

November 14, 2021
“The Labor of Love”
1 Samuel 1:4-20 / Mark 13:1-8
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

As we prepare for the SEASON of preparation, of expectant waiting, the four weeks of Advent leading to the 12 days of Christmas, it's appropriate that we find in our lectionary readings stories and metaphors involving childbirth.

This morning we find birth as an answer to prayer; birth as the beginning of a new chapter in the Israelite journey of faith; and birth – and more specifically, birth pangs and the labor necessarily involved in giving birth – as a metaphor reminding us that the journey to new life, shifting from old to new ways of living and being, can be painful.

I heard an interview this past Friday on WHYY, with Sinora Allwood and Dr. Jillian Lucas Baker, co-creators and co-hosts of what has in its first season become a popular podcast called *A Tribe Called Fertility*.

Maybe you heard the interview or are otherwise familiar with the podcast? Their focus is on sharing information and honest conversation about maternal health and experiences around fertility, particularly among Black families – mindful that African American women are three times more likely than white women to die of complications from childbirth, and twice as likely as white women to face infertility.

Allwood and Lucas Baker are friends who grew up and met as teenagers in the Bronx, both now medical professionals in this area. They discovered a few years ago that they had both previously dealt with infertility, with the shame and stigma that can come with not being able to get pregnant. In realizing that they could have been each other's support if they had known, they created the podcast to make that support available for others.

At one point, Allwood describes how valuable it would've been for her to have such support: “Even just having someone to talk to, because it was just so alienating and isolating. And when I would gather up the strength to say something to someone, like I often talk about talking to my mom and my aunties, they would often dismiss it, like,

'Girl, ain't nothing wrong with you. Just get on your knees and pray.'

That kind of response IS dismissive and insensitive, and her words speak to the deeply socialized intensity and pressure and stigma that can come with the experience of infertility, when fertility is so intertwined with identity.

That's true now, and it was certainly true in ancient Israel where women's identities were so closely tied to their ability to produce offspring.

Stories and themes of infertility and fertility get a lot of play in the Bible, on multiple levels, as with our reading from the opening chapter of 1 Samuel. New life emerging from barrenness. New life emerging, literally and figuratively, where there had been, or at least seemed to be, NO CHANCE.

Getting on her knees and praying for fertility, praying that she will get pregnant, is EXACTLY what Hannah does; Hannah, along with Penninah, one of Elkanah's two wives. In verse two, just before our reading, the line is clearly drawn and the tension clearly established: "Penninah had children, but Hannah had no children."

Now setting aside any aversion we may have to the notion of multiple wives, we come to find that Penninah, because she had children, is not only dismissive and insensitive toward Hannah, she's straight-up cruel. CRUEL. She's described as Hannah's "rival," intentionally and consistently provoking and irritating Hannah, year after year lording her own fertility over Hannah's infertility.

It is a tragic tendency of human nature that we can be SO cruel to and SO devoid of compassion for each other – operating within oppressive cultural, socio-political and economic worldviews and structures; consciously or not, jockeying for relative status and privilege within those hierarchical and falsely dichotomous structures; and SO, consciously or not, directing our underlying dis-ease with those structures at each other INSTEAD of at the structures themselves. And those whose power and privilege depends on keeping them in tact.

Injustice thrives on this short-sighted tendency. Racism, sexism, homophobia,

xenophobia, depend on this tendency. And those in political, economic and religious power have long exploited this tendency.

Imagine how different this story would be if Penninah stood in solidarity and support, stood in the struggle WITH her sister rather than AGAINST her. Imagine.

But back to the actual story, we are not surprised to learn that Hannah “wept and would not eat.” She’s miserable, her misery only compounded by Penninah.

So she does the only thing she knows to do within her limited power. She prays. As the text puts it, “she presents herself before the LORD,” understanding as she does that the LORD is the one who has closed her womb in the first place, and so is the only one who can open it. That troubling theological assumption, of course, requires some unpacking, but for now we need only understand that this is how Hannah sees it. And for now, it’s important that we get how fervently she prays. She’s desperate and so she makes a vow to God: “O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.” She vows that if God grants her a son, he will belong to God, not to her.

She prays silently, but SO fervently that we’re told her lips were moving. And Eli, the priest, for whatever reason assumes that she must be drunk: “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.”

“No, my lord, I am a woman DEEPLY TROUBLED; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. Do not regard your servant as a WORTHLESS WOMEN, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.” We can hear and feel her fragile sense of self and self-worth. We can hear and feel her distress. And we are also meant to hear and feel her determination, her faithfulness, her steadfastness.

Eli apparently does, and offers her peace and his own prayer that her petition would be granted. We have no idea for how long Hannah had been praying these prayers, but

at that moment, she is a changed woman. She doesn't know if her petition will be granted, but we're told that "her countenance was sad no longer." She seems, at least, to have laid down her burden. To have released what was out of her control.

And, of course, as the story goes, her prayers are answered. This barren woman—like Sarah and Rebekah and Rachel before her, like Elizabeth, the mother of John the Baptist, after her—IS able to conceive, eventually giving birth to Samuel. Samuel who would go on to play such a pivotal role in the Israelite journey of faith, ushering in the beginning of the Hebrew monarchy; Samuel who would become known for his extraordinary wisdom, a prophet eventually venerated by Jews, Christians and Muslims.

Hannah is lifted up as yet another example of dogged determination in the long line of faithful servants within the arc of Israel's narrative. A woman praying through her profound grief and anxiety, and in so doing, enabling new life where new life – by all accounts, after years of hardship and barrenness – did not appear possible.

Hannah's LABOR of love (see what I did there!) includes her faithful labor BEFORE she conceived, believing against belief, hoping against hope. And her LABOR of love continues AFTER she gives birth to Samuel – as she does, in fact, follow through on her word to "give her son to the LORD."

Again, troubling as the thought of turning over a child to the religious or any other establishment may be to our current sensibilities, the point here is that Hannah fulfills her vow. She is faithful to the God who she believes has proved faithful to her. As the translation in verse 28 puts it, she GIVES to God what God has GIVEN her. And in so doing, her personal story finds its place within the larger Hebrew story. Their story continues and new life, once again, finds its way out of wilderness.

This week's gospel reading concludes what has been a yearlong lectionary journey through the gospel of Mark. A year ago, the first week of Advent began in this same chapter of Mark, and so this morning's reading now brings us full circle.

This morning's reading is unmistakably apocalyptic – apocalypse from the Greek, meaning "revealing" or "uncovering." "For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom

against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs."

THIS IS BUT THE BEGINNING OF THE BIRTH PANGS, and here we go again with the birth metaphor! The LABOR of love.

Scholars tell us that Mark was likely written during or perhaps just after the Jewish revolt against Roman occupation of Palestine, roughly 66-70 CE. The Roman armies had squashed the rebellion and destroyed the Jewish temple, so the overall message of Mark's gospel is one of persistent hope in the midst of very real ruin and despair.

As one commentary puts it, to really hear that message "we have to listen from a position of desolation, chaos, and bewilderment; we have to listen alongside the traumatized soldier, the displaced refugee, the pregnant teenager, the addict and his heartbroken family, the activist discouraged by lack of real progress. This is where Mark lives. These are the depths from which Mark proclaims God's good news."

And it's important for us to understand, too, that apocalyptic literature – as with the biblical books of Daniel and Revelation in the Bible – represent a creative and hopeful response to the harsh reality of community pain and suffering; "revealing" and "uncovering" in spectacular, intentionally evocative fashion, an imminent future in which God ushers in a new era, the good news where the world is turned right-side up, where suffering ends and justice prevails, where the last are first and the first last, where new life emerges even out of death and destruction.

The temple in Jerusalem was just being built, or rebuilt, in Jesus' day. The large stones that his disciples are so impressed by at the beginning of chapter 13 are estimated to be 35 feet long by 18 feet wide by 12 feet high. That would be roughly six of me long, three of me wide, and 2 of me high. That's a BIG stone!

Coming out of the temple and responding to his disciples, Jesus is clearly following the prophetic tradition of Jeremiah and Micah in predicting the Temple's destruction, suggesting that not one (of these stones) "will be left here upon another." And in so doing, understand here that Jesus, moving closer to the crucifixion he knows is coming,

is preparing his disciples for the work ahead. Deliberately framing their current and coming struggles as “but the beginning of the birth pangs” – the necessary labor that will inevitably, if painfully, lead to new life and his new way marked by love and liberation.

A revolution of values and priorities described so powerfully in Hannah's song – found in chapter 2 of 1 Samuel, following our reading this morning – and echoed in Mary's so-called “Magnificat,” HER song upon hearing from the angel Gabriel and BELIEVING, again, against all belief, that she will become the mother of Jesus.

Both glorious visions of the mighty brought down and the lowly lifted up. The world turned right-side up.

We, ALL OF US, are called to join in this ongoing LABOR of love, to do what the midwives tell expectant mothers to do, what those of you who are biological mothers and know what it feels like to give birth were reminded to do: breathe and push, breathe and push. And keep breathing and pushing as long as it takes. The long, ongoing labor of love.

On New Years' Eve 2016, with a Trump presidency looming, as part of a Watch Night service hosted by the *Poor People's Campaign, A National Call for Moral Revival*, the Sikh activist and author and mother, Valarie Kaur, delivered an incredibly powerful speech further reframing this work we are all called to as people of faith. Work we are called to as people, God's beloved people, grounded in relentless faith and hope, ever-leaning toward new life and new ways of living and being.

If you haven't seen it before, Google it. In her speech she asks, rhetorically, “What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the darkness of the womb?”

What if the darkness of the TOMB is really the darkness of the WOMB? What difference would it make, does it make, for you to believe, deep down, that the struggles you're facing in your life right now, that the struggles we're facing together as a people and as a planet, are but the beginning of the birth pangs. The necessary labor leading us all to deeper love and abundant life.

Friends, believing against belief and hoping against hope, as Hannah did, and ALWAYS breathing, then pushing, breathing, then pushing, may we continue to labor on our own and with each other, toward life made new for all.

May it be so.