



SERMONS THAT WORK

**Pentecost 26 – Proper 28
Year B**

Journey Through Grief

[RCL]: 1 Samuel 1:4-20; 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25; Mark 13:1-8

In a church much like this one, a woman stays behind in the pews after the service. She is sitting at the back, off to the side, so no one notices her as they are tidying things up. Eventually, the priest comes back into the sanctuary to retrieve something and hears her crying. When the priest asks what's wrong, the woman tells her story: she and her husband have been trying to have a child for over a decade. They have been through every fertility treatment, including intrauterine insemination and in vitro fertilization, as well as complementary alternative therapies like acupuncture and yoga for fertility. Nothing has worked. This week, the woman's specialist told her that she is entering perimenopause. The couple also had to take out loans from family to pay for the treatments and she is utterly depleted—financially, emotionally, and physically.

Quietly, her husband joins them and puts his arm around his wife. He says to the priest that they have prayed faithfully to God for the blessing of a child. They have attended church, have tithed, have volunteered in their community, and have even bargained with God that they would dedicate their child to a rigorous Christian upbringing, sending him or her to an expensive, private Christian school, no matter what the cost. In essence, they felt like they had done everything in their power as faithful people and they felt as if in some way, God was punishing them. Their desire to become parents had ended up causing them more pain and isolation than they ever could imagine.

The priest listening to this couple's story felt deep compassion for them. Immediately, the priest thought of the parallels they had to Hannah's story, except for this couple there has been no happy ending, so how would sharing that be comforting? The priest's mind then turned to some continuing education they received regarding perinatal grief and loss, remembering the statistics from the U.S. Center for Disease Control's Reproductive Health report that 12% of women aged 15-44 had impaired fertility; 7.3 million women have used infertility services; in 35% of couples with infertility, a male factor is identified along with a female factor; and about 30% of the cause of infertility cannot be explained. How could the priest or anyone else bring comfort to this type of suffering?

For people struggling with fertility to hear the story of Hannah, on the surface, it sounds like a story about them: a person desperate for a child feels shamed by others and looks to God for succor and hopefully a

miracle. They often conclude that if they would just pray hard enough, suffer long enough, and do the right things (whatever those are), God will perform a miracle and give them their longed-for child. The same goes for anyone who is challenged with chronic illness, pain, unemployment, abuse, and really any situation in which a person is not in control and wishes God, looking like Dumbledore from the Harry Potter books and movies, will wave a magic wand and give us our heart's desire. But God doesn't work in such a transactional or magical way, so we must look more deeply into what this story is about.

This story is about Hannah, but it is also about Israel and its monarchy. Hannah and her plight root us in what it meant to be a woman in a society that valued fecundity and male offspring. A society that itself was in barrenness, despairing of a leader, and in need of hope. Hannah represents a faithful servant who believes she means something to God in the midst of a social construct that tells her she is only worth the children she bears. If God cares about a marginalized woman, how could God not also care for the plight of Israel—an entire people?

Hannah's journey through grief is emotional and spiritual, in which her connection and trust in pouring her heart out to God assist her in moving forward. And it is from this marginalized woman that Samuel, who will become a great prophet and anointer of kings, a new hope for the people called Israel, is born.

In response to God's faithfulness, Hannah prays what is called "Hannah's Song" in I Samuel, chapter 2, adding her voice to that of Miriam—Moses' sister, and Mary of Nazareth—mother of Jesus. These women praise God who has created extraordinary circumstances so that the people of Israel may be delivered from distress in ways they could not imagine. The same goes for us as well. God cares about you and me in the midst of joy and pain. When we bring our whole selves to God in prayer and with faithfulness of life, we can become transformed. God is no longer seen as a shopkeeper who should hand over the goods when we believe we've paid our price. Nor is God a magical being who grants wishes based on whimsy if we're on God's good side that day. Instead, God becomes a constant and faithful companion on the journey, and this relationship bears witness to both who we are in each moment and who we are becoming.

This relationship was vital in the time when Mark's Gospel was written. There are other prophetic figures going around predicting a variety of apocalyptic events that must happen in order for God to create a clean slate and establish a new creation. Jesus' concept of prophecy is different. It is not something that predicts the future but instead is used to hasten repentance and reform. Therefore, the relationship that the disciples have with Jesus helps them discern what is true and what is false. When one does not heed a prophet, only then does destruction occur.

In the midst of chaos and swirling rumors of destruction, Jesus tells the disciples not to engage in the apocalyptic zeal going on around them. This speaks to us as followers of Jesus even now. As Christians, we have one charge, and that is to share the Gospel with others – especially in the midst of life and world events. Like Jesus, we have both opportunity and a mission to be with others. Instead of getting drawn into a mob mentality—blindly following others and being affected by their hysteria—we can focus on what is

right in front of us and show others how our transformational relationship with God gives us strength and hope in uncertain times.

Jesus has reminded us about what God taught Hannah: that each of us matters, no matter how insignificant we may be in our society and in the world. Like the couple struggling with fertility, we do not know what the ultimate outcome will be. However, the priest at that moment had the opportunity to be the hands, feet, and listening ear of Jesus, as do each of us when in the midst of another's turmoil. Our faith in God and faithfulness to each other saves us from destruction. This is the Good News, indeed! Amen.

The Rev. Danae M. Ashley, M.Div., MA, LMFTA is an Episcopal priest and Marriage and Family Therapist who has ministered with parishes in North Carolina, New York, and Minnesota, and is now serving part-time as the Associate Rector at St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Seattle. She is also a therapist at Soul Spa Seattle, LLC. An advocate for spirituality and fertility issues, Danae has written articles and a chapter in the book Still a Mother: Journeys through Perinatal Bereavement, been a guest on podcasts, and collaborated on and produced Amanda Aikman's verbatim play Naming the Un-Named: Stories of Fertility Struggle. She was recently featured in the documentary Don't Talk About the Baby, which can be found on Vimeo.