

**Proper 28B
I Samuel 1:4-20
November 15, 2009**

Things were not going well for Hannah. She had problems.

The biggest, most overwhelming problem was that she was infertile. And in ancient Israel, a woman who could not reproduce was useless. A man needed sons, a family needed its future, and Israel needed its children.

So it didn't matter that her husband, Elkanah, loved her. He still went and took a second wife, Penninah, who turned out to be amazingly fertile. So Hannah not only had to share her beloved with another woman, she had to endure that woman's mocking and teasing for Hannah's failure to reproduce.

Hannah had problems, indeed.

Things were not going well for the Lord of hosts either, as it happens. It had been generations since God had brought the children of Israel out of Egypt and given them the law to live by, so they could enjoy a fertile, promised land in peace and harmony. But the children of Israel couldn't stay on task. They wandered. They strayed from God. They hurt one another. They forgot that God is one and that they should love their neighbors as themselves.

So periodically, the Lord would send new leaders ... Gideon, Samson, Deborah, to rally the people and call them home. But they would wander off again as soon as the leaders' backs were turned.

As the book of Judges says in its final verse ... "there was no king in Israel, and all the people did what was right in their own eyes." So that even at Shiloh, even at the tabernacle of the Lord, Eli the priest let his sons run wild, drinking and carousing and extorting from the people who came to sacrifice there. Israel was falling apart.

God, it seems, had problems too.

And in this moment when it seems that both of them – Hannah and her God alike – must have despaired, something happened. Hannah stood up. Hannah rose, our reading says. And she carried her grief and her need right up to the gate of the tabernacle. And when she got there, she didn't talk to Eli. She didn't ask for prayers. She didn't offer sacrifices. She went straight to God.

She prayed from the depths of her heart. Out of her anxiety, out of her vexation, she implored the Lord of hosts. "Remember me, God. Don't forget me, God. You know what I need, God, and if you give it to me, I will give it right back to you in thanksgiving. Please, God. Please, oh please, oh please."

And the needs of Hannah, this sad and broken woman, and the needs of her community, of the whole dysfunctional nation of Israel, intersected. Because the child she begged for, the child she promised to return to God's service, would be Samuel, the last judge in Israel, the prophet who would anoint the first king and help Israel move into true nationhood.

Hannah needed God. And God, it turned out, needed Hannah too.

So she got pregnant, and she bore a son, and she named him Samuel, "because I asked him of the Lord," our reading says. Except in Hebrew, the word "asked" is also the same word as "borrowed." "Because I borrowed him from the Lord," Hannah knew from the beginning that this child, who was the answer to all her prayers, was also only loaned to her. She knew he was a loan from the Lord, and that the Lord would have need of him. And when he was weaned, she took little Samuel back to Shiloh, and gave him into the service of Eli.

Now God does not often grant us such miracles as Hannah received, nor does God often demand of us such sacrifices like giving up a child. But I do believe that every blessing we receive from God is like a little Samuel sent into our lives.

Every blessing we receive from God is only borrowed from God, on loan really, a gift to be returned to God, a gift to help heal our communities, to shine light in dark places, to bring God's purposes to birth in a broken world.

Every blessing we receive. Every blessing. Every one ... our lives, our health, our homes, our jobs, our families, our happiness, our gifts and talents, our children and our parents. Every blessing we receive from God is like a little Samuel sent into our lives. A gift to answer our prayers and to fulfill our deepest desires ... but only if we give it back to the God who gave it to us first.

We live in uncertain times – not as uncertain as that ancient time in Israel – but times to give us pause, to make us wonder what the future is really going to hold. And while we may not be as desperate as Hannah, most of us have some anxiety about the future of our families, our community, and our state.

And yet God pours out blessings upon us all the time, every minute of every day, and asks only that we give them back, that we help God deal with this uncertain world and these uncertain times using the very gifts that we have been given. We have problems, yes. And so does God. And it is the amazing calling that all of us bear, to take our gifts and give them back to God. In doing so, both we and God are blessed.

And so we come to this Ingathering Sunday in company with Hannah and everyone else who has ever lived in uncertain times and prayed for God to bring them safely through. This parish has been a witness here on Abbot Road for more than 55 years, a witness, proclaiming in words and deeds that God does love this world, teaching its children to love and serve God and neighbor, reaching out in acts of service, speaking out with a strong voice for justice, and trusting that the God who gave us this commission will give us everything we need to carry it out.

And so we come to this Ingathering Sunday, asking each person to make a pledge of financial support to this place for the year ahead, to hand back some of our blessings, some of our own little Samuels, to continue God's work here at All Saints.

We have had four weeks to ponder and pray over our pledge for next year. We have had four weeks to remember how – in good times and in bad -- this parish has sustained and challenged each one of us, and to consider its future as a beacon of love and service to the world.

Some of us have carried little yellow sticky notes around, praying over a number. Some of us have talked long and hard with spouse or partner about sacrifice and commitment, about hope and the future. Some of us have examined our bank statements, which tell us hard truths about the current economy, and which challenge us to think about what it means to trust that God is still working.

But what we know. What we KNOW on this Ingathering Sunday is that God is faithful. And the God who answered Hannah's prayers, and Abraham's prayers, and Sarah's prayers, and David's prayers, and the prayers of countless others who put their trust in God's goodness and God's providence – this God will answer our prayers as well.

And now it is time to receive a pledge card from the ushers and make your pledge. To write down the number God has placed in your hearts. Or not to write down a number. A gift freely given must be just that ... freely given. If you cannot give, or if you are not yet ready to decide on the amount of your gift, just indicate that on the pledge card as well. If you are visiting with us for the first time today, know that you are our welcome guest and we ask only for the gift of your prayers as we complete this process.

But before we fill out our cards, please join me in prayer. After the prayer, there will be time to indicate your pledge and seal the cards in the envelopes provided. The ushers will pass special ingathering baskets to collect them, and they will be delivered, still sealed, at the end of the service to the pledge secretary.

Let us pray: Most gracious God, we give you thanks for every good gift we have received through the bounty of your love. Everything we are, and everything we have comes as a gift from your gracious hand - a gift which continues to renew us. Teach us again and again that our sharing of that divine gift does not diminish our life in terms of possessions, but instead enhances our life in terms of blessings and grace.

In thanksgiving for our life and for the life of All Saints Episcopal Church, we give glory to You, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and forever. AMEN

(Michael plays quiet music as cards are filled out. Ushers pass baskets (don't forget the choir loft!) and collect the pledges. Then carry them forward to the altar.)

The Lord be with you. And also with you. Let us pray.

Bless these pledges of support, gracious God, and bless this parish. We bring these offerings and our promise of giving in a new year because we hope for more in the days ahead. We dream of a stronger church, a more compassionate world, and a time of peace. Shape us, through our giving, into people more faithful to your Word, a people full of joy and good news. Receive these pledges of money, given from the heart. We dedicate them to you, along with our selves, our souls and bodies, a reasonable, holy and living sacrifice to you. Amen.