PRAYER OF THE DAY

God of all mercy, by your power to heal and to forgive, graciously cleanse us from all sin and make us strong; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.

[By way of introduction, this story takes place before the birth of the shepherd boy David, before Israel had a king, and before the building of the Temple in Jerusalem. Worship of the LORD takes place in Shiloh. The ark of the covenant seems to have been kept in a stone house there in Shiloh. Samuel becomes the last of Israel’s Judges. He marks the transition from rule by the Judges to rule by kings.

Let me suggest that as I read this story aloud, you note the points in the story that especially touch your heart. I hope my sermon will address some of those points.]

HOLY SCRIPTURE

1There was a certain man of Rā·ma-thā·im-zṓphim of the hill country of Ė́phra-im, whose name was El·kāˊnah the son of Je·rōˊham, son of É·līˊhū, son of Tōˊhū, son of Zuph, an Ė́phra-im-îte. 2He had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Pe·ninˊnah. And Pe·ninˊnah had children, but Hannah had no children.

3Now this man used to go up year by year from his city to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hoph’nî and Phin’e-has, were priests of the LORD. 4On the day when El·kāˊnah sacrificed, he would give portions to Pe·ninˊnah his wife and to all her sons and daughters; 5and, although he loved Hannah, he would give Hannah only one portion, because the LORD had closed her womb. 6And her rival used to provoke her sorely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. 7So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. 8And El·kāˊnah, her husband, said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?”
After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. And she vowed a vow and said, “O LORD of hosts, if thou wilt indeed look on the affliction of thy maidservant, and remember me, and not forget thy maidservant, but wilt give to thy maidservant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.”

As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was speaking in her heart; only her lips moved, and her voice was not heard; therefore Eli took her to be a drunken woman. And Eli said to her, “How long will you be drunken? Put away your wine from you.” But Hannah answered, “No, my lord, I am the woman sorely troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. Do not regard your maidservant as a base woman, for all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation.” Then Eli answered, “Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have made to him.” And she said, “Let your maidservant find favor in your eyes.” Then the woman went her way and ate, and her countenance was no longer sad.

They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. And El-kā’nah knew Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her; and in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel, for she said, “I have asked him of the LORD.”

And the man El-kā’nah and all his house went up to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice, and to pay his vow. But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, “As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, that he may appear in the presence of the LORD, and abide there for ever.” El-kā’nah her husband said to her, “Do what seems best to you, wait until you have weaned him; only, may the LORD establish his word.” So the woman remained and nursed her son, until she weaned him. And when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine; and she brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh; and the child was young. Then they slew the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. And she said, “Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. For this child I prayed; and the LORD has granted me my petition which I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is lent to the LORD.”

And they worshiped the LORD there.
HYMN ELW 419  

For All the Faithful Women

In the name of the Father and of the † Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Here are the points in this story that especially tug on my heart. I am thinking of three of them. First, there is Hannah’s sorrow that she cannot have a baby. Second, there is her peace and confidence, once the priest Eli has prayed for her. And finally, there is her dedication of her child to God by bringing him and leaving him at the house of the LORD at Shiloh. Hannah had promised to do so, and she did, but how extraordinary this is!

So, first, let us speak of Hannah’s sorrow when she cannot have a baby. In pre-marriage counseling, I always try to point out to a young couple that sometimes babies come along unexpectedly. If so, then they should practice that profound hospitality that consists in welcoming this little stranger into their lives. Cherish the little one, as our God does. But in the course of parish ministry, there is another kind of sorrow that comes along: the sorrow of couples who want to have a child, but cannot. In this modern age of medicine, the chances of conception can be improved, but there is no guarantee, and it is expensive, and it increases the heartache if there is no success. Also, there is the sorrow of folks who would have loved to have married and to have had children, but it never worked out.

There is a line in the Lamentations of Jeremiah that the Church instinctively applies to Jesus on the Cross. But it is a verse that could also be used for women and men who want to have a baby, but cannot. The verse goes this way:

Is it nothing to you, all you who pass by? Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow which was brought upon me… (Lamentation 1:12, RSV)

The desire to have a baby is one of the most beautiful desires I can think of. Not all people have that desire, and that is okay. They might desire other good things in this world, and they might work toward them, to the blessing of many people. But the desire to have children seems good because it accords so naturally with the desire of our God, for he too desires that there should be life. There was no compulsion for our God to create us. How could there be any such compulsion? No, our God creates us because he loves life. He wants living things in the oceans and the lakes, flying up there in the air, living on the land, in the forests, in the meadows. Our God wants people, and many of us join him in that. We have a longing to help create life on earth. We would love to have a child and to weave our lives for the rest of our days with our children.
So it was with Hannah. Her husband loved her and she had many blessings, no doubt. But also she had this sorrow: she wanted to have a child, and could not. She wept over this and would not eat. Her spirit was vexed. She was troubled. Life did not seem right to her.

As it turned out, things worked out okay for Hannah. But suppose they had not. Suppose the LORD, according to his wisdom and love for Hannah, never did give her a child? Then the best comfort I can come up with is a saying of Jesus. It has always been a somewhat strange saying to me, and yet I have long suspected that there is comfort for us in it. It is about marriage in the kingdom of God. People had come along, trying to confuse Jesus and trap him in his words. His opponents have proposed an incredible case in which a woman is obligated to marry seven brothers, one after another. So, certain of the Sadducees ask, whose wife will she be in the resurrection? Jesus answers this way:

34And Jesus answering said unto them, The children of this world marry, and are given in marriage: 35But they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage: 36Neither can they die any more: for they are equal unto the angels; and are the children of God, being the children of the resurrection. (Luke 20:34-36, KJV)

Jesus certainly means to take care of us in his Kingdom. If there is to be no marriage there, perhaps that means that in that world, we will look upon each other with the love that in this world is focused on spouse and children. That is, when we see any child in that kingdom, we will smile on that child exactly as if it is our child. We will be entirely proud of that child and love the child with our whole hearts. And we will smile on all our neighbors in God's kingdom as if we loved them as we love our spouse in this world. Or even better! That would be to say to Hannah and others who grieve over not having children, “You story is not yet done. There are still great loves and children ahead of us. Trust Jesus about that.”

Next, I am touched by Hannah’s confidence in the power of prayer. The priest there in Shiloh prays for her. We need not assume that the priest Eli is some great saint. What we should give him credit for is that he is called upon to pray for others, and he does. The passage I especially like goes this way:

17Then Eli answered, “Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition which you have made to him.” 18And she said, “Let your maidservant find favor in your eyes.” Then the woman went her way and ate, and her countenance was no longer sad. (1 Samuel 1:17-18, RSV)
The man had done what he was supposed to do—what Hannah expected him to do: he had prayed for her. He had prayed that the God of Israel would grant her petition. Then Hannah went on her way happy. Her sorrow was gone. She ate “and her countenance was no longer sad.” Hannah believes in prayer. She believes that somehow or other, the Lord will grant her prayer. She was confident that somehow or other, she would give thanks to God for fulfilling her prayer.

This all puts me in mind of that great passage about prayer in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says this:

“Ask, and it will be given you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. 8 For every one who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. 9 Or what man of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? 10 Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? 11 If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matthew 7:7-11, RSV)

In our town, day by day, momentous things are done. Legislation is written, financial decisions are made, scholars craft their words, artists work on their canvases, musicians on their scores, police and FBI and firefighters all risk life and limb fighting for justice. But among these momentous things, do not overlook the importance of your prayers. If you say you will pray for someone, do not forget what you have said. Your prayer that day will be important. Trust that. Hannah did.

Finally I turn to the point of the story that most tugs on the heart of my wife, Carol, and me: the fact that Hannah fulfilled her vow and left her child in the house of the LORD with that old man, Eli. Who could imagine giving your little child a final hug, turning and walking away? The immensity of that deed, I propose, gives us some measure of what our God has done. Recall that golden verse from this past Sunday:

16 For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son... (John 3:16)

“Farewell, Son. You are leaving the safety of heaven and the adoration of the angels. You are heading into a hard world. I am letting you go. I am entrusting you to the world of men and women, boys and girls, because you and I love them, fallible and sinful though they might be.”
Our God did this thing, but I do not imagine it to have been easy. The image of Hannah saying farewell to young Samuel gives us some vision of what our God is like, how the Father and the Holy Spirit let Jesus go as part of their work to save us.

You and I are loved by a mighty love! That is what I conclude. We are loved by our God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, to whom belongs the glory, now and forever. Amen.