

“Catching the Vision: Witnessing to the Gospel Today”

This story of the birth and dedication of a child whom God will use powerfully in the unfolding saga of ancient Israel begins like those of several other biblical greats.

There was a man who had two wives, one who was bearing him children and one who desperately wanted to birth at least one baby.

And as in those older stories about some of Israel’s patriarchs and matriarchs, although Elkanah appreciated Peninnah and her children, we’re told he loved Hannah.

Among the ways he endeavored to express his love to Hannah was to give her double what he gave to Peninnah and her children.

**But her husband’s gifts didn’t ease Hannah’s grieving her childlessness.**

Indeed, responding to Hannah’s heartbroken tears and lack of appetite by asking her if he’s not more to her than 10 sons may have felt like someone telling us we should count our blessings instead of focusing on our losses.

Regardless of intent when one is grieving such expressions feel uncaring and hurtful.

For Hannah, there were three important issues related to her childlessness.

First, for biblical women, children were seen as a sign of God’s blessing, provision, and hope for the future.

Not being able to have children was not only seen as being out of favor with God, but also could mean the difference between having someone to provide for you later in life or not.

Her second issue was the need to fulfill her destiny, which for Hannah meant being a mother.

For us, fulfilling our destiny might mean something else. Whatever we've embraced as our destiny, any obstacles can cause us frustration and heartache.

And the third issue for Hannah was that her sense of worth was wrapped up in her being able to have a child.

Again, what provides a sense of worth for us can be many things but having it frustrated might also lead us to question our value to God and others.

Since there were no fertility clinics back then, Hannah did the only thing she knew to do, and one of the things many childless couples still do – she went to her house of worship to pray to God to be able to have a baby.

**She begged, she pleaded. She offered God a deal.**

Give me a baby and in gratitude I'll give him back to you she prayed to God.

She believed God had closed her womb and that the Almighty One had the power to open it.

She believed God would understand the situation and her unhappiness, and that her Creator was ready to listen to her.

Maybe she knew from past pilgrimages to the Shiloh shrine that praying hopefully to God about her heartache brought some degree of comfort.

**Prayer is about relationship.**

Once the priest, Eli, understood that Hannah wasn't drunk but was praying, he was able to assure her of God's loving, listening presence.

Both private and silent prayer can give us the sense of God's loving, listening presence, but the Holy Spirit also often uses our praying with others to bring hope, reassurance, and comfort.

The peace her prayer brought to Hannah enabled her to regain her composure enough to eat something and to participate in worship with the family before they all returned home.

Although Hannah apparently still didn't get pregnant right away, as she continued to hopefully pray, we're told that "*in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son*" whom she named Samuel.

**"Samuel"** sounds like the Hebrew phrase meaning **"heard by God"** and was the answer to Hannah's years of hopefully praying.

Although for the next few years after Samuel's birth she didn't accompany the family on their annual pilgrimage to the Shiloh shrine, Hannah didn't forget her promise to God about this child.

When Hannah promised that if the Holy One would give her a son, she would return that child to God's service, it was a serious matter, with implications for both her life and the life of her entire family.

Hannah's prayer promising to dedicate the baby to holy service if the Almighty One would bless her with a child could be seen as an attempt to bribe God.

However, when we believe in our Creator's goodness and really appreciate God's gifts, an almost uncontrollable urge to respond in the fullest way we can imagine may bubble up in us.

**God's love inspires in us both gratitude and consecration.**

So it's very possible that Hannah's deepest desire wasn't simply to have a son but to be able to dedicate a child to God's service.

It could be that giving Samuel to be brought up in the Shiloh shrine was for her not a necessary yet terrible self-sacrifice but was rather something that though very hard to do also gave her deep joy.

Many believing parents have prayed that their children might be used in God's service and have known the paradox of joy and pain as their prayers have been answered and those children have gone on to work in dangerous parts of the world.

Whether this was Hannah's perspective or not, there was no doubt in her mind that when she next visited Shiloh it would be to leave Samuel with Eli, or rather, with God.

In gratitude for the gift of her answered prayer, Hannah would remember and keep her promise, giving her child to God, to serve the Holy One for the rest of his long life.

Although we know we don't always receive the answers to our prayers that we want, Hannah did.

And she responded with the ultimate grateful sacrifice – she returned more than a portion of God's gift for the Almighty's use.

**She returned the entire gift for God's use.**

While certainly they were no replacement for her firstborn, after Hannah kept her promise to God to dedicate Samuel for a lifetime of service from the Shiloh shrine, her Creator blessed her with five more children.

Like the Shiloh shrine where Hannah went to pour her heart out to God, our churches are among the few places in our culture where we invite and trust sibling believers to pray with and for us.

It's a place where we share our stories of joy and sorrow, of miraculous delivery and provision, of answered prayers.

It's a place where we learn hope is what Rev. Debie Thomas calls "*robust and muscular and ferocious and long-suffering.*"

Writing for *The Christian Century* magazine, Rev. Thomas continues, “*Hope never gets so cynical that it can’t be surprised.*”

Finally. Rev. Thomas writes, “*Hope sits in the darkness – outwaiting torture, humiliation, crucifixion, and death – until finally a would-be gardener shows up at dawn and calls us by name.*”

The church is a place where we learn of God’s self-sacrificial love for us and receive our commissioning to witness to that Gospel news in the hurting corners of our world.

It’s a place where we learn that all that we have and all that we are begin with a Loving Creator who lovingly listens and cares for us throughout our earthly lives.

True gratitude is about remembering the Giver of all our blessings – be they big or small, what we think we want or what we truly need – and sharing from those gifts.

All of us have received blessings from God, and all of us have something to return to God’s service.

Some of us are giving to Trinity Presbyterian Church and its ministries, as well as to other charitable organizations that have moved our hearts, because of promises we’ve made to God.

Some of us are returning an entire gift we’ve received and some of us are sharing a portion of what our Divine Provider has given us.

Some of us have more to return to our Creator and some of us have less to share for God’s use through Trinity and its ministries.

Our act of giving, regardless of the gift and its size, is among the ways we express our gratitude to God.

Trinity’s “Catch the Vision” 2022 financial pledge campaign is an invitation to share not only from your financial but also from all of your gifts in the coming year

supporting Trinity's witness to the Gospel of love and hope today while continuing to prepare to welcome new pastoral leadership to come and join with you in your mission and ministry.

To God be the glory!

Amen.