

Promise of Hope
1 Samuel 1:4-20, 2:1-10

Marian Wright Edelman, the founder of the Children's Defense Fund, tells this story about a boy named Tony. He is one of the children who attends Martha's Table, a private program in Washington, D.C., that serves poor and homeless children. Martha's Table tries hard to celebrate the birthdays of children attending the after-school program. As their birthdays approach, the children are asked what kind of special gift they would like. Tony desperately wanted a bike for his twelfth birthday, he told the staff. Tony was in luck. Several used bikes had been fixed up and donated to the center. So, the staff promised Tony his bike. On his birthday, however, Tony quietly approached the after-school supervisor. "I want to change my birthday order," he said. "Instead of a bike, I want a bag of groceries for my mom." With her heart breaking, the supervisor took Tony into the kitchen and packed two big bags full of food. She even found a day-old lemon meringue pie. She put the birthday pie on the top of one of the bags. Then she offered to drive Tony back to the shelter because the bags were too heavy for him to carry alone. Tony picked up one bag, and the supervisor picked up the other, and together they headed out to her car. As they walked across the parking lot to her car, the bag the supervisor was carrying broke. Broken glass and spilled food were everywhere, and on top of the pile was the birthday pie, now ruined. The supervisor began to cry. Tony, however, just shrugged his shoulders. He looked at the mound of ruined food and said, "That's my life."

Why should a twelve-year-old boy have such lack of hope? Why do we live in a world where hope for a better day seems to be in short supply? What brings you hope in times of despair? What brings us hope for our world when it often seems that all is lost? When we see so much suffering around us, what keeps us going to work for change?

Today's Bible story is about a tremendous promise of hope in the midst of severe pain and despair. The main character in this story for today from 1 Samuel is Hannah. To many of us, Hannah is not a well-known Bible figure. Yet, her role in the history of the people of God was very significant. Hannah was one of two wives of a man named Elkanah. She went to the temple every year with her husband and his other family to worship. But the problem with Hannah was that she was supposedly barren. She could not have any children. This was a major ordeal in those days and in that culture. A woman's main role was to be a wife and a mother. Hannah had to carry that burden of being barren and the taunts of her husband's other wife who had children. This was also a very difficult time for the whole nation of Israel. There was a great deal of abuse of power on the part of those who kept the spiritual center of Israel – the tabernacle. The only center of Israel's life was its religious sanctuary – the tabernacle to which the people came both to worship God and to order their life together as a nation. It was at the tabernacle that law suits were settled and the law adjudicated. The nation was given direction and focus at its primary religious sanctuary. But the problem was that those leading the sanctuary and, consequently, the nation, the sons of Eli, were abusing their position and building power for themselves in the face of the growing erosion of power and of the wealth of the people.

Against this backdrop of Hannah's personal despair because of her barrenness and the political corruption of the spiritual leadership of Israel, we find Hannah praying at the Shiloh Sanctuary and making a vow that if she had a son that she would dedicate him to the service of God. And indeed Hannah gets pregnant later on and has a son she dedicates to the service of God. Indeed he becomes one the great leaders of Israel. He becomes a judge and a prophet. Her

son Samuel is the one who helps with the transition of Israel from being ruled by judges to a nation ruled by a king.

The pregnancy of Hannah and her giving birth to Samuel is so significant to the history of Israel. Many great men of biblical tradition –Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Samson, and Samuel -were born of women who were supposedly barren. These men were very important in the life and history of Israel. They were instruments of God's work in restoring justice to the earth just at the time when things seemed to be completely hopeless. What is amazing is that Hannah's experience and later on her song give hope and inspiration also to many generations later, one of which is that of Mary, the mother of Jesus. In fact, Mary's famous song, the Magnificat is so similar to that of Hannah's song. Mary was much influenced by Hannah's prayer 1100 years later. In order to see these similarities, I invite you to look at the insert in your bulletin which has these two songs side by side. First, you can see that both songs begin with praising God. Second, both women do not focus on themselves. They only focus on the miracle of God's work. The third and most important similarity is that both Hannah and Mary talk about what God will do to restore justice to the earth. This is indeed the miracle in both stories. God brings justice to the earth through both Samuel and Jesus: The first one as a judge and a prophet, the second one as the Christ, the promised Messiah.

The real miracle presented in the story of Hannah is the reversal of the power structures of the world: Hannah who was barren and without hope is brought back to life through the birth of a son; the nation of Israel who was in disarray under the abusive power of its new priest, the sons of Eli, was brought back to order and life through the leadership of Samuel. In fact, Samuel was instrumental in helping transition Israel to a new model of leadership, the leadership of a king. The son of a supposedly barren woman, has two books in the Bible named after him. God brings up the lowly to a higher place. This is the miracle of faith. This is what gives us hope. This is what gave Hannah hope. This is what kept the people of Israel going. This is the hope we are invited to believe in. When we feel discouraged in life and ready to give up, we need to remember this promise of hope that comes from God's being on the side of the weak, oppressed and suffering.

When you feel discouraged about the suffering and injustice in the world, remember the story of Hannah, of how God can bring such great changes into our history out of the faithfulness of one person, even a person who might be considered worthless by society. If it were not for Samuel, Israel would have possibly never had a king or a kingdom, or would have not continued to follow God's voice and maybe their whole faith would have been lost. Out of the barrenness of Hannah's womb came great light to the world. But the key is that Hannah knew that her source of hope was God's love and her relationship with God. She did not focus her energy on retaliating against the other wife, Peninnah. She did not give up on life and her faith. What she did is found strength in her prayer. In fact, her prayer was so passionate that the priest who heard her pray believed that she was drunk. She even vowed to God to give her son up to be a priest. What an amazing example of faith and commitment!

What situations are you passionate about in the world or in our community? What are some things in our world that are in need of a Samuel? The reversal of social corruption that Hannah was thanking God for is needed in our world today, where often the rich and powerful are the ones who get to rule the world. I personally struggle when I see how many people are left without jobs or benefits while we are spending a great deal of our money as a country on two wars on the other side of the world. I know some of you are passionate about God's creation and taking care of the earth. I know that some of you are great advocates for justice and help for

those with disabilities or mental illness. I know that some of you are concerned about the people who go hungry or homeless. And the list goes on. But in the midst of all of this, we can't give up when we see or experience these injustices because through the eyes of faith, we see that God's presence is with us, especially in those hard times. In her book, *Operating Instructions*, Anne Lamott tells about an experience that she had with her son when he was about 2 years old. One day, he accidentally locked himself in the bathroom. She tried to explain to him how to unlock and open the door but he couldn't do it. She called for help, but while they were waiting for help to come, she said that all she could do was to get down on the floor and slide her hand under the door. Only two fingers would fit, but somehow that was enough for him to hang onto. Imagine if we kept that vision alive, two fingers under the door. Maybe your letter of comfort for someone is those two fingers under the door. Maybe your work of education about a certain issue is the two fingers under the door.

Here is a great story from the Jerusalem Post about a small group of people who are keeping faith and hope alive in the midst of a very dim and difficult reality. The community is called: Oasis of Hope or Neve Shalom/Wahat al Salam. It is a place that offers both Israelis and Palestinians a ray of hope; a glimpse into what is possible and achievable between two people who have been involved in a brutal conflict since 1948. At a time when rockets explode in Israel and Palestinian homes are reduced to rubble, thoughts of coexistence between Jews and Palestinians seem irrelevant and detached from reality. One terrorist attack is followed by a retaliatory response, followed close at heel by yet another murderous response. Calamity is heaped upon calamity, while each side is keeping score and counting its dead. And yet, in the sea of hopelessness, there exist a small island of sanity; a tiny glimmer of hope. Perched on a hill, midway between Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, Neve Shalom - Wahat al Salam, is a communal village where Jewish and Palestinian Israelis live together. It is a small community of people who have chosen to build a bridge; a collective committed to coexistence. Democratically governed and owned by its members, the community is not affiliated to any political party or movement. Founded in the early 1970s by Father Bruno Hussar, an Egyptian Jew who converted to Christianity, Neve Shalom offers both Israelis and Palestinians and even the whole world a ray of hope and a glimpse into what is possible.

Our hope does not come from a naïve outlook on life. Our hope is grounded in the amazing and hard work of the Spirit of God in the world through those who respond to the call of peace, love and justice. Amen.

Psalm of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10)

Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. ²"There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. ³Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. ⁴The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. ⁵Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. ⁶The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. ⁷The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. ⁸He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world. ⁹"He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. ¹⁰The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed."

The Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55)

And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."