

Holy Family

The family in today's first reading seems like an odd choice for Holy Family Sunday. The father, Elkanah, had two wives: Hannah, who had no children, and Peninnah, who did. The two women did not get along. Peninnah used to provoke Hannah, just to irritate her; Hannah cried and refused to eat. Her husband Elkanah, who was getting the best of both worlds, tried to cheer her up, saying, "Am I not more to you than ten sons?" Hannah bites her lip, so the implied response is, "Well, no, now that you ask." Even a single guy like me knows Elkanah should have said, "You are more to me than ten sons," but Hannah was getting none of that.

One day they went to the temple to offer sacrifice. Hannah entered alone. She made God a bargain: "Give me a son, and I'll give him right back to you. He can stay here and serve the temple." She said this silently, just moving her lips. Eli the priest at the temple saw this and jumped to the wrong conclusion. He shouted, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." Hannah, apparently used to insensitive people even at home, wheeled around on him. The first word she speaks out loud in the whole bible is "No," and she says it to the chief priest. "I am not drunk. I am praying." Eli backed off, reconsidered, and asked God to hear her, even though Eli didn't know what she wanted. Hannah then went home.

She became pregnant. She gave birth to a son. She named him Samuel. Her husband said, "Let's go back and offer sacrifice." Hannah said, "No. I'm waiting until Samuel has been weaned." So, whenever that happened, Hannah went back to Eli at the temple, reminded him who she was, and gave him a slaughtered bull, a sack of flour, a skin of wine, and one more item. She explained what her prayer that day had been all about, handed her newly-weaned toddler over to the startled priest, and left. That's how today's first reading ends. Now before anybody gets any ideas, don't do this. Don't bring your kids over to church and leave them here.

When Saint Luke wrote the first two chapters of his gospel about the births of John the Baptist and Jesus, he almost certainly told the events with the story of Hannah in mind. Hannah was a barren woman who gave birth to a child, like John's mother Elizabeth. Hannah sang a song of praise like Mary's Magnificat. Little Samuel was dedicated to the Lord from his birth, as was John. Samuel ended up in the temple, as Jesus did, where he even called it "my Father's house." When Samuel grew up, he was the prophet who anointed David as king of Israel, and John was the prophet who baptized Jesus at the start of his ministry.

So the Holy Family is a kind of do-over of Hannah's family. Nonetheless, Hannah's story tells us that God is ready to come to the rescue, even to families where people mean well but often say the wrong things to one another. Family members share a unique bond, and sometimes that bond feels threatened because people start holding different values or beliefs. But God stands ready to help. Christ belongs in the temple of our hearts and homes. When we risk everything to put him there, God will be pleased and will look upon our families with kindness.