

“Out of anxiety and vexation”

November 15, 2009

Text: *1 Samuel 1:4-20, Hebrews 1:19-25*

I.

This reading from 1 Samuel comes from the historical period, right before the monarchy, eleven centuries BCE. It was a time, like all times, when nations were struggling for power, trying to gain whatever advantage they could—first for security and then for whatever prosperity they might achieve.

It was a time, too, when Israel was feeling increasingly insecure about *not* having a king. It should be noted that having a king was not God’s idea. God knew a few things about kings—that they had enormous power which they could easily abuse. Still, Israel clamored for a king.

Our story of Hannah, this morning, eventually has a happy ending, because soon she will give birth to Samuel who becomes a great *prophet of God*, the prophet who goes on to anoint Saul as Israel’s first king, signaling the beginning of the monarchy.

II.

However as the story unfolds, Hannah is in a dreadful state—a humiliating state, really—because, up to now, she is barren. In ancient times, this was THE worst thing that could happen to a married woman.

Yet, what her story symbolizes is a common biblical theme. Again and again in the Bible, the people of God—both as individuals and Israel as a nation—move from darkness to light, from despair to hope ... from wilderness to the *promised land*, from crucifixion Friday to resurrection Easter morning.

In all of these life-stories, God is on the move, the Spirit is alive and prompting. The bottom line: there is One greater than we in the midst of things; we are never alone; and darkness and despair are never the final word.

1. Before Hannah, Sarah, the wife of Abraham, had been barren well beyond her child-bearing years. But soon, Isaac was born—one of the patriarch’s of Israel—and Sarah’s shame gave way to joy and exultation.
2. In a couple of weeks, we’ll begin our journey through Advent leading to the birth of Jesus at Bethlehem. And once again, we’ll tell the story of Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus—the one who announced his birth. Elizabeth, too, had been barren.

But, for the moment, Hannah is trapped in the despair of her barrenness. To make matters worse, as if that were possible, her rival, Peninnah—the *other* wife of her husband, Elkanah, has given her husband a host of children. And Peninnah, no doubt from jealous motives, loves to taunt Hannah, doing everything she can to provoke her and upset her.

III.

If there is as bright note for Hannah, it is that Elkanah, the husband, seems to prefer her. He seems to go out of his way to please her; indeed, it upsets him to see her weeping in her despair.

Yet, he doesn't fully understand what she is going through. Check it out: *Hannah, why do you weep*, he says to her. *Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?*

It's like Elkanah just doesn't get it. He doesn't understand the depths of her anguish and personal shame. He doesn't understand how all the humiliation wears on her soul and spirit; and how every moment of life for her is tainted by what she has not been able to become—namely, a mother.

He's too easily dismissive of her plight. Think about it! Sometimes our well-meaning family and friends simply don't understand us and can become a real irritant.

We see this in our Compassionate Parent's group that meets monthly here in our church (for parents who have lost children). In virtually every session, there is some conversation about comments made by family or friends that are especially *not* helpful, even to the point of being extremely irritating.

Sometimes they feel like crying out, *God deliver me from well-meaning friends*. Hannah, no doubt, had similar feelings towards Elkanah.

IV.

And so, Hannah is struggling, day by day, trying to make it through to a better day. One of her great strengths, that gives encouragement to us in our struggles, is her tenacious persistence. Day by day, she pushes on. She refuses to believe that she is not loved and valued by God.

In pouring out her soul to God, Hannah reveals a deep *God consciousness* all her own. Her prayers are heart-felt expressions of her very human yearning, and also of her vulnerability in a patriarchal culture where a woman's fertility is everything.

As **Martha Mount Shoop** says in a commentary: *Hers is a prayer of groaning that comes from utter vulnerability*.

Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, Hannah prays; ***for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation***. Straight away, she is praying out of her deep distress. To have vexation—to be vexed—is to be annoyed and irritated, even bitter. For her, these are tough times of personal diminishment and humiliation.

And yet, she persists, holding on to hope, doing everything she can to sustain a close walk with God.

As **William Willimon**, United Methodist Bishop in Alabama says:

Show me a person who is not hoping (for something more to come), who is not yearning,, not leaning forward, standing on tiptoe for something better, and I'll show you a person whose faith is dead.

The future belongs to those who hope; to those—like Hannah, he might have added—who know we are meant for something better. The present darkness, whatever it is, is not our final destination.

Out of anxiety and vexation, the spirit comes ... and new hope rises up ...
Out of anxiety and vexation, new life is shaped and a new future us born.
We ARE, indeed, meant for something better.

V.

In these days of our lives, we, too, know experiences of **anxiety** and **vexation**—experiences of irritation and frustration ... experiences of uneasiness and uncertainty about what tomorrow will bring.

These are the most difficult economic times of my lifetime. I've never seen so many people out of work ... laid off, let go; and other people underemployed or working limited hours. There are no jobs. And although there are momentary glimpses of an economic upswing, there's no robust confidence in a quick recovery. If you have any kind of a job these days, you have to be thankful and keep moving.

And like Hannah, therefore, we, too, feel vulnerable.

Vulnerability is a compelling reality. To begin with it's utterly human. As human beings, we're vulnerable. We're not God; and we're not in control.

So much about our human experience is fleeting. Our job is here one day, gone the next (you'd be surprised the number of people and families that are one or two paychecks from not making it).

We're vulnerable; which means, in part, that whether we're trying to get pregnant, like Hannah, or desperately trying to find employment, we're not in control. There are a

whole range of variables that factor in.

However, our vulnerability is also an opportunity for a deeper relationship with God. And why is that? Because when we're vulnerable, we see, more fully, our inter-relationship with everything—with God, with family and friends, with our career, our health, our short and long-term security.

We see everything more clearly. And we realize that, in a heartbeat, what we have can be taken away—not by God, but by the harsh realities of hard times.

On a theological note, our hard times, whatever they are, are not God's doing. They're not God's will. These things don't happen to us for some hidden reason, as if they were a part of some larger divine plan. God doesn't work like that.

1. With regard to the economy, our hard times are the result of market forces and human error.
2. As for the loss of loved ones, stuff happens, through disease, perhaps, or other random stuff; or sometimes through the poor choices we make.

God does not will our human suffering and misery. And just as Hannah knew a very biting, painful vulnerability, many of us, too, have been learning more about vulnerability than we want to know.

VI.

And so, with all that is happening, with our **anxiety and vexation** about these hard times, what are we to do?

Clearly, like Hannah, what we are to do is to persist and not give up—certainly, not on God, but also not on ourselves.

With this in mind, let us resolve to do as the writer of Hebrews exhorts us:

Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope, without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds ...encouraging one another along the way.

The economy is going to turn around. It may take a few years; but it's going to turn around. And along the way, we're not going to give in to the tough times. We're going to keep our heads up, keep trying to do good things, trying to make things better, trying to lift up one another; all the time, growing in love and good deeds.

And through it all, we'll grow as human beings, toughening our resolve to meet the challenges ahead; working even harder and more creatively to find ways of embracing the future.

Hey, there are challenges and implications to globalization that we haven't figured out yet.

And through it all, we'll also grow in gratitude for the more simple things of life ... thankful for whatever blessings come our way.

And, of course, what's really important is that we grow in love—standing with one another, growing more closely together as family and friends. In other words: using these tough times for good; finding the blessings between the lines; Doing as 1 Timothy 6 reminds us and ***Taking hold of the life that really is life.***

Out of these tough times, times, for sure, of **anxiety and vexation**, letting us stand strong, holding fast to hope ... loving one another as Christ has loved us.

All praise be unto God! Amen!

Dr. Jeffrey E. Frantz
Miami Lakes Congregational Church, *United Church of Christ*
6701 Miami Lakeway South
Miami Lakes, FL 33014
On the web at www.mlcchurch.com