

Out of Barrenness
I Samuel 1:4 – 20
Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost
November 15, 2009
Dr. Frank Trotter

“Top Ten Things You Rarely Hear in Church”:

10. Hey, Mom! Isn't it our turn to sit in the front pew?"
9. "Personally I find witnessing much more enjoyable than golf."
8. "I've decided to give our church the \$500 a month I usually spend on Lakers tickets."
7. "How do I sign up for the choir? I'd like to sing a solo next Sunday!"
6. "I volunteer to be the permanent teacher for the Junior High Sunday School class."
5. "Since we're all here fifteen minutes early, let's go ahead and start the service now!"
4. "I love it when we sing hymns I've never heard before!"
3. "Pastor, we'd like to send you to this Bible seminar in Honolulu!"
2. "Reverend, I was so enthralled with your sermon that I never noticed it went 25 minutes over time."
1. And the #1 thing you rarely hear in church is: "Nothing inspires me and strengthens my commitment to God like our annual stewardship campaign!"

It has been a challenging year for churches and denominations throughout the United States. Because of the decline in the stock market last fall, many of the pledges that churches counted on did not materialize. Because of what we now know has officially been named as a "recession," giving over the past ten months has fluctuated more erratically than it has in several

generations. While pastors always know that as much as a third of the yearly offerings can come in during the past twelve months, many congregations like ours are hoping against hope that that statistic proves reliable. It's been a very tough year for churches across the country, and now we get to hear stewardship sermons!

I recently completed a six week sermon series on the Stories of Moses, and in the final sermon Moses and the Twelve Tribes finally arrive at the edge of the Promised Land after journeying for forty years from Egypt through the desert. Until now, one's personal identity was closely connected to the identity the tribe to which he or she belonged. But now, as the Twelve Tribes enters the Promised Land, it seems as if all of the old guide posts are disappearing. Now what? A tribal way of life, close to family, close to God, seems to be dying. The resistance of the Philistines who occupy the Promised Land is much stronger than everyone predicted. Dr. Ted Smith describes the setting this way: "Political, moral, and religious leadership is in disarray. Israel might not survive this generation."¹

What God chooses to do next to become present in the unlikeliest place – in the middle of a dysfunctional family. Dr. Bruce Birch, a prominent Old Testament scholar and close friend of mine, says that the passage we've heard this morning introduces us to Elkanah and his two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. "Monogamy was not yet established as the only acceptable practice, and many biblical figures had multiple wives (e.g., Abraham, Jacob, David). Hannah was the first wife, and Peninnah was the second..."²

The dysfunction arises because Hannah, the first of the two wives, is apparently barren and unable to bear children while Peninnah seems to get pregnant with amazing ease. The meaning of their names "may connote something of their role in the story: 'Hannah' means 'charming,' 'attractive,' indicating her role as the wife Elkanah loves (v. 5); 'Peninnah' means 'fertile' or 'prolific,' indicating her identity as childbearer."³ Peninnah, perhaps because she is wife #2, cannot avoid taunting the older woman over

¹ Ted A. Smith, "Commentary on I Samuel 1:4 – 20,"

http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=11/15/2009&tab=2. Dr. Smith is a member of the faculty at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, Tennessee.

² Bruce C. Birch, "The First and Second Books of Samuel: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflection," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. II* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 974. Dr. Birch served as Professor of Old Testament and Dean at Wesley Theological Seminary in Washington, D.C. until his retirement in 2008.

³ Ibid.

the contrast between them. The taunting is not only malicious, but it goes on for years – to such a degree that Hannah often refuses to eat because of her anguish. I read an article where a prominent Boston gynecologist suggests that the story of Hannah may be the first documented case of anorexia nervosa where a woman is caught “in a vicious cycle of despair and infertility.”⁴ The themes of infertility and barrenness are not unique to Hannah in the Bible. Before her story, we also remember how the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar dealt with the very same theme.

Elkanah, as the head of the household, sees what is going on between his wives but doesn't quite know what to do. While well-intentioned, he doesn't grasp the depth of Hannah's grief. “He rather plaintively asks [her] if his love is not worth more to her than ten sons... Hannah's answer to this question is no.... Elkanah may mean well, but he places himself, and not the plight of Hannah, in the central focus. He significantly does not tell Hannah that *she* is worth more to *him* than ten sons.”⁵

On a yearly visit to the sanctuary at Shiloh, Hannah takes a step she has never taken before. Entering the temple on her own, she falls into a fervent state of prayer and asks the gift of a child, promising to dedicate any child she should bear to God's service. Eli, the priest of the sanctuary, sees her fervent behavior and reproves her for being drunk. But Hannah proclaims that she is not drunk but is making a fervent request of God. Without even knowing what it is she prays for, Eli adds his prayer to hers and asks God to remember her. “Perhaps he responds to the passion of her trust in God's grace. He simply announces a blessing on her request and sends her forth in peace. His comment is as much an expression of confidence that God *will* respond to such a fervent and trusting petition as it is a hope that God will do so. Little does he realize what the child who results from this vow will mean to his own priestly family.”⁶

When Hannah returns home and has normal marital relations with her husband, the scriptures tell us that “the Lord remembered her” – and she conceived a son that very night. When the child is born, Hannah names him “Samuel” – a beautiful name which means, “I have asked it of the Lord.”

⁴ “Anorexia Seen in Bible's Hannah Despair, Infertility Linked, Says Doctor,” *The Boston Globe*, January 28, 1998, <http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1P2-8469353.html>.

⁵ Birch, 975.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 976.

Dr. Birch says, “The books of Samuel begin with a salvation story. New life comes out of barrenness. Hope rises from hopelessness. Despair is transformed into thanksgiving and praise... It is significant that a story that is to climax in the royal greatness of David begins in the bereft circumstances of Hannah. The future of Israel is to be a gift of God’s grace as surely as Israel’s past had been. Over and over again in the books of Samuel, God will find possibilities for new life and hopeful futures in persons and circumstances that seem impossible by human standards. Threatened by external enemies and internal corruption, Israel’s future at the time of Hannah’s story is bleak, but the birth of Samuel to a barren woman who boldly asks for God’s grace gives hope that God can transform Israel’s future even as Hannah’s future is transformed – and Hannah’s son, Samuel, is to play a central role in God’s plan. God remembered Hannah; God will once again remember Israel.”⁷

Dr. Birch says that there are several lessons for us in the story of Hannah:

1. First of all, we see in Hannah’s story the “importance of expressing our need before God... Hannah simply and straightforwardly expressed her need to God. In doing so, she recognized that wholeness in her life lay beyond those things she could control and rested in God as the larger reality of her life. Sometimes facing our needs as persons and as churches can open new possibilities, not of our making but of God’s.”⁸
2. The second lesson that Hannah’s story teaches us is to hold fast to the “trustful persistence required to claim God’s grace. Hannah boldly asked that God remember her. She prayed passionately, as a woman of ‘stubborn spirit’, and she trusted that God’s grace was available to her. There is an audacity to this persistent trustfulness that does not always fit well with the gentility of Sunday morning religion in the modern church... There is a certain audacity to the insistence that God’s grace is ours...”⁹ But the bottom line is that God responded to this audacious woman!
3. Finally, the third thing we can learn from Hannah – and this is the stewardship message for today – is that “the proper response to the

⁷ Ibid., 977.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 977-78.

gift of God's grace is to give it back. If we attempt to keep it as a possession, we will lose it. Hannah knew this from the beginning and vowed to give back of the grace God might grant. When the time comes, Hannah's response teaches us something of proper response to the gifts of God. When the infant Samuel is weaned, Hannah returns to the sanctuary with offerings and sacrifices, and she dedicates the child to God."¹⁰

We know, of course, that not all prayers come back to us in the exact manner in which they are prayed. Not every woman who prays to God for a child receives one. My godmother, Eula Ashmore, was one of those. She came into my life when I was a few years old and she and her husband, Joe, were in their mid-60's. One of the old traditions in the south is for church members to help pastors raise their children. Eula came into my life and became the grandmother I never had in a personal sense. She gave me the love she would have given her own child, and I hope that I was able to give her the love that a child would give his own mother or grandmother.

Pain can nourish courage. Mary Tyler Moore, who has faced and surmounted many serious personal and physical difficulties in her own life, was once asked how she had been able to face the considerable challenges that had come to her during her life. She said, "You can't be brave if you've only had wonderful things happen to you."¹¹ To say it another way, you can't be brave if you've never known pain or what it means to suffer.

Bishop Will Willimon once wrote, "Martin Luther once said, God can ride a lame horse or shoot straight with a crooked bow. Christians do not believe that we have an answer to the tragedies of life, rather that what we have is a God who, in Jesus Christ, enters tragedy, stands with us and makes a way through. The cross of Christ, the greatest of the world's tragedies, is a sign. Not an answer or a reason for the hurt that happens in life – it is something even better. The cross is a sign that God is with us, particularly in the dark times. The cross says, wherever there is tragedy, injustice, pain, there is God."¹²

¹⁰ Ibid., 978.

¹¹ Mary Tyler Moore, quoted by Barbara de Angelis, "Difficult times develop courage and confidence," Life Challenges Web Site, www.Lifechallenges.org/door/diftimes.html.

¹² William H. Willimon, "Quad Quotes," *Duke Magazine*, July-August 1999, 56.

Dr. Birch says: “When grace brings new life, we, too, must give back of the grace we have received. This will include worship, which is the giving back of grace as praise. It will further include dedicating the grace we have received to the service of God. In every generation there has been a need for some in the church to move beyond receiving grace to returning grace... What was *asked* must become what is *lent back*. People and communities of faith must become less concerned over who and how many have received God’s grace and more concerned with the ways in which God’s grace is given back into God’s service.”¹³

We live in a time of uncertainty, a time of questions about what the future will bring. Such an assurance that God is with us in the most difficult of times is of immense importance to people of faith.

Because of the witness of Hannah, I am inviting, indeed, asking you to pray boldly for the church of Jesus Christ during these difficult times. As you pray about your commitment to God here at our church during the coming week, remember what is possible in the mostly unlikely of situations when we boldly enter God’s presence and pour out our hearts in supplication and thanksgiving.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

¹³ Ibid.