

“When We Bring up a Child in the Faith, a Lot Can Happen”
First Samuel 1: 4-20, 2:1-10 and 18-21

It seems to me that for the past several years, the word “extreme” has gotten very popular. It’s been used for sports, for games, for all sorts of activities, for TV shows, extreme makeovers. “Extreme” may even have become “extremely” overused.

However, I’m going to use it today, also, in the description of the story in the Bible. The story of Hannah and her son Samuel is an example that goes to extremes.

Hannah was the wife, the favorite, beloved wife of Elkanah. Hannah had no children. Elkanah’s other wife (that was allowed back then) Penninah did have children, and she lorded it over Hannah. Because, according to one book, at that time:

“An Israelite woman had to produce a baby. If she could not, she was regarded as less than a woman.” [Michael E. Williams in Volume 3 of The Storyteller’s Companion to the Bible, Judges-Kings]

That was a harsh attitude.

So Hannah prayed hard for a child. She poured out her heart, asking God to give her a baby boy.

The extreme part comes in when she promises God that if she does have a son, she would “give him completely, unreservedly to [God], set apart for a life of holy discipline.” [The Message]

To me that is extreme.

God did grant her prayer, the baby boy Samuel was born. Hannah kept her promise; by the time Samuel was three or four, she took him to the place of worship and he began his training and service to the Lord.

From then on, Hannah saw her son only once a year, taking him a new set of clothes she had made for him.

The whole situation seems, well, extreme to me. Pray for a child, then not really keep him. It sounds very hard, very heart-wrenching. I couldn’t do it.

Still, God used all of this wonderfully well. For one thing, we read the verses from First Samuel. To have two books of the Bible named for you—that’s success, isn’t it?

And Samuel was “the last of the judges and the first of the prophets, Samuel ruled Israel immediately before the beginning of the kingdom.

He was dedicated to God’s service at his birth by his grateful mother, Hannah, and raised in the Shiloh sanctuary by Eli the priest.

He zealously reformed Israel’s idolatrous worship, then rallied the tribes to throw off the Philistines [their enemies]. . . .Samuel was the acknowledged head of the loose confederation of the tribes for years. [When the people demanded to have a king] Samuel reluctantly crowned young Saul, then regretted it when Saul failed to give God absolute obedience. Samuel angrily denounced Saul and secretly anointed David as king. Samuel, the great patriot of Israel and spokesman for God, was the man who made possible the emergence of Israel as a nation. [William P. Barker, Everyone in the Bible]

So, yes, God worked it out beautifully.

Now, I am not saying that this is the example that parents in our day and age should follow to the letter.

What we can do, however, is pray for children. Not just pray for them to be born, but pray for them after they have been born.

In fact, that is what all people are asked to do: pray for children and their well-being, and live accordingly.

That's one of our promises, as a church, for babies and children when they are baptized:

“We will pray for them, that they may be true disciples who walk in the way that leads to life.”

That is in our hymnal. We pray that they'll become Christians.

The other example Hannah set for us was dedicating her child to the Lord. Again, we'll want to do this in a different way, not just drop off a child here to live. In fact, I would appreciate it if you don't drop children off here at the church to live! No, we will want to do this dedication differently, and for all children, not just one.

My understanding of dedication of a child to God is that children are to be raised in the church, brought to church and Sunday School and Bible School, and later on, involved with youth group. Also, they are given a Christian home with prayers before meals and bedtime, and taught good Christian living.

Even children whose homes and families are not Christian ones can be part of the family which is the church. In fact, this particular church is pretty darn good at that! We have so many people who have taught Sunday School. Raise your hand if you have taught children or youth. That's great. Some of you have sponsored youth groups. And probably all have taught by being a good example of a Christian adult.

We've got enough love to go around. It's the love of Jesus, after all. No limits there.

However, a Christian home and family are real and wonderful blessings. They can have life long, even world changing effects. That old saying “The hand that rocks the cradle rules the nation,” is pretty wise. Parents greatly affect the children who grow up to be the adults of the future. One's upbringing can be a strong and wonderful influence on us in our adult lives.

No guarantees, though. It doesn't always “take.” There is that free will thing. And children are not Play-Doh. They are people who make their own choices. Still it's the best thing to do, raising children in a Christian manner.

I wonder if Hannah ever had a notion of what the future would hold for her son. Did she know what a fine man he would become, what a great leader he would be for God's Chosen People?

That is something to think about, the future. We have to do what we can to prepare for the future. And one of the best things we can do is to bring as many people, children and adults, into loving, believing relationships with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

If you don't think so, well, just look at our country and our world right now. For quite a while, there have been an awful lot of neglect and laziness and even disdain about the religious education of children and youth. We're seeing the results of that now.

Quite often, these are the children and youth who are in trouble, or causing trouble, or even growing up to be adults whose behavior is absolutely unacceptable—violent, dangerous, dishonest.

I shouldn't even get started on the lame excuses people have for not bringing their children to church.

“I just wanted to be my kid’s buddy, so we went to the park instead of church on Sunday.”

“I didn’t want to force him into my beliefs. He can choose when he’s an adult.”

Right, did these kids get the “choice” about going to school, or washing their hands, or eating enough to stay alive?

Parenting is too important for such wrong-headed thinking. Also, we need to consider the needs of the children, the true deep needs.

God created us, all of us, to need God. To want someone to love and believe in and respect and obey. Someone higher than ourselves or our families or anything else. We need God.

And while I’ve talked a lot about children, please remember, we are all God’s children. We are all under God’s care and love and protection. God wants us to know that, and to look to God for guidance and happiness, and forgiveness and renewal.

It’s never too late or too soon to be God’s child. We are never too old to claim God as our heavenly parent, Jesus as our Savior, and the Holy Spirit as our comforter.

We are never too young to receive these gifts either—even if our understanding has not fully developed, we’ll get there.

Everyone can be a prayed-for, dedicated-to-the-Lord, child of God.

Our mighty and loving and merciful God is waiting, arms out, ready to embrace us. Amen.

(by Rev. Sally J. DeMasters)