



**“Punctuation and Transformation”**

Sermon preached by Anne R. Ledbetter

November 15, 2009

Scripture – I Samuel 1: 1-20

The story of Hannah often sounds like a defense for bargaining with God. Just a few verses into this opening chapter of I Samuel, we discern that the central character of this scene is Hannah. She is identified as the barren wife of Elkanah, while Penninah was the fertile one who sired him child after child – sons and daughters. But Elkanah is smitten with Hannah, and does not hold her barrenness against her – which in that day was the typical reaction – infertility must be the woman’s fault.

At the yearly festival, when the family went up to Shiloh for worship and sacrifice, Elkanah would give double portions of food to Hannah because he loved her. Twice our story indicates that the Lord had closed Hannah’s womb – that is, God had made her barren. But let us pause here, and remember that in ancient times whenever someone was sick, it was understood that the Lord was punishing them for some sin. Thus, in the same way, Hannah’s infertility was viewed as God’s punishment or judgment against her.

While infertility is a grievous condition for many women today, support is available in the form of fertility specialists, medications, surgical procedures, and adoption. Infertility causes major disruption, upheaval and grief in a woman’s life, but it does not make her worthless. Yet in ancient Israel, where procreation was vitally important to expanding tribe, providing labor and extending the family name, barren women were essentially seen as less than human. Elkanah loved Hannah, but her childlessness made her a pariah in society. Moreover, her favored position with Elkanah kindled resentment in his other wife Penninah who had born and bred her husband many children, including sons to continue his name.

Hannah’s barren state sends her into depression so that she cries and does not eat. Elkanah asks, “Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?” She may be more to Elkanah than a baby-maker, but Hannah yearns for redemption, for vindication, for acceptance in the community, and motherhood will restore her position. She pours her heart out to God, imploring God to grant her a son, vowing to God that if her request is granted, she will dedicate her child as a nazirite, or servant in the temple of the Lord. It seems like God hears Hannah’s prayer, and responds favorably. However, the big picture contains not only Hannah and Penninah, but Israel’s moral decay and its need for renewed spiritual leadership. Hannah wanted

a son, and God sought a servant leader. Hannah would not only bear a son, but he would be a servant of the Lord who would succeed Eli as priest and anoint Israel's first king. Her son Samuel would play a pivotal role in the history of Israel, bridging the era of the judges and the beginning of the monarchy. Whereas society condemned Hannah for her barrenness and declared her barren, God waited for the moment to fulfill both Hannah's prayer and the divine plan.

You see, our story today is but one scene in the biblical narrative of salvation. The expansive saga contains recurring themes of the people's faith and subsequent disobedience, of God's righteous anger, divine mercy and creative restoration. But the most astounding aspect of Yahweh, the Holy One, is this: God never gives up, God keeps faith with the people, God lets them make mistakes and choose their own way over God's way, God allows them to experience hurt and alienation and grief. But God always provides for the people – a birth to the aged one or the barren one, a rescue in the form of an exodus, manna in the wilderness, a king to lead the people, a prophet to remind them of covenant fidelity, a victory against a powerful opponent, a savior born to peasant parents. To read the Bible is to meet a God who is mighty and mysterious, wise and wonder-full, sustaining and surprising.

To embrace the story of faith requires us to acknowledge our finite or limited view, and be open to God's limitless horizon. Consider the insight of Gracie Allen, comedienne and wife of George Burns. Years ago as she lay dying from heart failure, George suffered such grief and sorrow that he could barely speak or function. They had been together since their 20s and had spent nearly their entire adult lives together. Burns told her that not only did he not want her to die, but that he also did not want to live without her. It was the end of everything he had loved and trusted in life.

Gracie was a devout Catholic but George was a doubting Jew. He had lost his faith in his teens when his father, who was a cantor at the synagogue, died in the flu epidemic of 1903. But just before she died, after a long illness culminating in a heart attack, Gracie, the believer, wrote a note of comfort to her theologically suspicious husband. In it she said simply, **"George, never put a period where God has put a comma."** He would later share those profound little words with numerous friends throughout the rest of his life. <sup>i</sup>

Amateur theologian Gracie Allen had instinctively put her finger on a recurring theme in scripture. How often does the sentence appear complete, the chapter seem concluded, and God sweeps in, changing the period to a comma, and transforming the entire story. Our God is a wizard with punctuation, whose business is always transformation. If you doubt me, just consider the evidence:

Abraham and Sarah were way past the age for social security when God finally fulfilled the divine promise of a son. It was so preposterous that they named the child Isaac, meaning laughter.

Moses led the Hebrew people out of slavery in Egypt, only to come to the sea with Pharaoh's army breathing down his back. The great escape had gone awry and all looked lost, a tragedy in the making, but God made a way out of no way, and told Moses to stretch his staff over the water. The sea separated, the tide went out, and the people quickly crossed to the other side.

There was the time when the Philistine army was camped across the valley from the Israelites and the Philistine champion Goliath challenged any Israelite soldier to a fight to the finish. The army of the loser would be the servants of the army of the victor. Young David the shepherd boy came visiting his brothers one day, and heard the taunting cries of Goliath, and readily volunteered to fight him. All seemed lost. David appeared as a child sacrifice marching out to the monster covered in mail, armed with a sword, and wearing a bronze helmet, but David slew the giant with a simple sling and a stone.

What about us? Have you or someone else inserted a period in your own life, where God intends a comma? Maybe you have recently been divorced or widowed and do not believe that you will ever have love and companionship again. Maybe you had to drop out of school years ago and declared your education over. Perhaps like Hannah you have been unable to conceive a child, and assume motherhood is a pipedream. Or have you received a cancer diagnosis and now carry it as a death sentence? Perhaps you quarreled years ago with a loved one and voiced 'good riddance,' washing your hands of a broken relationship. Maybe we have placed periods in our lives, where God has left a comma.

Whenever we perceive the door closing, or feel our eyes shutting, or hear the final chords sounding, God may suddenly wrap on the door, appear in our dreams, or conjure up a reprise indicating that nothing is over until it's over. And even then, God may be preparing us for something entirely new. God routinely takes up a red pen and corrects our punctuation, putting a comma where we have placed periods.

Hannah, called barren, was bitter, hopeless and despondent. But God enabled her to conceive, making way for joy, hope, and a son! As the psalmist sings, God can turn our mourning into dancing. God works continually for transformation, seeking to make all things new. What new birth might our God bring about/inject in your life?

As Christians we believe that God's story of salvation culminates in Jesus, whom we call God's Son. In the gospels we encounter a Christ who ministered to those whom society had labeled, those whose lives were shut off from society, and shut down with pronounced periods. Jesus received the deaf and made them hear, he touched the blind so they could see, he healed the lame so they could walk, he preached good news to those imprisoned by poverty. When the authorities arrested Jesus and crucified him, and he was laid in a tomb and all seemed lost, his disciples discovered that death's decisive period could not wipe out God's inscribed comma. For with God, even death does not have the final word, as God proclaims, "Resurrection!" What transformation is God generating in your life?

Former colleague Kit Schooley called me with amazing news on Monday. In the ongoing theological debate over the ordination of gays and lesbians, people often draw lines in the dirt, and put periods at the end of their passionately professed sentences. One such speaker over the years has been Dr. Mark Achtemeier, theology professor at Dubuque Seminary in Iowa. With awe in his voice Kit reported that Achtemeier a self-proclaimed evangelical, announced to the annual Covenant Network of Presbyterians conference a week ago his conversion from opposing the ordination of gays and lesbians to supporting their rights in the church and in society. Essentially Professor Achtemeier acknowledged that the period at the end of his

previous declarations on the ordination issue, proved to be God's comma. Mark Achtemeier shared his prayer for the denomination to make the same change and offered a Scriptural basis for doing so. At the end of this newsy voicemail message, Kit left this question, "Is there nothing in the world that we can count on anymore, Anne?!"

My reply to Kit would be this: Only that our God continues to move in us, among us, and around us in mysterious and surprising ways – always championing the cause of the oppressed and outcast – raising up the poor, blessing the barren one with a child, filling the hungry with good things, and giving strength to the powerless. Thanks be to God, for God's great reversal still at work in our personal lives, in the church, and in the world.

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<sup>i</sup> UCC Pastor and blogger, Dr. Stan G. Duncan, <http://homebynow.blogspot.com/2006/06/never-place-comma.html>