**Hannah’s Story (! Samuel 1:1-28)**

I am sorry that I am such a mess. I’ve been baking bread for all my children! I love this simple chore. It wasn’t always that way though. I remember the many years that I was barren and without children.

When we were first married, my husband Elkanah, and I were very happy. He would say “Hannah, you are the best thing that ever happened to me.” He loved me dearly. But I could tell that he also desperately wanted children – and try as we might, I never conceived. We were married for 10 years before Elkanah reluctantly took a second wife – Peninnah. She was younger than me. And before long she gave birth – not to one child, but over the course of time, she gave birth to many children.

I wouldn’t say that Peninnah was really mean spirited, but did lord over me. She would gloat that she had children, while I had none. While we did chores together, she would mock me with laughter and say: “ Hannah – you go and gather the herbs from the hillside and the fruits from the trees, because I have children to care for.” Or she would tease me saying, “Hannah, have you fed your lovely children this morning?”

I tried not to let her taunts upset me. I would try to hum a happy tune to keep my spirits lifted. And would tell myself that my husband loved me the best, after all we had been married for 10 good years before Peninnah came along. But, after years of taunts, it was no longer possible to cover my pain. Lines of sadness enclosed around my eyes. I would lay awake at night and dream how things could be different if only I had a child.

Once a year we would all make the pilgrimage to the great stone altar at Shiloh to offer sacrifice to God. Year after year we would get dressed in our finest clothes and pile the cart high with generous offerings. Eli, the high priest at the altar would always look forward to our visits. As my husband presented the offerings he would say: “We offer in thanksgiving for all that God has given us during the year; for crops that have burst forth; for fields and herds that have multiplied; and for the blessings of family.”

While the air was still filled with the odor of burn offerings, my heart would weep. Blessings of family? I had not been blessed with family. My dreams had not been answered. As we would retreat from the Holy place, I would weep.

Elkanah tired to comfort me. He would look at my sad face and say, “Do not weep. Am I not more to you than ten sons?”.

“Yes”, I would say, “You are a good husband.” But the salt of my tears remained bitter in my mouth.

I was so certain deep down that God would one day answer my prayers. I was getting weary in waiting. But I still dared to dream. Finally, one year when we were at the Holy Place, I drew away from Elkanah and Peninnah, and I prayed before the ark of the Lord. I poured out all my soul praying: “O Lord of hosts, if you will look on the affliction of your humble servant Hannah and remember me, and bless me with a son, then I will give him to your service.”

Eli, the high priest saw me praying, and although he first scolded me for being a woman in prayer, he could see that my pain was deep. He said, “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel show mercy and grant your petition.”

Early the next day, before we returned home, I prayed again at the altar, but I felt a strange deep sense of peace. Had the Lord heard my prayers?

Within one year I gave birth to a son. We called him Samuel, which means ‘He who is from God’ – because I truly believed that this sone was from God. He was given to me because I dared to dream.

He filled my heart with joy, and each day did not seem long enough to hold my laughter. The trouble between Peninnah and I was put to rest. It was as if Samuel had brought peace to the family like a rainfall after a long drought.

I kept my promise to God. When Eli was just 3 years old, I presented him to the temple, to grow up there, and be a servant of God. Some might say that I made a sacrifice – but I think I just kept a promise to God. I would visit him regularly as he grew up. And although I missed him at times, God blessed me with 3 more sons and 2 daughters. I dared to dream ,and God blessed me beyond anything I could imagine.

And so you see, as I bake bread now, I am full of happiness, and my heart exults in the Lord. There is no Holy One like the Lord. Praise be to God. Amen.

**Dare to Dream – like Hannah**

Hannah believed with all her heart in a God of power and possibilities.

We need to understand that it would not have been easy for her, being a woman who could not bear children. Society would have looked down upon her. In the same way that Peninnah taunted Hannah for her childlessness – she would have also been scorned by society in general. It would have been her duty to bear children in a marriage – not a choice. And if she could not fulfill that duty, there would have been accusations about her cleanliness, and even her sinfulness!

But, Hannah is not alone. Our ancestral Hebrew stories are full of women who are barren. Women like Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel, and Zleponith. And in the New Testament, we hear of Elizabeth. And yet despite being scorned, none of these women gave up hope. Each of them dared to dream in the God of power and possibilities.

And, for each of them, their prayers were answered.

Sarah, wife of Abraham, gave birth to Isaac

Rebekah, wife of Isaac, gave birth to Jacob

Rachel, wife of Jacob, gave birth to Joseph

Zlelponith wife of Manoah, gave birth to Samson

And Elizabeth, wife of Zechariah, gave birth to John the Baptist.

Each of these stories of strong matriarchs in our ancestral history, are rich and full of obedience and faithfulness, and each of them about the power to believe in possibility – I encourage to pick up a bible and read them.

But I also encourage you to think about what these stories might be saying to us today?

I think that in some ways many consider that the church is in a period of barrenness.

Just after WWII in 1946, about 70% of Canadians were regular church goers. The church played a significant role in government decision making. But in 2020, a major survey indicated that now only 10% of Canadians attend church; and about half the Canadians who go to church as children, eventually fall away and to describe themselves as agnostic.

We are in a time where many believe there is a barrenness of faith. Many are simply giving up.

* We struggle with changes and long for the ‘old days’ and old ways of doing things;
* We wonder why we are not attracting young families;
* We wonder why people are not coming to church post Covid;

What should we do?

Are we thinking that we will simply keep doing the same, because we’ve always done things that way, until eventually in a few decades someone will turn out the lights for the last time?

I don’t believe so. I don’t think that is what any of us want.

The faith stories of our ancestors tell us how our God of power and possibilities has again and again worked revival in the past, and we should have every expectation that God can and will do so again.

We need to have the faith of Hannah to dare to dream.

I believe that the church today is on the precipice of new possibilities.

We need to stop spiralling downwards and giving up hope.

What if instead we considered rejoicing and praising God like Hannah did in her song.

In Hannah’s song, much like Mary’s song in the gospel of Luke, she sings:

*There is no Holy One like the Lord,*

*No one besides you;*

*There is no Rock like our God*

(1 Samuel 2:2)

Despite the hand that she has been delt by society, Hannah is full of faith. And she is also full of hope in a God of justice, as she sings:

*God raises the poor up from dust;*

*He lifts the needy from the ash heap,*

*to make them sit with princes.* (1 Samuel 2:8)

Do we dare to dream in a God of power and possibilities like Hannah?

Are we willing to look into the future with hope, and have a vision of what the church can be like?

Are we willing to work together towards that vision?

This week I was part of the Western Ontario Waterways Regional conference. The theme was Resuscitation or Resurrection? While you might prefer one term more than the other, both are about bringing life back to the church.

I believe that there is plenty of new life in the church.

Despite all the struggles of the pandemic, it has helped us to see things differently as a church – see things in a new way.

Church for some may not always be coming to worship in the sanctuary on a Sunday – perhaps church for some will be gathering around a yoga mat at a mid week gathering; or sharing stories and encouraging one another sitting in a circle knitting; or perhaps we will in time gather for a movie and talk about how it inspires us. All of these are ways that God calls us to be church.

Yes, it might be different, but the pandemic has made us realize that *we are* capable of change.

It has shown us the importance of community, and of reaching out beyond these walls.

It has inspired us to find ways to use technology to stay connected – I am really looking forward to the Advent study group on zoom, where we can connect with friends far and wide.

And, this time has taught us the importance of creating a hybrid worship so everyone can be included. Yes, it is lovely to worship with you in the sanctuary- but how marvelous that we can also worship with others at home – and I know for certain, that it means a lot to them too.

So, today, let us celebrate.

May we all sing with joy like Hannah.

May we all dare to dream and believe in the God of power and possibilities.

Let us rejoice.

Let us come before God in prayer and praise.

For there is no Holy One like our Creator. God is our rock. In God we can trust.

Amen .