

“Even mothers need a word from the Lord”

Pastor Sam Richards

Mother’s Day 2022

Text: 1 Samuel 1:1-20

So I’ve returned from Basics and overall, it was a very meaningful time: visiting, making new friends, eating and sleeping well—and *being preached to*. It is refreshing to be preached to especially when the preaching is excellently good. The sheer fact of it, launches you out of the echo chamber of your preaching mode which, apart from the occasional feedback of those who were listening, or were particularly “spoken to,” is difficult to attain. Listening to a sermon on-line is not the same as being in a congregation for whom a message is crafted and delivered. I always find being in your place instructive. This year’s Basics provided that and a lot more. And I met some amazingly kind and competent people on the journey there and back as well as our hosts and new acquaintances. . . amazing airline stewardesses, service staff at the gate . . . Midland Airport Chicago was both pleasant and happy despite delays and grumpy passengers. There was lots of stormy, bumpy weather but our pilots were successful at bringing us safely through.

I want to embrace the moment, Mother’s Day, partially because I have felt blocked from so doing. If the occasion seems unduly culturally driven, I am willing to brush that aside. *Mothers need a word from the Lord*—actually all of us do! So those of us who are not mothers can listen in to this word from 1 Samuel 1:1-20. Let’s dig into the word together and let’s renew our sense of the relevance of the living word!

I remember, as you well might, Jesus citing Scripture at Nazareth: **Physician heal thyself** (citing a proverb but cruelly echoing the taunt of one of the thieves on the cross, **Save thyself . . . and us.**) . . . **the wonders that you are purported to have done in Capernaum, do here.** (Luke 5:23) He was dealing with rejection. I have picked 1 Samuel 1:1-20 because it relates the plight of a woman, Hannah, who was afflicted by rejection. Now Hannah is pivotal in salvation history, but like most of us, *she had no idea*. God was about to shift from the age of the judges, to the age of the prophets and kings. And the priesthood which has quietly been exercised in obscurity, during the conquest, comes to the fore in this place. The ordinariness of it all quite shocking really.

We have a man, Elkanah, who lived in Ephraim, or Ramah and fascinatingly in a city of Zuph (a region of Ephraim) presumably where Samuel met Saul, the future king of Israel. Hannah, named first, is probably Elkanah’s first wife and she is barren (**the Lord had closed her womb**). She is not notable for her barrenness, or infertility however; she is notable for the conception of her first son, Samuel! She is notable also as a faithful worshipper but what is remarkable

about her is her suitability as a mother for Samuel. Conception is only the beginning of mothering—that's relevant!

I wonder if she reminds you of Manoah's wife, the mother of Samson, or of Jochebed the mother of three remarkable children (Moses, Aaron and Miriam). Jochebed used her ingenuity to save her male offspring from the infanticide ordered by an Egyptian pharaoh as part of population control (too many Hebrews, too many sons born into slavery). And she believed God for their rescue and care. Finally, I wonder if she reminds you of either Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, or of Mary, the mother of Jesus—yes, two miraculous conceptions but of persons set in obscurity, in places of ordinary life where everydayness connects their stories to our own ordinariness. Ordinariness is the setting for the miraculous because God is sovereign over the ordinary.

It may be that the grief of infertility is responsible for Elkanah's second marriage to Peninnah who was very fertile. I have heard of couples spending precious thousands to facilitate conception, in pursuit of having their own child. It is difficult, sad and heartbreaking *even without the antagonism pertinent to Hannah's bigamous situation*. There are questions about inadequacy, and self-doubt: why can't we conceive? What's wrong with us sexually, biologically? There's even blaming one another as if infertility were someone's fault! Now we see how relevant scripture is for revealing all this!

Hannah feels worthless as a wife because she isn't a mother. The text suggests Peninnah may have had ten sons (see the hint in v. 8 **Am I not more to you than ten sons?**)! That adds insult to injury for the infertile. Hannah is therefore *distressed*, being domestically oppressed, due to that same infertility. And the string of live births by her marital rival doesn't improve anything. Peninnah rubs it in, hostilely mocks Hannah for her barrenness which is a really hurtful, nasty thing to do.

However, in God's economy, as often proves the case, suffering is harnessed to other better things—such as healing, answered prayers, miracles of comfort and relief. . . a pregnancy. Yes, there's comfort in this thought! But I cannot leave Hannah's distress without drawing our attention to Peninnah's unlikely partner in crime, namely Eli. He actually attributes drunkenness to Hannah (mistaking her distress *entirely*) and plays into the theme of *worthlessness*. **How long will you go on being drunk?** (v. 14) This thoughtless comment goes beyond observation into judgmental-ism. I cringe to think how often we injure others, whose condition we do not know, with like surmises and presumption? This is not godly judgment and it is provocative. It is a grace note, on Hannah's part, that she harnesses this insult to something better, namely a diagnosis of her actual heart condition: **I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation** (v. 16) Eli amends his faulty view of her, and there is sincere

compassion in his answer: **Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made unto him.** (v. 17)

Who knows but what the intercession of Eli marks a turning point in Hannah's spiritual journey. She has converted a curse into a blessing. And obtained a prayer for **her petition**—namely have a son and to **dedicate him to the Lord all the days of his life.** (v. 11) Eli had no idea that in blessing Hannah he was blessing himself and that she would bear a son who would serve God and Israel as prophet, priest and judge. But, then, none of us know how we might advance ourselves by blessing a mother! At the very least Mother's Day should remind us that blessing mothers is a profitable and very good thing. Yes, we will deal with the consequences of either blessing, or cursing; let's resolve to bless one another. There's a hopeful work, a challenge to be kind.

Elkanah, we have learned previously, was an observant Israelite. He faithfully took his family annually to Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli were officiating as priests. This is some twenty miles north of Jerusalem. The family made this trip annually to worship God **and sacrifice to the Lord of hosts.** (v. 3) As a matter of note: this reference (v.3) to **the Lord of hosts** (a title!) is the first instances in Scripture and that is one indication that something spiritually significant is in the offering. Now this action brings the priesthood into focus historically. Eli and his sons administered the altar in the tent of meeting—there had been priests all the way back to Aaron—interceding for God's people through the prescribed rites and rituals. Unseen, or unnoticed, they attended to their calling. ***But here, a routine practice of worship inaugurates a whole new phase of salvation history.*** And this is the birth narrative of a very great leader in Israel.

Elkanah took his place in line so that **on the day that Elkanah sacrificed, (making a peace offering)** the family would eat the portions from the sacrifice in their tents, among other families who made pilgrimage to Shiloh for the same religious purpose. This festival time was very painful for Hannah. **The grievous provocations** of Peninnah year after year brought Hannah to tears and to her knees. Why did Hannah need to be brought to her knees? So that she would humbly seek God with her whole heart, that is, sincerely and thoroughly so that Jeremiah 29:12-14 would be fulfilled:

12 Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. 13 You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart. 14 I will be found by you,' declares the Lord, 'and I will restore your [a]fortunes and will gather you from all the nations and from all the places where I have driven you,' declares the Lord, 'and I will bring you back to the place from where I sent you into exile.'

Therefore, Hannah wept and would not eat. (v. 7) Her husband is concerned for her: **Why do you weep? Why do you not eat? And why is your heart**

sad? Am I not enough for you? (v. 8) Life is not a cake walk! Her husband aches for her, and feels inadequate as well as impotent. Hannah is in a hard place and Elkanah can do nothing to help her, to heal her, to “make it all better.” He needs to join her on his knees—he needs to seek God more earnestly, deeply, desperately even. **When you search for Me with all your heart** . . . neither of them are where they need to be, but God is graciously moving them there. *And that is our situation . . . that is where God meets us, or that is where He is found by us . . . suffering that draws us nearer to Him is our “spiritual incubation.”*

With v. 9, the focus on Hannah is intensified. We have her going on her own to the tabernacle/ temple. She is out of her mind with grief and sorrow, in a place of spiritual unrest and ferment. Therefore she is indifferent to those who, like Eli, might be observing her. **She is deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly.** (v. 10) But it is on this occasion that Hannah takes action: **She vowed a vow to the Lord of hosts** (v. 11, see v. 3 for comparison) saying: **If indeed you will look upon the affliction of your servant and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor will touch his head.** (v. 11) We should note that this is two things: it is a prayer of dedication and a Nazarite vow. The latter is something that a parent must do for his/her child. We remember the parents of Samson, following the instructions of the angel of the Lord, raised Samson as a Nazarite. The strength of the Lord was in his hair, uncut as per here.

This, of course, is what the Lord has been angling for all along. That is, this is the outcome for which all the affliction aimed—it was purposeful and preparatory. The Lord sought someone (Hannah) utterly given to his service to birth Samuel, that man of God. He was born of godly parents because God heard Hannah’s prayer, heard Eli’s prayer:

19 Then they arose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord, and returned again to their house in Ramah. And Elkanah [g]had relations with Hannah his wife, and the Lord remembered her¹. 20 It came about [h]in due time, after Hannah had conceived, that she gave birth to a son; and she named him Samuel², saying, “Because I have asked him of the Lord.”

¹ And God hearkened to her - After the severe reproof which Rachel had received from her husband, [Genesis 30:2](#), it appears that she sought God by prayer, and that he heard her; so that her prayer and faith obtained what her impatience and unbelief had prevented. After 26 years of barrenness

² She calls him Samuel, lit. Shemuel ([Numbers 34:20](#); [1 Chronicles 7:2](#)), which was an ordinary Hebrew name, and means "heard of God," not "asked of God," as in the margin of the A.V. It seems to have been the mother's right to give names to her children ([Luke 1:60](#)), and Hannah saw in Samuel, whom she had asked of God, a living proof that she had been heard by him. The name, therefore, is of fuller significance than the reason given for it. Ishmael has virtually the same meaning, signifying "God heareth." THE VOW FULFILLED (vers. 21-28). 1 Samuel 1:19 Pulpit Commentary

God gave Hannah conception and, in due time, in the gestation period of life, the child conceived by God was born and Hannah arrived as a mother. Now that was a happy mother's day indeed! At the word of the Lord, all by the will of the Lord. Let us praise God for the gift of such mothers—those used of the Lord and blessed indeed.

Amen