

**Mount Hollywood United Church of Christ – Los Angeles**  
**Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost – November 15, 2015 – Stewardship Sunday**  
**Pilgrimage to the Manger**  
**Rev. Anne G. Cohen, Minister**

**1 Samuel 1:4-20**

**REFLECTION**

**"Sometimes the things we can't change end up changing us."**

- Unknown

**In-Fertility**

When I was ten I imagined that I would marry at 20, have ten children (somewhat simultaneously – some adopted), live on a farm in a big old two-story clapboard house, let the family run wild with dogs and any other creatures that came along. I would make quilts and pies and laugh a lot – and somehow those children would raise themselves and be awesome.

In my late twenties I finally got married and was in the middle of seminary with very little room in my psyche for children. I had revised my number of children down to two. And as my aunt had given birth to her fourth child in her forties, I figured I had all the time in the world to have my family after I finished my studies and found a job that combined a B.A. in English and an M.Div. in G-d Stuff.

Ten years later, divorced and remarried, I was not getting pregnant. My early 40's were spent getting acupuncture, drinking foul herbal teas, carrying African fertility goddesses in my pocket, praying in a variety of modes and traditions - and going through 10 medical fertility treatments (highly experimental at the time) which involved smuggling the drugs over the border from Mexico so I could afford them. I learned how to give myself injections with very long needles. I learned to ride out the artificial hormonal rollercoaster. I went through three tax rebates, two inheritances from grandparents and my savings account. I stopped short of the equity in my home.

The drugs had tampered with my brain chemistry in a way that intensified my anxiety disorder and put me on an SRI for the rest of my life. The SRIs got me through the end of my second marriage, some job changes and the beginning of the second half of my life – should I live to be 101 like my grandmother.

At that point I was a confirmed life-long member of the Infertility Club – the Women-Who-Actually-Want-Children-And-Can't-Have-Them Club. I was as gracious as I could be as my friends raised families and some had late children in their forties. I was angry every time I heard about a child born to a teenager who put the child in a dumpster or under a tree in a park in Altadena. I felt like G-d was punishing me for a variety of imperfections and mistakes – even though my theology didn't fit the emotion. This wasn't G-d. This was a result of choices and biology, a natural outcome of my life trajectory. But I raged at G-d anyway – much like Sarah and Hannah and Elizabeth and a million nameless, infertile women who were judged much more harshly than I was in their time and culture for not producing sons.

Then I met John – who wanted children – whom I encouraged to go and date “breeders” – who persisted in dating peri-menopausal me anyway – and decided to forgo biological children for adoption. Seven-and-a-half months after my 51<sup>st</sup> birthday – I gave up on the adoption, turned our “nursery” back into a guest room and moved on. One week later the social worker called and had me at “hello.” Peter was two weeks old when we brought him home.

The sudden move from the Childless Club to the Motherhood Club nearly snapped my neck with its speed. Within moments I was welcomed and embraced, given advice and encouraged, commiserated with and thrown 6 baby showers – one at each church I had served. It was surreal. And my guilt was palpable. How could I join a club that refused to have me as a member for most of my life? How could I abandon my compatriots in the land of infertility? So I didn't. I allowed myself to be a member of both clubs – half a life in each.

It has been a hell-u-va journey. If I want to philosophize about it, the first half of life was preparation for the second half. But that's kind of true about life as a whole – the way we gain the wisdom for old age that we could have used in our youth. Now that I'm in my post-fertile years, I am mothering a kid who demands the energy of a village to keep up with him. And I am grateful every moment for the Village that has grown over those years when I had the energy and time and motivation to give to the villages of other people's children.

And I am grateful for the other Hannahs who are raising children and grandchildren in our Older Mothers Club. We recognize the damage done by the infertility, the subtle exclusion from conversations and events, the stories we couldn't tell – before now. We recognize the effort it takes to come up with the energy demanded by this 24/7 responsibility – admire fiercely the single parents who are taking one day at a time.

We smile across birthday party tables at the tired gratitude we all feel for the chance to experience something that cannot be imagined – and the scars that still tug at our hearts – wounded by our early emptiness.

Hannah had more reasons than I did to feel the wounds of infertility. Her theology made G-d Responsible for her situation. She was lucky to have a loving husband – but suffered from the fertility of her competition in a polygamous marriage. She lived in a culture that demanded fertility as a value, part of the marriage dowry – and punished infertility with judgment, devaluation, exclusion, rejection. Sons were needed to take care of their parents in their old age and infirmity. And in her religion and culture, sons were the only access to immortality – as they were the ones who recited the Kaddish – the prayer for the dead – and carried the memory, the name and character traits, and inherited the physical property of the father. No sons --- dead dynasty. Not good.

But these values have not vanished entirely with time. My Anglican grandmother, whose first love returned from WWI with PTSD and married someone else, had a late marriage to a Jewish Naval Officer arranged by her father, the Admiral. She was given the mission to give birth to sons and raise Naval Officers – hence my father – given the names of both his father and grandfather. Cadets at the Naval Academy in Annapolis were appointed by state senators. She knew one of the senators in Tennessee – but they lived in Pennsylvania. So when it came time to give birth, my grandmother travelled to Washington D.C. where young men born in our nation's capitol can be appointed by senators from any state in the union. When her sister died and her children came to live with them, she aimed her two nephews in the same direction. Her value was in both her fertility and her support of the family business. And believe me, there was damage done – along with the usual family adventures.

More recently, I have family members of my own generation who have chosen not to have children. And they have been judged and castigated by family and strangers alike – as if there is something wrong with them – as if they were being selfish – as if their unrealized fertility was an act of treason.

I'm sad to say that the suffering of Hannah in many forms is alive and well in 2015. One of the first questions when a couple gets married is, "When will you start having kids?" A chronically single child is made to feel guilty for not providing grandchildren. And those of us who want children and are unable to give birth to them are told to relax, to pray about it, to keep trying, that G-d has a plan – and are pitied, unconsciously (or systematically) ignored, judged. And we wrestle with self-worth, family marginalization, conversations we have no invitation to join, guilt for negative

feelings about other people's joy, and a host of other complex idiosyncracies that might lead any priest to think we were drunk.

The trauma of infertility is not PTSD. But it is a wounding that bears notice. Not everyone who wants children can have them – and not everyone who is infertile chooses to adopt. Those are completely different choices – and the choice to adopt doesn't necessarily resolve the issues of the "failure" – or "condition" – or the "experience" of infertility.

If we are looking for a theological angle on this – yes – it is natural for humans to blame G-d or the gods for our plight. It is natural to feel like we are being punished by the Universe for our conditions and choices. It is interesting to note that Jesus didn't have children – but there are ongoing myths and stories about how he and Mary Magdalene were secretly married and had a son. Our obsession with fertility goes deep.

And my only advice, as a member of both clubs, is to pay attention to the stories of those around us – and to be kind – like Elkanah.  
Resist natural urges to judge or question –  
and affirm anyone in our choices and conditions –  
allowing each of us to be where we are on life's journey –  
welcome as full and valuable members of the Beloved Community.

Thank you for your kindness.

## 1 Samuel 1:4-20

4 On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; 5 but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. 6 Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. 7 So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore, Hannah wept and would not eat. 8 Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

9 After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the LORD. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. 10 She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. 11 She made this vow: "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."

12 As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. 13 Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore, Eli thought she was drunk. 14 So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." 15 But Hannah answered, "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. 16 Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time."

17 Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." 18 And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer. 19 They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her. 20 In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the LORD."