

FROM THE SLOUGH OF DESPOND TO A SON SO FOND

1 Samuel 1 (text) Luke 1:1-17

"Now there was a certain man from Ramathaim-zophim ... and he had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah, and Peninnah had children but Hannah had no children." Congregation, we've come across this phraseology before. Remember Judges chapter thirteen, verse two: *"And there was a certain man of Zorah of the family of the Danites whose name was Manoah and his wife was barren and had borne no children."* Or again, Ruth chapter one, verse one: *"And a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to sojourn in the land of Moab with his wife and his two sons and the name of the man was Elimelech and his wife, Naomi. Then Elimelech ... died; and she was left with her two sons and they married two Moabite women."* Then her two sons *"also died; and the woman was bereft of her two children and her husband"* and – not written in these words, but that is the effect – left with two daughters-in-law and they had no children.

And of course we won't forget Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebecca, or Jacob and Rachel. Does God make a specialty of this sort of thing?! Well, in a way he does. We won't talk about Abraham and Isaac and Jacob this morning. We'll just stick to these first three that I have mentioned because they are linked together. Notice – and perhaps you have already – how they are introduced. *"There was a certain man from"* such and such a place *"and he had a wife and she had no children."* But then, by the end of the story in Judges, Ruth and Samuel, Mr and Mrs Manoah had been given Samson, Ruth and Boaz had been given Obed, and Elkanah and Hannah had been given Samuel.

There's another interesting thing about these three families though. Not only are they introduced in the same words; not only is their experience of life very similar; they all lived around the same time. I suppose if it happened today they'd form a support group.

There is something else very interesting in the story of Samson; the Holy Spirit is very active in this period. About nearly all the judges you read that, before they went about to do their work, the Holy Spirit came upon them and then they wrought their marvellous and valiant salvations for Israel. But we read about that more with Samson. And maybe God worked in him in a different way, for we read in the twenty-fifth verse of Judges chapter fifteen, *"And the Spirit of the Lord began to stir Samson in Mahaneh-dan."*

I mention this because of a couple of things we read in the third chapter of first Samuel. In the first verse of chapter three we read that, *"Word from the Lord was rare in those days and visions were infrequent."* But in the last verse of the same chapter we read, *"And the Lord appeared again at Shiloh. Because – or: in that – the Lord revealed himself to Samuel at Shiloh by the Word of the Lord."* The Lord was stirring and his Word, absent from Israel for some time, had made a reappearance.

There is the lay of the land. A certain man and a certain man and a certain man and they all have wives but they have no children, not by the wives mentioned anyway. But the Lord is stirring himself. What is he about to do?

There is another similar "*certain man*" in Scripture and yes, you guessed it, because we read it in Luke chapter one, "*In the days of Herod the king of Judea there was a certain priest named Zacharias of the division of Abijah and he had a wife from the daughters of Aaron and her name was Elizabeth and they had no child because Elizabeth was barren.*" And would you believe it, word from the Lord was rare in Zacharias and Elizabeth's days as well! In fact it hadn't been heard for four hundred years, from the time of Malachi, the last OT prophet. But the Spirit was stirring again. For Zacharias and Elizabeth would soon have a son who, we are told in verse fifteen of that chapter, "*will be filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb.*" And then, of course, as we all know, a few months later there was an even more remarkable birth just down the road in Bethlehem, to Mary, whose child "*was conceived in her by the Holy Spirit.*"

That is the scene. What is God up to in our story? I have tried to capture the chapter in this little phrase: From this slough of despond, from this valley of depression, God works a new beginning for his people.

ACT ONE: THE BARREN LANDSCAPE

In Judges 13, before we read about a certain man, Manoah whose wife had no children, we read, "*Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the Lord so the Lord gave them into the hands of the Philistines forty years.*" That was in the west and south of Israel. But at the same time, a little to the north and east, the Ammonites were causing trouble. God called Jephthah to deal with them. From both sides, Israel was under pressure from their enemies because of their sin. It wasn't, for those of you who remember that TV programme, the *Happy Days* of the fifties and the 'Fonz' in Israel at that time.

But as I read our chapter this morning, a question came to my mind about the last part of verse 3: "*And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests to the Lord there.*" My question was: why does God mention Hophni and Phinehas here? They don't seem necessary to the story at this point. We'll deal with Hophni and Phinehas in due course but suffice it to say at the moment: they were not exemplary priests. They abused the offerings that the Lord's people brought and they abused the female servants of the temple.

This gives us another tie-up with Elizabeth and Zacharias and John the Baptist. Zacharias was a priest. Elkanah was a Levite, the same tribe as the priests. The priesthood in Zacharias' day just before Jesus came was also in bad shape. The office of high-priest was being bought and sold to the highest bidder in a kind of auction system run by the Roman authorities. But Zacharias and Elizabeth, and Elkanah and Hannah, were both righteous. What we read about Zacharias and Elizabeth we can apply to Elkanah and Hannah: "*They were both righteous in the sight of God, walking blamelessly in all the commandments and requirements of the Lord*" in an age of religious and moral decadence and political distress.

John the Baptist's task was "*to prepare the way for the Lord in the wilderness*" that Israel had become, "*to make smooth in the desert a highway for our God,*" Isaiah 40. Then the glory of the Lord would be revealed. That, of course, was Jesus Christ himself. John's task was "*to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the children to the fathers.*" And that was just as necessary in Eli's family. Eli himself

seems to have been personally righteous but he was weak, he wouldn't discipline his sons. And his sons couldn't care less about him.

Now we might, just by-the-bye, take note of this and be encouraged by it. Just because we also live in a time of religious apostasy and moral decadence and political skulduggery doesn't mean that we cannot maintain godliness or that our children must necessarily follow the ways of the world.

At both points in history times were very dark. It was a very barren landscape and the righteous do not always escape the judgement, or all of the judgement, that God brings on the world at such times. Elizabeth and Hannah were barren but they maintained their own righteousness and a true piety. Every year Elkanah would go to Shiloh to make the annual sacrifice and to worship God. He never missed, regardless of the state of the priesthood – a weak father and scandalous sons. And from the rest of the story we know that this was not just formalism on Elkanah's part, or Hannah's. It was a living faith. And after they had presented their burnt offerings and sin offerings they would then bring their peace offerings, or thank offerings they may also be called; the one sacrifice of which the offerer ate most of the beast as a fellowship meal with his family and friends and the priest.

So they would all sit down and there was Peninnah with her many children; and there was Hannah on her own. And Peninnah thought she was the bee's knees with her tribe around her and she shot off a few sarcastic comments to Hannah during the meal, "Oh, you're still not pregnant, Hannah." And Elkanah tried to give Hannah a lift by giving her a special cut - eye fillet, or whatever. Perhaps that wasn't very clever. For women, especially, notice those sorts of things, and they don't need to see special cuts going this way and that to get the message either. So Peninnah wound poor old Hannah up some more.

Hannah would get up from the table in tears and Elkanah would follow her out and try to comfort her. He even said to her, "*Hannah, aren't I better to you than ten sons?*" He loved Hannah. Hannah loved him. But no, as a matter of fact, he was not better to her than ten sons. No husband can be. Because a husband is not a son.

And I think this is a mistake we make with all the talk nowadays, in Christian circles and very well meant and with a good deal of truth in it, about companionate marriage. Of course a husband and a wife are to be real companions. They are to be best friends. That is to be the closest relationship in life. But even that is not everything. God has put an instinct within us to be productive, not only in bearing children but particularly in bearing children; and particularly in women to bear children. After all, she has all the specialized equipment for the whole business. And do you really think God doesn't give her the psychology, and the desire therefore, to match the physiology?

Where God does not give children he gives special grace. Even as he does when he doesn't give a husband or a wife. But that drive for fruitfulness must be fulfilled. In the end that drive for fruitfulness must be fulfilled in serving the kingdom of God and his righteousness first; with our children, if he gives us them, or without. For if we try to live for our husband or our wife, or if we try to live for our children, we are going to come a cropper. If we try to live for anything other than for God we will not find the best. Only God and only the service of God can satisfy an empty heart.

So there is the barren landscape – religiously, morally, politically, and personally for Hannah and Elkanah.

ACT 2: THE DESPONDENT PLEA

Did you notice whom she prays to? “*Oh Lord of hosts.*” Nobody had ever prayed to the Lord of hosts before. At least it’s not recorded. He is called the Lord of hosts in verse three of our chapter but that is the first mention of this name of God in the whole Bible.

Now congregation, the Lord of hosts is a very busy God. That name speaks of God as the ruler over the heavenly hosts – the angels, the stars, all the powers of heaven and earth, visible and invisible; later on it included all the nation of Israel, the host of the Lord. And Hannah addresses this God in the midst of all his busyness ruling heaven and earth and Hannah expects him to take time out to listen to her, one lone, barren, despondent woman. And she asks him for a son. Then she does a very dangerous thing, it seems to me. She says, “*Then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life and a razor shall never come on his head.*” Personally, I wouldn’t recommend you do that sort of thing. If she’d asked for three sons, or even two, then I could feel a little more confident she would fulfil this vow and give back to the Lord one of them under this Nazarite vow. But to give back one out of one that she asked for?! And I think Elkanah has some question marks about that too, as we’ll see in a minute. He knew about Ecclesiastes five: “*It is better not to vow than to vow and not pay.*”

But anyway, that’s what she asked for and that’s the vow she made in her distress. That’s another similarity with Samson by the way. He too was consecrated a Nazarite to the Lord. Only in his case, the whole thing came out of the blue. I’m quite sure Mrs Manoah had prayed many times for a child, but what is recorded is that the angel met her unexpectedly, promised a son and imposed upon her the Nazarite vow. Hannah asked for a son and made the vow voluntarily.

So Hannah prays and of course in the despondency and those tears, the prayer didn’t exactly come out the Prayer Book. You know, precise grammar, well balanced, dignified posture, everything covered. As a matter of fact the prayer didn’t come out at all. Yet, as upset as she was, she was controlled enough to speak silently. Eli sees her and he thinks the meal of the fellowship offering has been a bit too convivial and says to her, “*Put your wine away from you.*” In other words, “You’re sloshed woman, go and sleep it off before you come to the house of God!” “*Oh no my lord,*” she says and she explains the situation. Maybe Eli also has become spiritually insensitive or maybe he has just seen too many people in the state he thought Hannah was in and his mistake is understandable. At any rate, he sees her for what she is now and he blesses her with the hope of a positive answer.

And that’s enough for Hannah. Millions of women have prayed this prayer throughout history and no doubt very many have had the prayer answered with a child. But not all. But this, what Eli says, may be no more than his prayer added to hers. But she is satisfied with that. “*And she went her way no longer sad,*” we read. It’s a bit sentimental but Fanny Crosby’s hymn is right,

*Oh what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear,
all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.*

For the truth is, the Lord of hosts, busy as he is, the whole world, the whole universe to attend to, does have time and a concern for his people. And this is the way God works, personally, and as church, local and universal. He drives us to the end of ourselves until we are helpless and fruitless in ourselves and we know it. Then we will pray. Only, too often only then will we pray.

For Israel wasn't in the state it was in, suffering the oppression that it was, for nothing. Israel had sinned and their oppression was a judgment. I'm not saying that Hannah had also sinned and was **therefore** barren. There's no evidence of that at all. In fact, the evidence points more in the direction of what is said explicitly of Zacharias and Elizabeth. But God uses her as a picture of how he deals with us to combat our pride. When we are weak and we know we are weak then the Lord can use us. Then it is that he often works a new beginning, the coming of a better day. After all, was it not "*at just the right time, when we were helpless, that Christ died for us?*" as Paul says in Romans five. That is the despondent plea.

ACT 3: THE GRATEFUL DEDICATION

Brothers and sisters, we know about this story. Some of us know the heartaches of Hannah. A good number of couples in this congregation, which is not so large, have not been able to have children, or able only to have one or two and they would like to have had more. On the other hand, we've got couples whom the Lord has blessed with great fruitfulness. Thank God it doesn't provide opportunity for strife as it did in Elkanah's home. We can be thankful that monogamy has finally become well-worked into our culture.

First of all, something personal and individual. The Lord answered Hannah's prayer. He gave her a son and she called him Samuel. The commentators are not quite sure what Hebrew word Samuel comes from and therefore what the name means, but she did call him Samuel because, she said, "*I have asked him of the Lord.*" So most likely it means: heard of God. In other words, in that name Hannah bore witness that God is a God who hears the cries of his people – even though he doesn't always answer them in the way we would like him to.

Hannah doesn't take Samuel straight to the temple the next year. She waits until he is weaned, probably about three years old. Elkanah seems a bit nervous about this and he says to her in verse twenty-three, "*Only may the Lord confirm his word.*" I have difficulty understanding what Elkanah is on about when he says that – because the Lord has confirmed his word! he's given them a son! The Greek translation of the Old Testament, a version of 1 Samuel in the Hebrew scrolls found in the Qumran caves fifty years ago, and an old Syriac version of the Old Testament has this clause slightly different. It has Elkanah saying, "*May the Lord confirm your word.*" In other words, "Hannah, this is a dangerous game you're playing, putting this off. May the Lord enable you to keep your oath." But Hannah too knows about that solemn warning in Ecclesiastes chapter five and she "*pays God her vow which she uttered in distress,*" Psalm sixty-six, which we'll sing in a moment.

People of God, this Nazarite vow that Hannah made is really only an intensified version of what we vow when we have our children baptised. And what we ought to want for our children anyway. We're in covenant with God. They are his children, not

ours. They are given to us in trust to wean for him and for his service, whatever form that service may take, but perhaps even involving danger. Hannah brought Samuel to the temple when he was three years old to come under the influence of weak old Eli and his two wicked sons, Hophni and Phinehas; and their sins were no mere peccadilloes. We have to trust God, congregation, for our children too.

So that's something personal and individual. But now let us ask; **What is God doing?** When you look at the Bible and all of those other stories like this, you could wonder if barrenness is always a prelude to fruitfulness; whether it's always the harbinger of a new beginning; by driving us to cry to the Lord. I suspect, broadly and spiritually-speaking, that is exactly right. It sure seems to be in the Bible. And Paul did say, "*Only when I am weak am I strong.*"

Samuel was, of course, unique. He is not merely an example for us to follow, nor Hannah and Elkanah, despite what we may properly learn from the way God works in their lives. But God is doing something special here with this couple and this desolate woman and their son. They are to raise up the Old Testament John the Baptist, as a matter of fact. As John the Baptist prepared the way for the Lord to come and bring his eternal kingdom and salvation, so Samuel prepared Israel to receive David, the greatest type of Christ in the whole Bible. That's what God is doing.

You see, people of God, God has his fingers on the pulse of world and religious affairs. God controls the strings. For while he was raising up Samuel to prepare the way, not so long ago he had brought Ruth from Moab and brought her and Boaz together in quite a remarkable way and given them Obed whose son Jesse must have been more or less contemporary with, perhaps a little older than, Samuel. For it was Jesse's son David that God later called Samuel to anoint as the king of Israel. And round about the same time as he was raising up Samuel in Ramah and working out that romance in Bethlehem between Ruth and Boaz, he was also stirring Samson in Mahaneh-dan. And Samson, in his utterly foolish way, God used to provoke a renewed enmity between Israel and the Philistines because, of late, they had been getting far too cosy and accommodated.

Times were dark, but that is when God brings a new movement of his Spirit and a new work of salvation for his people. We're all very concerned about the Church's apostasy in the West and New Zealand's moral degeneracy and we can become quite despondent about it at times. Maybe, brothers and sisters, it will be in this slough of despond that we will turn to God in prayer and that the Lord will respond with a new work of his Son by his Spirit. And who knows if it might not be through one of our sons so fond. Let us so pray. Amen.

John Rogers, Reformed Church of the North Shore, 9th May, 2004