

St. Columba's Episcopal Church
November 14, 2021 – 25 Pentecost
1 Samuel 1:4-20; 1 Samuel 2:1-10
The Rev. Dr. Susan Kraus

This morning I want to speak about our reading and canticle from the Old Testament book of First Samuel, about giving thanks to God, and about faith.

First, a little background. This book of the Bible was probably written in its final form shortly after the Babylonian exile in 586 BCE. Samuel was a great prophet of Israel known especially for being the prophet who anointed Saul as Israel's first king. He lived approximately 500 years before this book was written. The "history" of all that Samuel did in Israel is found in 1 Samuel. But this isn't "history" as we mean that term today. Though the writers of this section of the Old Testament no doubt used historical sources, the work is a creative literary masterpiece, full of private conversations, personal thoughts, and wordplays – not an objective account of what happened, with footnotes.

Back to today's readings. Samuel's father was Elkanah, a devout and righteous man who took his family on an annual pilgrimage to worship the Lord at a temple at Shiloh. Elkanah had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Hannah did not bear any children to Elkanah. It may be because of this that he married Peninnah, a "second" wife. She gave birth to several children. At the time barrenness was considered to be an affliction from the Lord. Hannah prayed fervently year after year for God to give her a son. She promised that if granted her request, she would dedicate her son to the Lord. Hannah did, in fact, leave her son Samuel, once he was weaned, in Eli's care at the temple in Shiloh.

The canticle this morning is from the second chapter of 1 Samuel, Hannah's song or poem of thanksgiving for God's favor in granting her a son. You may have been thinking of other famous women in the Bible who were barren and then bore a child as a favor from God – Sarah and Rachel in the Old Testament and Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist, in the New Testament. Hannah's song and Mary's song – which we know as the Magnificat – are similar. Hannah says, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God." Mary says, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior."

The accounts of Hannah and these other women are foreign to us in some ways. Most people today do not regard the inability to bear children as a sign of affliction by God. Certainly, many women unable to have children are deeply grieved by their condition, but their burden should not be made worse by a belief that it is a sign of God's disfavor. If we can grant this change of perspective since ancient times and then look for what we can relate to in this text, I think we can appreciate what we find there: both a lesson about thanksgiving for blessings from God and a lesson about faith.

Hannah, Elizabeth, Mary and many, many other people in scripture remind us that deep, heartfelt, exuberant thanksgiving to God is our right response to God's extraordinary blessings. In a week and a half people all around the nation will be celebrating Thanksgiving Day. It appears that in the world the focus of the day is more on food than giving thanks to God. We are called to be in the world but not of the world. So, I hope that you will seriously consider joining me at 9:30 on Thanksgiving morning to worship God and give thanks to God, the giver of all good gifts. This parish has recently been through difficult times, and I think it's especially appropriate this year for us to collectively pray to God, "Thank you, God. We've made it through. We are still here. We have a future. Thank you."

Hannah also reminds us of the practice of making a thank offering to God for blessings received. When she dedicates Samuel to the Lord, she is giving to the Lord a son who otherwise might have provided her with financial security in her old age. She is giving back to the Lord the blessing she had prayed for and been granted. You or someone you know may have done just that. A woman I knew in seminary had had stomach cancer. She prayed that God would save her life and that if she lived, she would give her life to God's service. She did live and then attended seminary to become a priest and give her life back to God.

Last Sunday we blessed the United Thank Offering gifts. The idea behind the UTO movement is to encourage people to make offerings of money in thanksgiving for daily blessings. Those offerings are then gathered and distributed to programs that help people in need. We can choose to participate in this important UTO effort. We might also make special gifts to thank God for extraordinary blessings, like Hannah did. For example, a person who has recovered from a serious illness or had life-changing surgery might make a donation to Doctors Without Borders. A sacrificial gift to such an organization is turning thanksgiving to God into a blessing for a stranger who is also a child of God but who has not been so richly blessed. Such spiritual practices help others and also help us to grow in loving our neighbors as ourselves.

The story of Hannah is also a story about faith. Faith is largely about trust in God. Hannah prayed year after year for the Lord to bless her with a child. She trusted God. She didn't give up. Hannah's prayer for a son was answered and then she looked back on her life, saw God's hand at work in her life, and praised God for that work.

Hannah's example reminds us that the past can be a great help to our lives of faith, especially when we are struggling. Our own past experience surely includes moments when we have trusted God completely, when we have known the reality and love of God beyond doubt or comprehension, when we have been touched by God. Remember those times and cherish them.

Steven Charleston is a Native American, a retired Episcopal bishop and former dean of Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. I want to share with you some of his wisdom on this topic. He writes:

"Spiritual faith is trust, the ability to believe beyond doubt that an agency greater than my own is not only present, but at work in the world, at work within me and through me. How do I know this is true? Experience: I have a history with the Spirit. Looking back over my life I see the handprint of the Spirit over and over again, a clear pattern of benign intervention, a track record of insight and support that is unmistakable. There is even a sprinkling of what I would call miracles, results beyond any expectation that have saved or shaped my life in ways I can only describe as extraordinary. Therefore, I trust my experience, knowing the source is love, knowing the intention is kindness, knowing the wisdom is reliable. Trust is at the heart of faith. Faith is at the center of confidence. If you need a sense of reassurance in these troubled days, go to the core of what you believe and work your way back through your own history, seeing how your own experience invites you to trust the power of love in your life."

Following Bp. Charleston's suggestion of reviewing our lives in this way may be especially appropriate during this Thanksgiving season. Such a life review is strengthening, empowering. It may help us do just what the author of the Letter to the Hebrews (10:23) exhorts us to do: "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for [God] who has promised is faithful." So may it be, and amen.