

Not Our Story?
Sermon preached by Rev. Edee Chase Fenimore
November 19, 2006

Texts: Psalm 138 and 1 Samuel 1:9-20

It is possible that some of you noticed that the title of this sermon, “Not Our Story?” is not the same title listed in our newsletter, First Notes. That title, “Food, Faith and Forgetting” even made it to the sign board for a few days. I apologized to the custodian for giving them extra work. And I begin this sermon with a discussion of those two titles, because the process of changing that title actually moves us into the story itself, the story that was our second lesson.

That story about Hannah, her husband Elkinah and Eli the priest contains all the elements that were in the first title, “Food, Faith and Forgetting. The story begins with food; the actual words are, “After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord.” And like most Biblical stories it certainly is about faith or trust in God. Then there is Hannah’s repeated plea that God not forget her. So as I began to work on this story this past week, I could see how five weeks ago I had chosen the title, “Food, Faith and Forgetting”. But the more that I reviewed the story the more I kept asking myself, “Edee, why did you pick this passage from all the passages listed on the Presbyterian Calendar for November 19th? What does a story about a barren woman, one of several such stories in the Bible, have to say to us, men, women, old, and young, all of us living in 2006? Why on earth would this story have been kept for generations and told over and over again? Why would it have been written down and kept as a part of the tradition of our ancestors in the faith?” And to bring the questioning full circle, why would it have been chosen as part of the three year cycle of Bible readings called the Common Lectionary that is printed on our Presbyterian calendar to encourage preachers to preach on a variety of different texts.

We have heard the main part of the story read. Let’s review the setting, characters and plot line to see if anything seems to apply to us and our lives in this time and place. We’ll begin a bit before our lesson began. A man named Elkinah had two wives, common enough in that day but that alone might have us muttering, “This is not our story”. But let’s continue. Elkinah’s first wife, Hannah, had no children, but his second wife, Penninah had children. Now the original hearers would know exactly what is going on here. The second wife, whose name, by the way, actually means second, is there in order to assure that there would be children. Having children in those days was not only an economic necessity, it was a way of assuring that the work would be done and that the parents, particularly the mother would be cared for. Having children was also considered a sign of God’s blessing. When we hear Hannah say, “O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant” we are hearing not a whining complaint but a plea for God to look upon her with favor. Hannah is, to use the words from our lesson, deeply distressed because in her belief the fact that she had no children, the fact that she was barren was a demonstration of God’s forgetting or ignoring her.

Again, we are probably saying, “Well, that’s not our story.” For families today, if they consider only the economics of it, children are an expense, an economic drain not a positive economic necessity. And we, as people of faith in the 21st Century, are not so naïve as to think that lack of fertility has anything to do with our relationship with God. That’s not our story. Well, maybe that specific stress is not the one that applies to us. But we often are caught up in the same emotion as Hannah exhibits.

In discussions about the nature of God, we might be quite rational. But when tragedy happens, or when we ourselves are touched by inexplicable sadness, our emotions, if not our actual words, reflect the same pattern of thinking. “How could this happen?” we ask. We may not actually use the word God in the sentence but underneath it all, we often are saying, “How could God let this happen?”

Let’s continue with the story of Hannah, Elkinah and Eli. Hannah, in this petition to God also does some bargaining. She says to God, “If you will remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to me, your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death.” Now for many reasons, we are probably all saying this is not in any way our story. For starters, most parents today are not so rash as to think that they can promise that their child will do anything for the entire course of that child’s life. And it is foolhardy for a parent to promise that a child will abstain from alcohol, not eat grapes, not cut his hair and all the other things that were required of a nazirite. So this is definitely not our story.

Of course we do make promises about our children. In every service of baptism parents promise to bring up their children to know the love of God. And the gathered Christian community promises to show God’s love to this and all children being baptized. But there is the recognition by all, that though the parents and the community show by their words and their actions the love of God that we know in Jesus Christ, there will come a time when the child must confirm those promises for herself or himself. In this church that happens when the child is about 12 or thirteen. Confirmation classes are held and it is the young person’s decision whether or not to commit to those promises made for him or her, years ago in the service of baptism. So the promise that Hannah makes as part of this bargain with God seems completely beyond her ability to deliver. So we say with conviction, “This is not our story”.

But how about that whole idea of bargaining with God? Do we even think of God as one with whom we can bargain? We may remember that in the book of Genesis, Abraham bargains with God. In an attempt to save the cities of Sodom and Gommorah, Abraham has a long bargaining session with God, starting by saying “If there are fifty righteous people within the city will you still destroy it?”, and ending with God’s agreement that if there are even ten righteous people, God will not destroy the city. But we take this as complete allegory don’t we? For we modern, educated, sophisticated people do not believe in actual conversations with God, let alone bargaining with God, do we?

I suspect that there are moments, in the quiet of the night, or in the unnerving noise of an emergency room, in the privacy of our thoughts when we say things like, “If you will just let my child live, O God, I will promise you that I will never say a cross word to her.” Or, “If only you will remove this cloud of depression from my loved one, I will finish every job that I have promised to do.” Or even more globally, “God, end the bloodshed in Iraq, Darfur, Afghanistan, Palestine, Israel, and I will vote in every election, attend every rally, come to worship every Sunday, and so on”. Maybe our bargaining is not so transparent or obvious but I suspect it is there. A dear friend of mine once told me that he had promised God to join and serve faithfully a church, if he got well enough to do so after surgery. There was a good outcome. His health returned and he joined and served well a church, for nearly five years until a few weeks before his death. No miracle but also no evil outcome. However it surely was a bargain made with God and though we may not ever utter those bargain-like words, we human beings have within us the emotions that lead to such bargaining. Perhaps we are no longer so sure that this is not our story.

Let's return to Hannah. This bargain that she was making with God was done near the temple. Eli, the priest was sitting on the seat by the entrance and saw Hannah, who was outside of the temple proper, as was the custom of the day for women. Eli assumed that Hannah was drunk because her lips were moving and no sound was coming out. The custom of the day was that prayers were said aloud, so it never would have occurred to Eli that Hannah might be praying. Not our story? We, today, as people of faith, often walk the fine line between tradition and self-expression. And we are sometimes assumed to be something that we are not. This is our story.

Hannah is asked a question and given a directive by Eli. Eli says to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." Hannah explains that she is not drunk, that she has been pouring out her soul before the Lord and has been speaking out of her great anxiety. And Eli softens and says to her, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to God." Again the specifics may not apply to us but the general situation is a common human one. The very person who misunderstands and criticizes us may be the one through whom God's grace comes. Over and over again in this flawed human institution that is called the church, we feel criticized, misunderstood, excluded and unappreciated and then from that very same source we receive such appreciation, care, sympathy and concern that we can only describe it as God's grace.

Hannah's story ends on a particularly high note. After Eli gives her God's blessing, Hannah returns home. In the subtle style of our scriptures the words are "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 worshipped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkinah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her." With just those words, "Elkinah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her", all the original hearers of this story would know what had happened. But for you and me and all the hearers who would come later, the obvious is stated. "In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son." You can almost hear the bells ringing and the shouts of hooray. We probably all would want that to be our story as well. Not the bearing a child part, but we want to receive that for which we have longed. We want to celebrate and feel blessings raining upon us. We want to say, "This is our story".

Finally let us hear the last sentence of this story. "Hannah named the child Samuel for she said, 'I have asked him of the Lord'." Whether or not Hannah gets it that God never forgets us, that God always remembers, we do not know. But Hannah does thank God, Hannah does recognize that all gifts are from God, and Hannah makes sure that all who meet her son in the future will know that this one is a gift from God. His name, Samuel, means asked from God.

Finally it is our choice if this is or is not our story. We can choose to recognize the constancy of God's presence and love. And we can choose to be thankful, not just on Thursday, the day designated as Thanksgiving, but every day, and every moment. We can live out our thanks by serving the world that God loves. It is our story. Thanks be to God.