

1 Samuel 1:4-20

The Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

November 14, 2021

How did the leopard get its spots? It depends on who you ask. According to Rudyard Kipling's *Just So Stories*, Leopard's prey, Zebra and Giraffe, learned to camouflage themselves. So Leopard asked his friend to paint spots on him as well. Because of this small change to one leopard, long ago, all leopards now have spots.

A biologist will tell you that this is both true and false. False, because you can't create an inheritable change with a can of paint. And true, because if a change helps an animal survive and reproduce, that change will spread.

1 and 2 Samuel is a Just So Story: How Israel Got Its Kings. You'd have to ask a historian how true or false it is, but like the story of the leopard's spots, it starts with just a few people, all of them very unhappy.

Elkanah has two wives: Hannah and Peninnah.

Hannah is not happy: she can't seem to conceive children. She wants to be a mother: she wants to feel new life within her. She wants to raise and love a child. She wants to share the parenting adventure with her husband. She wants to have a child – especially a male child – to secure her old age, especially if her husband dies first.

People of Hannah's time don't have our knowledge of biology; they assume God has chosen not to grant children to Hannah.

Elkanah is not happy: he loves his wife, Hannah, and can't bear to see her unhappy, so he gives her extra gifts to show that his love for her doesn't depend on children. "Am I not more to you than ten children?" he asks. I'm sure Elkanah means well, but it doesn't seem to help much. Again, Elkanah's love for his wife doesn't leave Hannah secure if he predeceases her. I wonder if he's also a bit tired of constantly reassuring her, and a bit hurt: "I love you, Hannah – doesn't *that* mean anything to you?"

Peninnah isn't happy: has she not produced children with and for her husband? But he lavishes gifts and attention on the unhappy Hannah – not on Peninnah. And so she takes out her frustrations on her rival, Hannah.

Hannah goes to the temple to ask God for help, and we begin to see how this unhappy family's story is connected to the larger story of God's people, Israel. Hannah prays silently to God at the sanctuary at Shiloh. Eli, the priest, cannot hear her prayer and thus concludes that she is drunk. It may not have been the common practice to pray silently, but why should he leap to the conclusion that she's drunk? Is there so much disorder in the sanctuary that drunken people are a common occurrence?

Maybe there is. We read in the very next chapter that Eli's sons, who are supposed to be priests, are scoundrels. They steal the food brought for sacrifice, and sleep with the

women who serve in the sanctuary. Their father Eli is ineffectual, and seemingly powerless to stop them. Little wonder, perhaps, that we hear that God is distant: “the Word of the Lord was rare in those days.” Little wonder that Eli’s increasing physical blindness is matched by a spiritual blindness and inability to discern Hannah’s faithfulness.

The people of God are as ill and dysfunctional as Elkanah’s family. There is no distinction between the personal, the family, and the national scale: “As above, so below.”

I gotta say, everything feels like a big mess here in Canada, too. I love my job, but we've just learned that the optional health benefit plan for clergy will be eliminated. An aging workforce combined with the stress of ministering during the Pandemic has us drawing more money out of the plan than we're putting in, and the denomination can't afford to subsidize it. We'll be paying more out of pocket for our children's orthodontics and other expenses.

This is part of a broader pattern of costcutting across the United Church of Canada. Incomes are shrinking because congregations are shrinking. We're not drawing people in as fast we're losing them. Those of us who remain—those of us in the pews—are asked to shoulder more volunteer work because we have fewer siblings in faith to share the work.

It's the same story across the nonprofit sector: whether it's because people are working harder just to put food on the table, or because people just aren't joiners like they used to be, both income and volunteers are in short supply.

This at a time when alternative voices are needed more than ever before: CEOs earn exorbitant salaries while the middle class is shrinking and the planet is burning. The world is a mess, and we know this in our personal everyday lives. As above, so below.

But Hannah is more hopeful than I manage to be. Rather than retaliate against her rival Peninnah, rather than snap at her husband Elkanah, she takes it to God in the sanctuary at Shiloh. Eli, for his part, finally understands that she is praying and gives her a blessing on behalf of God. That's good enough for Hannah, whose deep faith trusts that God will act. She returns home no longer sad, and in due time she conceives and bears a son.

She will dedicate this son, Samuel, to God, and in the course of his service in the Temple God will use him to convey a message of judgment to the priestly line of Eli. Samuel will go on to serve God faithfully and be instrumental in the rise of King Saul and King David after him. The private misery and private faith of Hannah leads, through God's engagement and Eli's blessing, to the healing of both Hannah's and Israel's misery and the renewal of the faith and faithfulness of God's people Israel. This is how Israel got its kings: Just So. The private becomes the political: as above, so below.

One detail makes me a little uncomfortable: does God make Hannah *earn* this child? The prescientific worldview does hold that fertility or lack thereof is an act of God, but there was no prior suggestion that God was holding back children as a test. Neither was it part of a grand plan. Instead, what I see here is God responding to need and to human initiative, and working out possibilities that we never would have expected on our own. God's answer to the problem of Hannah's infertility becomes an answer to the problem of Eli's sons' infidelity. God is the connective tissue between the affairs of individuals and the affairs of the nation, because God is the God of both.

God is also, surely, the God of our modern problems and the God to whom we moderns are faithful. In the midst of all our problems, today we celebrate 40 years of the faithfulness of our Gladwin Heights congregation. Despite all of our challenges, the United Church in the Fraser Valley is full of faithful and dedicated people, and God can use that faithfulness in ways that amaze us and even exceed our knowledge.

My colleague Bill talks about the relationship between Vision, Mission, and Goals. It's easy to muddy them, but Bill says your Vision is what you want to see in the world, your Mission is your part in it, and your Goals are the steps you'll take to get there. Terry Fox had a Vision of the end of Cancer. Ending Cancer was bigger than him, but his Mission was to raise money for Cancer research. How would he do that? His Goal was to run across Canada.

Our Vision is the kingdom of God embodied on Earth: where everyone has enough, where nobody is persecuted, where everyone is valued as children of God. But we have our Mission: to embody that kingdom in the Fraser Valley, to be a little church that cares. And when that feels too big, we focus on our Goals: to welcome those who come through our doors. To equip and support each other for mission. To serve our neighbours and engage with their projects. Affirming ministry; sandwich making; Emma's Acres; and so on.

How did the kingdom come? That's bigger than us. But it all began with a handful of Christians in the Fraser Valley. Just So.