

Debby's sermon on Hannah

Readings:- 1 Sam 1: 4-11, 19-20, 24-28 and Luke 1: 39-56

In the name of God, the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sanctifier, Amen.

Thank you Julie for inviting me to speak about Hannah, our woman of the bible today. Last week Julie opened the Book of Ruth to us. Today we turn literally one page further on to find Hannah. She is the first of the 4 key characters in the 2 books named after her very famous son, the prophet Samuel. Hannah, Samuel, Saul and David are the key people in these books. Hannah the mother, Samuel the son and kingmaker - and the kings Saul and David.

Do you remember back to the beginning of lockdown? It was just before Mothering Sunday / Mother's Day. Julie had put in a lot of preparation for our special service in the Newsome Scout Hut . And we were going to celebrate her big birthday then too. Thanking our mothers and being thanked by our children is hugely important. And it goes back many generations. But there's always some people for whom the day is tricky. A mother might have recently died, single people living alone can get left out and there are childless couples who long for a child and have maybe tried to get help from fertility clinics but with no success. Hold onto that, because it might help you to understand Hannah .....

Because Hannah is also part of another biblical 4-some. Barren women - do we use that word any more? - barren women who miraculously give birth to significant sons. Abraham's wife Sarah was the first. 3 angels came calling and spoke with God's voice. A year later, Sarah gave birth to Isaac. We don't know the name of the second woman, only that she was married to Manoah. Those were patriarchal times and a woman's fulfilment was through childbearing - no children, no name, no value. But an angel came calling. A year later, Manoah's wife miraculously gave birth to Samson, the legendary strongman and judge of Israel. Hannah was the third barren woman to give birth - to Samuel. The final woman was Elizabeth, Zechariah's wife, in the New Testament - Luke's Gospel. An angel came calling - to Zechariah this time, not her. A year later, Elizabeth gave birth to John the Baptist.

Hannah's story happens about 1000BC - again a very patriarchal society where women's role is as child bearer and homemaker. If you can't bear children, there is no role for you. Let's look at her story, which begins when she has no children.

First of all, her name. Names are important in the bible and it is significant that Hannah means "grace". She is grace-filled, gracious, graceful. Her husband Elkanah (it means God creates) is an very ordinary man and he has a second wife called Peninnah, (it doesn't mean anything) who has produced a lot of children and is very unpleasant to poor Hannah. Elkanah either doesn't notice or doesn't care about the treatment she receives. Every year the family travels the 10 miles to the temple at Shiloh to worship and make a sacrifice to God. The meat sacrifice is then divided up , one portion to Hannah, one portion to Peninnah and one portion each to every one of her children. Hannah is so upset that she cannot bear to eat. Elkanah tries to calm things down "am I not better for you than ten sons?". Maybe he is being supportive, maybe he is just trying to quieten her down. Because it was shameful in those days to be childless.

Hannah leaves the group and walks into the temple, past Eli the priest who takes no notice of her. She goes forward and confronts God. "O Lord of the angel hosts, if you look at my misery and remember me and don't forget me, but give me a male child, I will present him to you Lord as a consecrated one all his days; his hair will never be cut". She is offering her unborn child as a Nazirite, a servant of God. She is making a radical vow to God.

Eli hasn't got much pastoral skill. He thinks Hannah is drunk and says so. She tells him that she has been pouring out her life before God and what he has seen is her misery. He sends her on her way with "Go

in peace and may the God of Israel grant your request". He isn't interested in her story. She is just a weepy woman to him. But Hannah by being completely real with God has encountered the completely real God. She knows that she has been heard. She goes back to the family and eats. The next day, they all go home. Hannah and Elkanah make love and Samuel begins his womb life. And when he is born, the name she gives him means "God has heard me".

Hannah stays home with her little son until he is old enough to be weaned. She skips the annual sacrifice until he can cope without his mother. And when the time is right, Hannah takes Samuel to Shiloh and proudly presents him to Eli saying "I prayed for this child; God granted my request. As a result, I offer him to God; all his days he is offered to God". And then she sings a victory song - these are women's songs of gratitude for national or personal victories. You may remember the victory song of Moses' sister Miriam after they all crossed the Red Sea and finally were free of Egypt. Hannah's victory song is special and very much like Mary's Magnificat.

And then Hannah returns home, without her Samuel, but with dignity and joy in her heart. She visits Samuel annually taking a slightly larger robe for him each year. You might think it was a hard life for a mother and for a little boy - and certainly Eli is a poor father to his sons and a poor priest - but the little boy who grows up among them learns the art of hearing God speak from an early age. He knows God and the knowing becomes the prophet's gift. He goes on to become the priest of Shiloh. And at home, Hannah blooms. She and Elkanah have 3 more sons and 2 daughters.

When I read stories like this one, I am reminded how much of the Bible - especially the Old Testament - is the story of men. If we read conversations, they are usually men talking to men. A few - like Hannah to Eli - are man to woman. Or woman to God - like Hannah, Manah's wife or Sarah. A very few are women attacking one another - as Peninnah attacked Hannah or Sarah attacked Hagar. Then there are great songs - like the victory songs of Miriam, Hannah and Mary. But there are only 2 conversations between women recorded in the bible. Last week we heard one - Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth who promises lifelong friendship to her - words which I have known couples use in covenants of friendship or marriage. In today's gospel we heard the other intimate conversation - between Elizabeth and her young relative Mary. Both are pregnant by miracle. Elizabeth is the 4th woman whose barrenness has been miraculously transformed by God so that she can bear John the Baptist. In Mary the first and only virgin birth takes place, allowing God to take human form - to be born for us and to die for us. And to rise again and to be there for us always.

From Hannah, I have learnt that childless women have been undervalued, neglected and ill-treated. But that they are also children of God, that God hears them, fills them with his grace, grants their heartfelt prayers and speaks to them. However low your self-esteem, God values you and has plans and purposes for you. There is always hope. Like Hannah, those who take their heart's desire to God know they can walk tall afterwards.

And from Hannah, I have also learnt that God has plans and purposes for our children. There is a time for them to leave and start their independent walk, aware of God or forgetful of God but always known and loved by God. They probably won't have to leave home as small children though it does happen. So a mother's (or a motherly father's) task includes letting go and letting God for them too!

And a very happy much belated Mothers' Day to all of you. Let us pray

Motherly Father of us all,

Help us to find our value in the grace you have set within us and in the relationships which enrich our lives. Teach us to let go of the ties that bind us and show us how to set free the ones we love. In Jesus' name, Amen.