot like Hannah's song.

THE SEASON OF SINGING AND PAINFUL MEALS

We too are about to enter the season of singing. We will sing songs about the birth of a baby who will be a king. We will sing songs about the kingdom that

comes and the justice and mercy of God.

But, the whole time we are singing many of us will be dealing with our own personal struggles. Like Hannah when we make the trek home to eat Thanksgiving and Christmas dinners some of us will be eating a heaping helping of guilt and regret along with the turkey and stuffing.

Some of us will be reminded of hopes long abandoned. Some of us will be confronted with anger and those who even wish us to fail.

I know. Many of you don't recognize that meal. And I'm glad if what I'm saying doesn't connect with you.

But, some of us do recognize that meal. Some of us identify with Hannah. Some of us know what it means to face sadness when everyone else is celebrating. Some of us know what it means to be filled with guilt and shame when everyone else seems to be filled with joy.

And even if we eat a double portion of pumpkin pie we cannot forget the emptiness in our heart. If that describes you (and I suspect that will describe all of us at one time or another), I have a suggestion.

Go to God in prayer and leave everything with God. Leave your past and more importantly leave your future in the hands of the Almighty. Trust the one who created heaven and earth to recreate you, to save you in ways that you cannot even imagine.

REGIFTING

There's a terrible practice that used to be in vogue in some circles. It was called "regifting." The idea was this. When someone gave you something that you didn't want you repackaged it, and gave it to someone else.

I suggest you don't do that. Sometimes love means learning to live with the white elephant!

But, I do think regifting is a good thing to do when it comes to God. In fact if we want to give God a gift, regifting is the only option available. The title of our second hymn says it all, "We Give Thee But Thine Own."

Whatever we may pledge today it is nothing more than regifting. And yet what we give to God can make a big difference.

Notice what Hannah gives to God. She gives God the promise of her firstborn son. In other words she gives her future to God. She places her hope not in the birth of a son but in the Providence of God.

And when she does that, when she leaves everything with God, she is filled with peace. She can eat her Thanksgiving meal and embrace the ones she loves. And she can leave all the worry and the regret and the guilt at the throne of grace.

COUNTING OUR BLESSINGS

I hope some of you had a chance to read Anne Lamott's article in Parade magazine last week entitled, "Counting Our Blessings." (If not you can always Google Parade Magazine, Counting Our Blessings.) Ann, by the way is a Presbyterian writer who has a new book out on prayer entitled: "Help, Thanks, Wow: The Three Essential Prayers."

As you might guess from the title of the Parade article Anne talks about our need to give thanks. But, in her case that need has a particular history.

You see Ann grew up in a family that didn't give thanks. In fact they didn't believe in God. They were avowed atheists. Before meals they might raise

their glasses in a toast to the chef, but there was no word of thanks to God. It was just dig in. It left Ann feeling hollow.

Anne had what she called a “terrible secret.” She did believe in God. She said that she did believe in a “divine presence who heard me when prayed, who stayed close to me in the dark.” So, Ann at age 6 began to “infiltrate religious families like a spy—Mata Hari in plaid sneakers.”

One of her best friends was Catholic. When she ate with her normally boisterous family collectively bowed their heads and said, “Bless us O Lord for these Thy gifts ...”

Anne said, “I was so hungry for those words; it was like a cool breeze, a polite thank-you note to God, the silky magnetic energy of gratitude. I still love that line.”

It turns out that Anne and her two brothers; the children of atheists grew up to be middle-aged believers. Anne has attended the same Presbyterian Church for 27 years, her brother is a “born again” believer, and her other brother is what she calls an “unconfirmed but freelance Catholic.”

And now at the holiday table someone always ends up saying grace. Someone always ends up giving thanks for God's gifts and God's love.

Last week I said that the reason we give to God is gratitude.

And today I tell you that what we give to God was God's in the first place. It is the one time regifting is permissible!

In this season of Thanksgiving and gift giving I ask that you join me in giving thanks to God. Let us sing Hannah's song. Let us trust our future and the ones we love to the Lord.

Let us sing together (as we bring our pledge to the table):

“We give thee but thine own,
Whate'er the gift may be:
All that we have is thine alone,
A trust, O Lord, from thee.”

Amen.