

Hannah stepped into Israel's history before the founding of Israel as a nation state and before kings came into power. She emerged as a leader of faith when the judges ruled, during a chaotic time in which . . . 'all the people did what was right in their own eyes' (Judges 21:25).

1 Samuel 1:4-20

On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters, but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb. Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. So it went on year by year, as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now, Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. She made this vow. "O Lord, if only you will look on the misery of your servant and remember me, and not forget your servant but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazrite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head." As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently, only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard, therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled, I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord, Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my anxiety and vexation all this time: Then Eli answered, "Go in peace, the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer. They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord, then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the Lord."

"God-Parenting"

Every Sunday for nearly three years Walter had a routine. Just before 10 a.m. he would open the doors to Epworth and prepare the church for worship. If the weather was cold, he would build a fire in the old wood stove. If it was hot he would open all the windows and distribute the hand fans with a picture of Jesus on one side and an ad for a local funeral home on the other. Next, Walter would open the Bible located on top of the wooden pulpit and read the selected scripture for the week. Then it would be time for prayer. Often there were folks in the community included on Walter's list. The latest national and world news would be mentioned. But always, Walter ended every prayer with a plea for God to remember and bless his beloved church. Every Sunday, Walter had a routine but what makes this story so unique is that with very few exceptions, Walter began and ended the Sunday morning worship service alone. Alone? Why? Many years ago, Epworth church was built on land donated by a neighboring farmer, but if for any reason they stopped meeting regularly, the property would revert to the original owners, and Epworth church would cease to exist. So what is the big deal? If Walter is the only one bothering to attend, why didn't he go somewhere else or pray at home? Why not face the inevitable and allow Epworth to quietly disappear? No one, save God and Walter know for sure. But I can't help but wonder if the Spirit blew through him like it blew through Hannah: Raising him up. Calling him to the sanctuary of God's holiness. Filling him with love for the healing of the huge hole in his heart. Empowering him for service to the Lord."

Hannah's story is about the birth of her son, Samuel, the last judge who appointed the first king of Israel. It's a story of faith that changed the political history of her world. Now Hannah (like Jesus' mother Mary) was a woman of low estate in the eyes of the world. Although she was married and therefore privileged with a place in society, she was looked down upon because she had no children. In her day wives were only valued for the sons they produced. Hannah was ridiculed by rival wives and although she was favored by her husband, she was tormented by her barrenness. She wept constantly and could not sleep. She refused to eat the best portions of food that her husband

gave to her. When she finally hit bottom, she did the only thing that could change the turmoil of her inner world: 'Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord' (vs.9). Hannah did that which others around her were not doing. She prayed: "In bitterness of soul, Hannah wept and prayed to the Lord'---offering up her tears of sadness and heart ache pain; of suffering humiliation and wounded pride; of loss of meaning and purpose. After that, she prayed: 'O Lord Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life and no razor will ever be used on his head.' Isn't it amazing how letting go of that which she believed was the solution to her misery, ended up relieving her anguish? Isn't it incredible how faith in Almighty Presence brought her peace of mind? And isn't it delightful, how Hannah, even from the depth of self loathing, discovered-realized-believed that she had the power to give God a good gift that would contribute to world peace? Freed, empowered, and grateful she praised Almighty God: My heart exults in the Lord, my strength is exalted in my God, My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is not a Rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth, for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world. He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness, for not by might does one prevail. The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered, the Most High will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth, he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointer!" 1 Samuel 2:1-19

Faithful Walter. Remember him? Well, one Sunday morning a young family new to the area visited Epworth and joined Walter in worship. They found something unique about this little church nestled among the trees and about the man who dedicated his service to the Lord. They came again the following Sunday and joined Walter in prayer, seeking comfort in the encircling arms of Holy Spirit, seeking wisdom concerning what was good and just in God's eyes, and seeking guidance about how best to follow Jesus. Little by slow, by the grace of God-Spirit-Jesus, two families grew to three, then three to four as they shared their individual gifts of time, talents, treasures for the renewal of their church's life and personal transformation.

Epworth was a God-parenting community of faith which took seriously advice from the prophet Isaiah on neighborly love (1:16-17): 'When you praise me, wash and make yourselves clean. Learn to do right, seek justice help the poor, the fatherless, and widows.' In a devotional on this scripture, Rev. Fitzgerald, a man, God-parented by church friends in Christ wrote: 'I took Isaiah's advice and skipped church on vacation. In lieu of worship I swam and rode bikes with my family. I also took a few trips to the country liquor store. It's the same place I bought candy as a child. Back then the proprietor seemed old. Now she's ancient. The store is unchanged. There is the same photo of her dead husband hanging on the wall. The same tired shelves of tinned meat and sugar cereal. The same plastic bottles of off-brand gin. Some of these items might be exactly the same. The place is covered in dust. There isn't a thing you can't find cheaper at a nearby Walmart. The owner isn't friendly. Or maybe she just doesn't see her customers. She won't wear glasses. She doesn't take credit cards. Cash only. I thought, "What a God-forsaken place." Then a grungy man bought a six-pack. The owner tried to read the register with a magnifying glass. She said, "I can't see it. How much do you owe me?" I live in Chicago. I couldn't believe this old woman's naivete. "How much do you owe me?" The register read \$6.80. The customer said, "\$9.00 Janice. Thanks." He set a ten-dollar bill on the counter, picked up his beer and walked out. A woman bought a gallon of milk and a box of cereal. Same drill. "I can't read that. How much do you owe me?" The register read \$7.80. The customer said, "\$11.00. Thanks so much." I don't know the whole story. I do know there weren't any pious meetings happening in that liquor store. Just a widow and some help and an upside down economy. Just the kind of praise God is looking for.