

No question about it... these are difficult days: post election, and now 4 years of what??? We are surely a polarized society. Some say the end of democracy is near and we could soon be another authoritarian ruled Russia or China. Others are cheering for a harsher crackdown on undocumented immigrants, tougher restrictions on abortion, and putting profits over environmental concerns. All our concerns tend toward extremes, without much willingness to compromise. People use extreme language.... have extreme fears, or celebrate victory with gloating.

I think we can gain some wisdom from our lectionary reading for this week from the “Old Testament” or Hebrew Bible. We know that the history of Israel is full of conflicts and contradictions, both as a nation and in its stories of the famous people and leaders. This morning we heard part of the story of Hannah and Peninah (1Samuel 1:4-20). I must admit, I was not very familiar with this story; even in my graduate studies at seminary. But one day I heard a sermon on the story by Rev. Dr. James Forbes Jr.... (I will do my best to make the story relevant, but you can hear his unforgettable 20 minute sermon, with interpretive *dance*, on the Hannah story by looking up “Hannah Rose” on YouTube.)

First of all there is the personal aspect of the story. A little before 1000 B.C.E., an observant Jew named Elkanah had two wives, Hannah and Peninah. The artwork on the front of our bulletin gives us an idea of how the story depicts them: Hannah has her face raised to the heavens in an prayerful expectant way. Peninah has a bit harsher look; we could even say she looks rather proud, maybe even with hints of anger. Yes, she was jealous of Hannah, because the story says that Hannah was the wife that Elkanah really loved. But Peninah was the wife that had many children! So at one big religious feast every year, Peninah would tease or make fun of Hannah. As a rival for Elkanah’s favor, Peninah would “provoke and irritate her”... one version says “make fun of her mercilessly!” (Here is where Rev. Jim Forbes has imaginative play with

the story... he speaks of Peninah asking Hannah if she is hungry, saying that when *her children* are through eating, there may be some leftovers her children could bring over to Hannah!). So poor Hannah, the barren one, was often very sad at these feasts, so sad that she could not eat, or and was most likely intentionally *fasting*.

Well, what do the Bible and other religions often say about fasting? Good to combine it with prayer! After the feast at Shiloh where Hannah did not eat, the text says that “she presented herself before the Lord.” Her sadness was great, and she prayed and cried all at the same time. We can think anything we want, (perhaps scientific rationalizing... like “her body was due to shift hormonally anyway, and some egg fell down at the right time”) But no matter how you look at it, prayer either helped her to conceive, or got her ready for the new birth... so she included a *promise* in her prayer: that if God would allow her to get pregnant, she would let the child be raised in the temple, and dedicate the child’s life to the work of God! Thus, from her prayer came one of the greatest prophets in Israel, Samuel! Samuel was indeed raised under the teachings of the priests of the temple and became a prophet or a “Seer,” one of the last judges over Israel, a good judge and prophet.

Thus, there is also a *nationalistic* aspect of the story of Hannah and the birth of Samuel. Israel at that time was a confederacy of tribes; there was no unified government, sound familiar? Surely there were many conflicts and needs for judges to be called to come and judge, to make decisions among warring factions. Samuel was said to be a very good and wise leader, a “seer” who could “see” important truths and ways to guide the nation. When they asked for a king, so they could be like the other nations, Samuel warned them about the flaws of kings: the tendency toward greed and corruption. Samuel was trying to guide them to revere God, the LORD, as their only or primary leader. Let’s go back to prayer for a moment; if the Spirit of God is your principal guide, spending

time in prayer is crucial. Reading the laws of Moses, as well as prayer about current situations, helped Samuel to be a good guide.

Samuel learned about God and God's ways from studying under priests at the temple, and probably also from strong encouragement of his mother Hannah, whenever she visited him at the temple. Hannah was a devout Jew, no question. When she had prayed for a child (actually for a male child!) while fasting, the text says that she was praying from her heart... since her lips were moving, no voice was heard, and she was trembling and weeping while praying. Serious, fervent prayer! Also, the text tells us that after her child Samuel was born, she had another prayer or song that was fervent and serious... so serious that we now recognize it as a prayer for social justice, for social change, a prayer from one who was downtrodden, one who was oppressed for not having children! ... but also a universal plea on behalf of *any who are experiencing oppression*, being beaten down!

So there are the nationalistic overtones in this story. And we hear the same overtones a thousand years later in the Song of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Listen to part of the Song of Hannah, and you will recognize the Magnificat of Mary! *"My heart exults in the Lord, my mouth derides my enemies. Talk no more so very proudly; the bows of the mighty are broken. The barren has born seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. The Lord makes poor and makes rich. He brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust, and makes them sit with princes. For not by might does one prevail.*

Hannah and Mary both sing songs (prayers) that speak of *reversals* when God or true followers of God govern, of leveling the playing fields... of the proud and arrogant falling down, while the humble and poor get lifted up. Hannah's son Samuel and Mary's son Jesus also work to make things more fair, more peaceable, in this world, where it is not power and might that have the last say.

So when times are really hard, either in personal life, or in national life, it is surely the time for more prayer, for more fervent prayers from the heart. Of course action is needed, but the *course of action* will be directed well if it springs up from prayer, if the ideas come from prayer, if the values come from prayer. We all need to discern what is the spirit of goodness and what is the spirit evil.... If we disagree, are we willing to negotiate and compromise rather than say the loudest voices or ones using weapons will be the winners? Anger voiced for what is good and right is one thing, but anger that seeks to beat down, to beat into submission, to win by violence is another thing, an evil thing.

This past week I went to a clergy gathering and a forum on the future of democracy. In the clergy gathering, there was a lot of needed venting, and agreement to wait on specific challenges and actions we might take. At the forum on democracy ... most of the presentation reminded us that America was never really well united as “united states,” but that regions of our country have continually been at odds. There was very little said at the end about concrete hopes for more harmony and unity among our states, the north and the south, etc. So I’m back to *prayer* and the call of our faith... and all faiths, where the final goal *must be* peace and harmony among people ... and it must be voiced often and worked for in any way we can! Like Hannah and her son Samuel, Mary and her son Jesus, let us be a people of prayer: prayer for the actual turning points, the changes and actions that need to happen to bring more goodness and truth into our world! Amen.