The stories of nobodies who changed the world

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Pentecost + 25 B – 1 Sam 1 4-20, Song of Hannah, Heb 10 11-14, 19-25, Mk 13 1-11

Children: Introduction to the story of Samuel using the first three verses of 1 Sam: make connections between Hannah's, Ruth's and Mary's stories and highlight God's call to powerless people to change things for the better.

1 Sam 1.[1]*There was a certain man of Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah (God creates) son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephraimite.* [2] *He had two wives; the name of one was Hannah (grace), and the name of the other Peninnah (jewel). Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.* [3] *Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the Lord*.

Sermon

Before there were Kings in Israel, God appointed men and women to govern the nation. We know them as Israel's Judges. Some of the great names of Hebrew Scripture come from this period; like Deborah, Gideon and Samson. But things were going badly towards the end of the time of the judges. In fact, the last verse of the Book of Judges says something quite worrying. *In those days, there was no King in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.* Jud 21.25 It's a picture of growing anarchy – a bit like now in some parts of the world.

But we heard last week in Ruth's story that God was doing something about it. We saw God actively at work in the life of a very vulnerable, foreign widow named Ruth. God was preparing to give kings to the Hebrew people. And Ruth, a foreign nobody of a woman would be the ancestor of their most famous kings, including David and Solomon – and ultimately of Jesus as well.

As our gaze begins to turn towards Christmas and Mary's story, we are reminded by the story of Ruth and now this week with Hannah's story, that God's call to Mary wasn't just a one-off. God seems to make a habit of commissioning a completely unknown woman or girl for a pivotal role in salvation history. These women are role models to us of courage, faith and patience; women who know what it is to wait in hopeless misery, and yet still find room in their hearts to hope again; women who have the amazing trust in God to do that.

And with their courage and faith and trust and patience, God chooses these women and works together with each of them to take the history of salvation a giant step forward. We meet another such woman today in Hannah. We just heard the birth story of her son, Israel's last judge, the prophet Samuel; God's answer to his mother's desperate prayer. Anyway, let's look at what we've heard today about Hannah's story and see what it might call from us.

As with Ruth and Mary's stories, before we meet the children, we meet the families they'll be born into. Like all families, Hannah's has its share of troubles. In her family, there's Hannah, who can't have children. Her name in English means Grace. It's a bitter irony; she's a woman caught up in a patriarchal society that only values women if they have male children. Hannah can't have any children; but her husband's other wife, Peninnah is blessed with child after child.

Hannah's misery is bad enough in itself, but on top of her own sense of hopelessness, Hannah suffers the vindictive taunting of her husband's other wife, Peninnah. And she endures an

annual religious ceremony that rubs her nose in the bitter shame of her situation. She's not helped by the awkward way her husband handles things.

This particular year, she couldn't stand it any more. Refusing to eat, and leaving straight after she'd served the meal, she fled to the sanctuary and poured out her grief to God. She bargained with God for release from her prison of shame. [10]*Her life was bitter, so she prayed … with deep sobs*. *"O Lord of hosts … give to your servant a male child, I will present him to the Lord a consecrated one all the days of his life*…" Her prayer was a vow, a sacred oath.

While Hannah prayed, the old priest Eli watched her and shockingly, he accused her of being a public drunk! Hannah corrected him*. No, my lord. I am a woman troubled in spirit; I have drunk no wine. I have been pouring out my life before the Lord. She'd* been pleading with God for release from her life-sentence of shame in this traditional society, and *Eli* got it wrong. A priest disapproves of someone for praying! You can't win sometimes. *Don't think that your servant is a worthless woman; I have been speaking out of my great distress and misery all this time!*

Eventually, Eli sends Hannah off with a blessing. She's recovered remarkably from the bad start to their encounter – but then, we know she's accustomed to being abused. You can tell that when Hannah responds to Eli's blessing by punning on her own name. She asks that she might find favour ['grace'] in his eyes. We know Eli *has* seen "grace – Hannah" *right before his eyes*, and he doesn't yet know it. But he will.

Grace is astounding: it's a treasure we most often discover at the lowest of low times. We watched Hannah reach that point today. She hit rock bottom, and Eli the priest failed her. But as her song showed us, we saw the Lord *raise her up from the dust; he lifted the needy from the ash heap, to make her sit*

with princes and inherit a seat of honour. [1 Sam 2.8] That's in the song that she'd sing years later when she presented her miracle son to Eli, back at the sanctuary – the longed-for child, Samuel, whom she returned to God as promised. She had truly experienced Grace; she would sing her heart out!

For us, the message is clear – adult or child, we might be nobody; an outsider; bullied *(yes adults get bullied too)*; misunderstood; sad. But take our tears to God: take God our heart with the gaping hole in it, and God will receive our trust, gently collect our tears (Ps 56.8) and heal our hearts. Then together with us, US! God will set about healing a whole world!

Ruth, Hannah, Mary – God seems to make a practice of calling 'outsider' women to move salvation history onto the next plane. I wonder if you can think of such a young woman today who may be just such a partner of God's in the world's hour of need?

There are plenty of reasons for feeling powerless and trapped today. These stories of nobodies who changed the world have been preserved to tell us that a different story is possible, and that for us too, the different story is the real one. Amen