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In celebration of Mother's Day, I thought we would reflect on the story of Hannah – a truly remarkable person and mother. I chose Hannah not because she is such a great mother - actually we really don't read much about her parenting skills. I chose Hannah because she is a person who knows that ultimately her salvation comes from God. In her second recorded prayer, which we will not be reading this morning, Hannah acknowledges that it is God, not her children or her possessions, rather it is God who is her rock, and her deliverer. She knows that in the end, it is God who will satisfy her emptiness, who gives meaning to her life. God is the creator of the universe, and who controls all things including her life.

Please turn with me to the first book of Samuel, chapter one.

In celebration of Mother's Day, Stacey tells the story of her mother. I am my mother's third child, born when she was twenty. When I was delivered, nurses took me from the room before she could see me. Her doctor gently explained that my left arm was missing, below the elbow. Then he gave her some advice: "Don't treat her any differently than the other girls. Demand more." And she did!

Even before my father left us, my mother had to go back to work to support our family. There were the five of us girls and we all had to help out. Once when I was about seven, I came out of the kitchen, whining, "Mom, I can't peel potatoes. I only have one hand."

Mom never looked up from sewing. "You get yourself into that kitchen and peel those potatoes," she told me. "And don't ever use that as an excuse for anything again!"

Of course I could peel potatoes – with my good hand, while holding them down with my other arm. There was always a way, and Mom knew it. "If you try hard enough," she'd say, "you can do anything."

In second grade, our teacher lined up my class on the playground and had each of us race across the monkey bars, swinging from one high steel rod to the next. When it was my turn, I shook my head. Some kids behind me laughed. I went home crying.

That night I told Mom about it. She hugged me, and I saw her "we'll see about that" look. When she got off work the next afternoon, she took me back to school. At the deserted playground, Mom looked carefully at the bars.

"Now, pull up with your right arm," she advised. She stood by as I struggled to lift myself with my right hand until I could hook the bar with my other elbow. Day after day we practiced, and she praised me for every rung I reached.

I'll never forget the next time my class lined up at the monkey bars. Crossing the rungs, I looked down at the kids who'd made fun of me. Now they were standing with their mouths open.

It was that way with everything: instead of doing things for me, or excusing me, my mother insisted I find a way to do them myself. At times I resented her. She doesn't know that it's like, I thought. She doesn't care how hard it is.

But one night, after a dance at my new junior high, I lay in bed sobbing. I could hear Mom come into my room.

"What's the matter?" she asked gently.

“Mom,” I answered, weeping, “none of the boys would dance with me because of my arm.”

For a long time I didn't hear anything. Then she said, “Oh, honey, someday you'll be beating those boys off with a bat. You'll see.” Her voice was faint and cracking. I peeked out from my covers to see tears running down her face. Then I knew how much she suffered on my behalf. She had never let me see her tears, though, because she didn't want me to feel sorry for myself.

Stacey concludes her story by saying that as a child, she wondered why she had to struggle so. But as she grew up, she knew – she realized that it is hardship that refines a person – makes them grow as people.

Hannah is married to Elkanah. Elkanah loves Hannah – he tries to treat her with loving care. But there is a problem. Hannah does not have any children. And in those days, not having children was a serious problem. A woman's value was measured by her ability to bear children. Without a child, there would be no heir, no future. And because Hannah was not able to have children, Elkanah takes a second wife – Peninnah. Peninnah is able to have children. And instead of feeling badly for Hannah, Peninnah ridicules her.

This story sounds familiar, doesn't it? In Genesis we read of a similar situation. Sarah is Abraham's wife. When she realizes that she cannot have children, she tells Abraham to take her slave girl, Hagar as wife. When Hagar becomes pregnant, she ridicules Sarah to the point where Sarah ends up beating her, and forces Hagar to run away. To not have a child, was a painful thing. A woman's well-being, her worth, her dignity, her rightful place with her husband was all wrapped up in her ability to give birth.

And what I find equally hard, is that twice we read that Hannah's inability to have children, is because the Lord had closed her womb. God planned for Hannah not to have any children. I find this hard to understand. God must know that Hannah wants a child. Doesn't God want for Hannah to be happy? To find fulfillment in life? Is this some cruel trick?

Rick Warren in his Purpose Drive Life book addresses this problem. He explains that to help us make sense of our life's situation – whatever that may be – we need to see life from God's perspective. Warren tells us that in God's perspective our lives here on earth - are filled with tests. God tests us. God tests our faith, obedience, love, integrity and loyalty. And this has been happening since the beginning of time. Words like trials, temptations, refining, and testing occur more than two hundred times in the Bible. We know that God tested Abraham by asking him to offer his son, Isaac. God tested Job by taking away all of his possessions, even his children, and his health. We know that Adam and Eve failed their test in the Garden of Eden. So did David – the man after God's own heart – David failed his tests from God on several occasions. And the Bible gives us many examples of people who passed their testing – Joseph trusted God even in jail, Ruth when her husband died, leaves her home so that she could be with her mother-in-law. Esther, when her uncle Mordecai tells her about the Jews' death sentence, risks her life in seeing the king.

God constantly watches our response to our problems, conflict, illness and even disappointments. Our lives are tested by major changes, or by impossible problems; or

unanswered prayers, or even senseless tragedies. For God, what is important is how we react to the problems we face. And the good news is that God wants us to pass the tests of life. In 1 Corinthians 10:13 Paul writes: God is faithful; He will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out, so that you can stand up under it.”

And how does Hannah respond to her testing? How does Hannah react to the fact that she can't seem to get pregnant? That God has closed her womb? I suspect that over the years, Hannah has felt anger, frustration, and helplessness. She probably felt as if God had abandoned her. Yet in her desperation, Hannah does not do what Sarah did. Hannah does not take matters into her own hands. Instead Hannah continues to pray to God. Hannah doesn't give up on God.

In verse ten we read that in bitterness of soul, crying her heart out, Hannah prays to God. Even in her depressed state, when she could no longer eat, when it seemed that her life had lost all of its meaning, Hannah turns to God. And she tells God that should he answer her prayer - should he give her a son, then she will give him back to God. Hannah promises God that she will do everything in her power to make sure that this child will serve God. Hannah is asking God for a child to fill her own need. Yet at the same time she realizes that life is more than just about her. Hannah is not going to be selfish with her child. This child will not just be for her pleasure. Rather she wants this child to serve God, she wants this child to give God pleasure. And so she promises to dedicate this child to God.

I think that this is the heart of the story – Hannah leaving the meal – she stops the routine of life and presents herself before the Lord. Hannah pours out her soul to God. She pleads for God's mercy; and then she makes a vow. She promises God that if she would receive this gift of a son – then she will give him back. This son would be brought up knowing that he is dedicated to God. Hannah is so intent with her prayer, she is not conscious of what she looks like – or even if someone is watching. She is startled when Eli, the priest speaks to her. And quickly assures him that she is not drunk. She is praying – praying her heart out.

And it is amazing to me, that Eli realizes his mistake. He believes what Hannah is saying. Right away tells her that God will answer her prayer. Eli doesn't even know what it is that Hannah has been praying for – but he blesses her – tells her to go in peace – that God will give her what she has been asking for. And Hannah believes him. She is no longer sad, or worried. She puts her life in God's hand. Hannah becomes a new person. She picks up the pieces of her life, and moves on. When it is time to go home, Hannah goes. And she continues on with her life – including her relationship with her husband. And in God's time, God honors Hannah's request. She becomes pregnant. She has a son. What a joy!

Hannah realizes that God has answered her prayer. Hannah names her son, Samuel, saying: “Because I asked the Lord for him.” And she does not forget her promise. When Samuel is but a little boy, Hannah takes him to the temple. She leaves him with the old priest who had mistaken her to be a drunk. She leaves her precious little son with a virtual stranger. She leaves Samuel with Eli the priest, so that he could serve God. What an amazing story of a woman's faith, and even more, of God's faithfulness.

Earlier, I mentioned that the heart of Hannah's story was the fact that in her most desperate moment, she turned to God. Hannah poured out her heart, she became totally

vulnerable. She admitted her need – she exposed the weakness of her life. And with Hannah, God responded by doing exactly what she wanted. Hannah asked for a son, and God gave her a son.

Yet we know from our own lives' experience that this does not always happen. God does not always answer the prayer the way we want. I personally know a number of women who have asked, who have pleaded with God for a child – and it didn't happen. We have prayed for healing of loved ones, and instead of them getting better, they died. It makes us wonder – did God not hear our prayers? Does our praying even matter to God. Of course it does – God does hear and God does care!

But the truth is – God does not always answer our prayer the way we think he should. In 2 Corinthians 12, Paul writes about a thorn in his flesh – we don't know that this thorn consisted of – but we do know that Paul wanted to be rid of it. Paul tells us that three different times in his life, he pleaded with God to take away his problem, but God didn't. Instead God said: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." In other words, know that I want to use you in what you think is your moment of weakness – your moment of need. God wants to use us in our moments of pain, of weakness. God wants us to bring our need to him – to admit our weakness and then, to trust him, no matter what happens. All we need do is remember that God loves us and that he cares for us. Much like Stacy's mother in the opening story, when she hears her daughter crying, she comes with words of comfort, while tears run down her face. God knows our pain, our weakness, and suffers with us. But there are times when God wants to use our weakness for his glory.

From our human perspective, this is sometimes hard to understand why God doesn't just answer our prayers how and when we want. But as Christians, we know that God views our lives from his perspective. And from Scripture we know that God loves to use weak people – God loves to use each of us, not because we are perfect or strong – but often because we are weak and vulnerable. God loves to use ordinary people like you and me to work out his power in this world. What a faithful, what a powerful God we serve!