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Hannah did not take little baby Samuel to the annual sacrifice the first time around. She waited until he was weaned – perhaps age 3. And then she took him, “*young as he was*” (vs. 24), and she gave him to the Lord ... for his whole life. And there Samuel became the most important prophet/judge/priest of the Hebrew people, the one who would anoint both Saul and David, the great kings of Israel.

Now I don't suppose, Kate and Dan, that when you brought Cara for dedication this morning you had any thoughts about leaving her here. You came to dedicate her and yourselves to make a godly home in your own house, where she may grow up to fully know and serve the Lord. And we have prayed God's blessings upon you and upon her, that little Cara will discover God's presence in your home and fulfill God's purposes for her life, in the course of time.

For Samuel, it was different. He would not be raised along with the additional three sons and two daughters that 1 Samuel 2:21 tells us grew up in Hannah's home. He was raised in a household of arrogant and wicked priests, who forced the people to hand over the best meat at religious festivals – see 1 Samuel 2:16, where it is recorded that the servant of Eli's sons Hophni and Phinhas would say, “*Hand it over now; if you don't, I'll take it by force.*” It was in the house of those wicked priests that the Lord first spoke to Samuel, giving him a dreadful message to speak to Eli – that Eli's family would be judged forever because of the sins by which his sons made themselves contemptible, sins from which Eli had failed to restrain his sons (1 Samuel 3:13). It was a message that Samuel was afraid to deliver to Eli, until Eli forced him to tell it.

Sometimes we think it an odd but wonderful thing that Samuel should grow up in the temple of the Lord. Actually, it was a tumultuous start into a life of standing against the enemies of the Lord and seeking to guide God's people. We, like Samuel, are shaped by the things that happen to us ... in the course of time.

Hannah was as well. The momentous decision to offer her firstborn son to the Lord came as a result of her prayers to overcome the taunts and jeers she suffered from her husband's second wife. It may come as a shock to some of you to realize that men in Old Testament times often had more than one wife. Or maybe you knew that. Maybe you knew (something I had not quite thought through until I did the study for this sermon) that women could not easily provide for or protect themselves in that patriarchal society, so it was important to have a husband. But because warfare had decimated the number of men available, the women often had to settle for sharing a husband. Maybe you remember from the scriptures that having more than one wife caused a lot of problems, a lot of jealousy, a lot of heartache. So it was for Hannah. She was the first wife – at least she is the first-named of Elkanah's wives in verse 2. But she had no children. And (1 Samuel 1:6-7) “*her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. This went*

on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the Lord, her rival provoked her until she wept and would not eat."

Elkanah somehow thought it would help to have her think of how important *he* was to her – “*Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?*” The unspoken answer was: No! Hannah wanted to give birth to a son. So she “*wept much and prayed to the Lord*” (vs. 10). And we understand the extremity of her emotions as she prays – “*Lord of Hosts [i.e., stronger than any of the forces lined up against me], if you will just give me a son, I will give him to you, to serve you all of his life and to never cut his hair.*”

[Sidenote – I am still pondering what I learned when Carolyn and I went with a group from NOAC to visit Cherokee, NC. The Cherokee people have seven clans to do various tasks – to make medicine, hunt game, gather potatoes, etc. And one of those clans has the task of growing long hair. “A-ni-gi-lo-hi” – the “long hairs” – who usually brought forth the peace chiefs for the tribe. What amazed me was how the ancient people of this continent and the ancient people of the Middle East could have the same symbol ... that long, long hair should represent spiritual leadership. Maybe the Hippies were onto something after all? End of sidenote.]

In the extremity of her emotions, Hannah promises that if the Lord grants her a son, his hair will never get cut. And when the high priest Eli finally grants her a blessing – after first accusing her of being drunk (this story is full of tribulations for Hannah!) ... when the high priest finally hears that she is full of anguish and grief and gives her a blessing of peace, saying, “*may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him,*” Hannah “*was no longer downcast.*” She begins to believe that life will change.

Do you know what that is like? Have you experienced the resurgence of hope – to begin to believe that things might get better, just knowing someone is praying with you, praying for you. Powerful! It is so very important to pray for others and to let them know you are praying that God will be at work to strengthen and to help them.

I was part of a group that prayed with and gave courage to Christians in the former Communist East Germany in 1978. At the time I had no idea that our visit would be part of the chain of events which would eventually lead to the tearing down of the Berlin Wall and the overcoming of the fears and political oppression that caused so many to wonder if things would ever get better. It took a whole lot of efforts, many persevering prayers over the course of decades, but God was at work as faithful people continued to hope. Prayer is powerful, especially praying for each other.

Hannah's life changed as Eli prayed for her. She began to believe.

Then comes the key verse – at least it is the verse that struck me most as I read the passage this year – verse 20: “*So in the course of time Hannah conceived and gave birth to a son. She*

named him Samuel [and the text footnote says, “Samuel” sounds like the Hebrew for “heard of God”], *saying, ‘because I asked the Lord for him.’”*

“In the course of time.” As usual, it took nine months for the pregnancy. The Lord knows that we need time to get ready for such major changes in our lives. And perhaps we need to remind ourselves that it takes time for prayers to get answered, it takes time for us to make lemonade out of the lemons that life hands us, it takes time to vindicate ourselves when the world around us beats down on us.

This is a sermon for all of us who have felt hemmed in on every side, who wonder how much longer we can handle the stress and strain of life’s turmoils and troubles. *“In the course of time,”* God provides.

Notice that it doesn’t happen all by itself. Hannah has to cry out. She has to let the Lord know what she’s feeling and thinking. Then she has to re-interpret the high priest’s misinterpretation of what her emotions are all about. People in distress are easily misunderstood. And then, of course, she has to help carry out her prayer, and her husband has to be a part of that – enacting her prayer – the mysterious intertwining of human action and divine blessing, as we read in vs. 19: *“Elkanah lay with Hannah his wife, and the Lord remembered her.”* Only so can the prayer be fulfilled. Sometimes we need to remember that praying requires follow through on our part as well as blessing from God. We are a part of the answer to our prayers.

And Hannah’s prayer was answered! Hannah rejoiced! 1 Samuel chapter 2 is a celebration in song, very similar to the Magnificat of Mary upon learning that she will give birth to the Savior of the world (Luke chapter 1). The whole world turns inside out – for Hannah and for Mary. There is a reversal of fortune: the oppressed now rejoice in the salvation of the Lord. Holy and awesome joy! A holy joy that is awesome because it arises out of the context of suffering and struggle. It is precisely because things have been so bad that now things are so fully wonderful. It is a “kairos” moment.

“Kairos” is the Greek word for a special moment in time – the opportune moment when things are able to happen. It is what Jesus proclaimed in Mark 1:15, “The time has come.” The “kairos” has arrived – the opportune moment. The time when, as we sing at Christmas, *“the hopes and fears of all the years”* will be met and life will be made right. The Kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Our culture likes having such moments take place Right Now! Without delay! Hannah’s story reminds us that they come only *“in the course of time.”*

Waiting expectantly creates its own dynamic in shaping our spirits. My friends in Germany would say that about mealtimes when it took longer to cook than we had expected – when you have to wait, it tastes better, they would say. Do you know that added dimension of enjoying

something when you have had to wait for it? That's part of what we want to teach children and youth. They get spoiled if they always get everything they want when they want it. Especially the gift of sex can be spoiled if we don't wait for it – until the right time, with the right person. And even after we're paired up with the right person, we seem to keep on having to learn to wait until the time is right. A lot of life is like that – learning to wait for God's blessings to come *"in the course of time,"* when the time is right.

As Ecclesiastes 3 muses, *"There is a time for everything, and a season for every purpose under heaven: a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot ..."* and the list goes until, until the preacher of Ecclesiastes concludes (3:10-11), *"I have seen the burden God has laid on men. He has made everything beautiful in its time."*

Oh, to finally come into our time! Our kairos moment! Our time of blessing and joy! How miserable to wade on through the muck and mess of all of life's distresses, wondering how and when the blessings will ever come to pass! How long, O Lord?!

That's good theology, you know. It's call a "Lament." Anxiously yearning for things to get turned around – for the kairos moment to finally come. *"How long, O Lord, must I wrestle with my thoughts and every day have sorrow in my heart? How long will my enemy triumph over me?"* (Psalm 13:2) *"How long will the wicked be jubilant?"* (Psalm 94:3) *"How long, O Lord, must I call for help, but you do not listen? Or cry out to you, 'Violence!' but you do not save?"* (Habakkuk 1:2).

In the fullness of time, the Scriptures say. *"In the course of time."* When the time is right. Until then, we wait, and we pray, and we make ready to do our part.

Some of us have been waiting a long time. We have heard the promise of Romans 8 that God has allowed this Creation to be *"subjected to frustration ... in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God."* But we wonder how ... when ... by what help from us things might get worked out better in our children's lives, in our marriages, in our workplaces, in our relationships with neighbors, in the places of conflict and battle around the world.

The story of Hannah, along with many other passages of scripture, reminds us that the blessings we yearn for are still possible. God is not finished with us, especially if we keep on praying with other believers and do our part to make God's purposes possible. *"In the course of time,"* shaped and molded by the struggles and the trials, God will yet be at work.

That's why I had us sing one of my favorite hymns a bit ago. It was the first solo I ever sang. I searched and searched for a meaningful text, and found these words, written by Gerog Neumark in 1657:

*If you but trust in God to guide you and place your confidence in him,
you'll find him always there beside you, to give you hope and strength within.
For those who trust God's changeless love, build on the rock that will not move.*

*What gain is there in futile weeping, in helpless anger and distress?
If you are in his care and keeping, in sorrow will he love you less?
For he who took for you a cross will bring you safe through every loss.*

*In patient trust await his leisure, in cheerful hope, with heart content,
to take whate'er your Father's pleasure and all-discerning love have sent.
Doubt not your inmost wants are known to him who chose you for his own.*

*Sing, pray, and keep his ways unswerving. Offer your service faithfully,
and trust his word. Though undeserving, you'll find his promise true to be.
God never will forsake in need the soul that trusts in him indeed.*

What do you need from the Lord today? Ask him. Ask him now.

As Eli said to Hannah, so I say to you: "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked" ... in the course of time, when the time is *kairos*, according to God's good will. Amen.

Hymn *Take My Hand and Lead Me, Father* 601