

**Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 28) – Year B – November 15, 2009**

**1 Samuel 1:4-20; 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8**

**Susan E. Wilmot**

Sonya is an African-American woman, who spent most of her childhood in foster care, and only completed a third grade education. She was thirteen when she married a much older man in the hopes of escaping poverty. Her husband turned out to be a bigamist and their marriage ended, but not before she had given birth to two sons. Her story is not unique, but the outcome has as much to do with Sonya's faithfulness as Hannah's story from 1 Samuel that we heard this morning.

The detailed family story of Hannah, her husband, and her rival Peninnah is set in the complex dynamic of Israel's history and God's plan of salvation. Israel is in turmoil, the period of the judges that God raised up to lead Israel is coming to an end, and the birth of the monarchy is about to begin. The moral, religious and social chaos that reigns through this period of transition in Israel's history is aptly described in the Book of Judges (21:25), "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." As is so frequently true, whatever is happening in the broader society is found on a smaller scale in our communities, and our family lives. As always, God is intimately involved in the affairs of creation and God's creatures at all levels.

Today's reading begins with Elkanah who has quite the genealogy. Earlier in 1 Samuel (1:1) he is described as "a certain man ... from the hill country of Ephraim, ... son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph." Given the patriarchal culture of the day, there is no doubt that he was relying on Hannah to secure his heritage through the birth of a son. The stigma of barrenness was a tremendously heavy burden for any woman of that culture to bear, but one that is not uncommon in the Scriptures. There are other examples, including Sarah, Rachel and Elizabeth. On the face of it, Hannah's story reflects the torment and agony of any woman, or couple, who have desperately wanted a child, but been unable to conceive. All compounded by the weight of societal pressure to produce a son and heir. The story reflects the roller coaster of anxious waiting and disappointment, depression and despair. Lives gripped by helplessness, hopelessness and grief, knowing each month that the probability of fulfilling their deepest desire to bear a child is slipping away. There are no fertility drugs for Hannah to try, none of the tricks of modern medicine. Hannah is left alone with Peninnah's taunts needling at her mind and soul. We might think that Hannah at least has the abiding love of Elkanah to console her. But even that is an empty consolation.

Let's look more closely at this family triangle. Elkanah, perhaps realizing that Hannah was not going to bear a child, solved the problem of the family inheritance by taking another wife, who has performed admirably by bearing multiple sons and daughters. In other words, the problem of Hannah's barrenness is no long his problem and so Elkanah is emotionally absent from Hannah as she grieves her barrenness. His lack of sensitivity to Hannah's plight is demonstrated when he asks her why she is weeping and not eating, and says, "Am I not more to you than ten sons?" Elkanah's relationship with Peninnah is also seriously amiss. Because of his love for Hannah, Peninnah is essentially trapped in a loveless relationship. The situation Hannah faces is an effective abandonment in her grief and shame by Elkanah, even while Peninnah mocks her. This mocking goes beyond the cruelty of taunts or plain insensitivity. Peninnah is described as a "rival". In other instances in the Hebrew Scriptures where a rival appears to have the upper hand, or where an enemy has defeated Israel, the mocking response is aimed directly at Israel's faith in Yahweh. Similarly, Peninnah's provocative and barbed comments are designed to point out that God favors her, and that Hannah is cursed in her barrenness. In other words, Peninnah is constantly challenging Hannah's faith and faithfulness to God.

Despite the years of suffering, and after all that Hannah has been through with her closest family, we have to admire this woman of faith's response. While it would be perfectly understandable for those seeds of doubt that Peninnah has so maliciously planted to take root and fester, Hannah looks

beyond herself. While it would be equally understandable for Hannah to sink into isolation and despair, cradling her wounded pride and her scarred heart that too is set aside in her determination to see God vindicate her faithfulness. She takes her anguish and pain straight to God in prayer. In the seemingly bottomless pit of her grief, she pours out her soul to the Lord, and offers God a promise in exchange for the son she wants so dearly. At the temple, we are introduced to the priest, Eli. Eli's lamentable lack of recognition of the fullness of Hannah's prayer in body, mind and spirit, provides us with more evidence of the sad spiritual state of Israel. It is as if he has never prayed so deeply in his own life, nor seen anyone else in a state of such humility and submission before God. I hardly need mention that that isn't a good sign in a spiritual leader. Nonetheless, his embarrassed, perfunctory blessing of Hannah after she has explained her situation in no way impedes the power of God.

"Prayer is the most powerful form of energy one can generate. The influence of prayer on the human mind and body is as demonstrable as that of the secreting glands. Prayer is a force as real as terrestrial gravity. It supplies us with a flow of sustaining power in our daily lives," says Alexis Carrel. I think Hannah would agree. She gives her burden to God in prayer, she accepts Eli's blessing, and confirms that she is a servant of the Lord. Then according to the text, "she is sad no longer." We do not know why some prayers are answered so immediately, whereas others seem to fall on deaf ears. Yet we can see that there is more than one miracle here. There is the miracle of God's grace in all of this, and especially in the gift of peace that lifts Hannah's anxiety and stress. Plus a miracle of God's mercy in transforming hopelessness to joy. There is also the miracle of God's power in granting new life and abundance where there was only barrenness and scarcity.

There is more than the most obvious way to experience barrenness, or to live a fruitless life. It may be that you and I are being invited to see Hannah's barrenness as representative of Israel's degenerate state, and lack of fruitfulness as God's chosen people. It may also be that we are being called as a community of faith, to look more closely at the touch points of our common life, as well as reflecting on our personal ministries. As we approach the beginning of Advent and our own time of preparation and waiting, perhaps it is time to actively and intentionally seek out those areas that are not bearing fruit in God's service and to ask ourselves the hard questions. Are these places where we are determined to do it ourselves, without coming to God in humble prayer for direction and guidance? Are our desires aimed at self-serving goals, rather than the glory of God's name? Have we failed to discern God's will in some way? Or is God testing our persistence? Heartfelt and persistent prayer is an essential part of finding the answers to these questions. As the Psalmist reminded us in last week's readings, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain" (Psalm 127:1)

Just like Hannah, Sonya also has quite the story to tell. With limited education, no money, and two children to care for, Sonya turned her steadfast faith in the Lord into determined action. Taking a cleaning job in order to pay the bills, Sonya steered her boys away from TV, to reading and learning. Through all her sacrifices and the challenges she faced, but especially in her persistence, God prepared Sonya to raise a great man of faith, who also happens to be one of the top neurosurgeons in the world, Dr. Ben Carson. Before Samuel was even born, he was dedicated to God's service by his mother Hannah. Samuel's miraculous birth in answer to Hannah's prayer led to the making of kings, and eventually to the restoration of Israel as a faithful nation under King David. What miracle awaits you and me, what blessed gift of grace has God prepared for this community of faith as we continue to fulfill our baptismal covenant, in the apostles' teaching and fellowship, through the breaking of bread, and in our prayers? These are exciting times for us all!

Amen.