

In the name of the loving, life-giving, and liberating God, who is blessed Trinity.

My two younger brothers and I often got on each other's nerves. Zach and I would sometimes gang up on our youngest brother, Nich, just to bother him. It was never about anything of consequence that I can remember, but we would provoke him and get under his skin. It wasn't uncommon for us to keep it up until he got so angry that he would chase us.

Zach and I would then run into the house, tear down the hallway, hit the wall, and split into our two bedrooms, slamming the doors behind us. Nich would follow, stomping into the house, breathing hard and fuming. He'd bang on one or both of our doors until he either wore himself out or Mom came to calm us down.

These were not proud moments for us, but they are a pretty universal experience for kids. Children know how to get under each other's skin, and they do it both to test boundaries and to learn about themselves and others. Although we often experience it negatively, this process is meant to teach us. In that sense, we never fully grow out of it. Unfortunately, when adults provoke each other, it's sometimes because we haven't yet learned proper boundaries.

We hear one such story in our Old Testament reading today. The Old Testament again focuses on one of the prominent female figures in Israelite history, Hannah. You may or may not remember her. She is mentioned in our text as the mother of Samuel, who would become the last judge of Israel. Samuel anointed Saul as Israel's first king and later anointed King David. Samuel was a leader and prophet, with two books of the Old Testament named after him. Today, we hear the beginning of his story through his mother's eyes.

Hannah is provoked, in this instance, by her husband's first wife, Peninnah, who apparently had many sons and daughters. Like many women in the Bible, Hannah is introduced to us as a barren wife, which highlights the significance of having children, especially male children, in that cultural context. This was, after all, part of Ruth and Naomi's story as well. Hannah's husband, Elkanah, may mean well by doting on her, but if he died, she would have nothing—except for a bitter first wife who could turn her out for any reason at all. So, Hannah's sadness and frustration are not without cause.

I do want to note that every story in the Bible about a barren woman ends with the birth of a child. These stories are chosen because of their hopeful endings. The women are made important because of their sons, which is as backward as it can be.

But I want to acknowledge that there are many women, or their spouses, throughout history who have been barren and never had children. If you are someone who couldn't have children or chose not to have children, that does not mean God did not hear you, or that God doesn't love you, or that you needed to have children to be worthy. You are loved and worthy. I pray for the day when society no longer judges people based on the number of children they do or don't have because each of us can make a difference, whether or not we ever have children.

In Hannah's story, she is provoked by Peninnah, which leads her to deep sadness. I think many of us can relate to Hannah's grief, even if we've never been in her exact situation. As Christians, we long for a world that reflects the Kingdom of God, and we feel deep sorrow when we look out into the world and see a lack of justice and no clear path forward. I'm sure all of us have felt this way at one time or another.

In her grief, Hannah does the one thing we all can do: she pours out her heart to God. In the face of oppressive systems and situations that are beyond our control, we are often tempted to think that prayer is ineffective. People of faith have been praying for millennia, so it's easy to think the world should already have been set right by now. There should be nothing left to pray for.

This is the dilemma faced by those who would have first read Mark's Gospel—and it's our dilemma too. Our reading from Mark is part of what's known as the "Little Apocalypse," a portion of Jesus' teaching that focuses on where we will all end up. It asks the question: how and when will God's Kingdom come? Much has been made of Jesus' words and other apocalyptic writings in the Bible, like the book of Revelation. People have spent years trying to explain exactly how it will happen, but Jesus' answer is always, "No one—not even I—knows how it will end."

That answer doesn't always feel like enough, but it's because we continue to ask the wrong question. We get preoccupied with the end, when Jesus is teaching us what to do in the meantime. The letter to the Hebrews encourages us to provoke each other—not like Peninnah provokes Hannah, or like Zach and I provoked Nich—but to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together. We are called to encourage each other, to spur each other on. This, in fact, is another kind of provocation—but one that is welcome. And just like those childhood jabs, I'm sure many of us have experienced a moment when someone offered just the right word of encouragement at the very moment we needed it. Hannah herself experienced this

when Eli the priest blessed her prayer. That blessing encouraged her in the midst of her sadness and helped her keep going.

Hannah also knew what Mary, the mother of Jesus, knew. We read Hannah's song today as our psalm, and if it sounded familiar, it's because Mary's song, sung when she learns she will give birth to God, is almost the same. Both of these women knew who God was, and they understood that, even if injustice reigned in their own time, God was at work bringing a Kingdom where every tear would be wiped away, and the poor and lowly would be lifted up. I believe both women also knew they were a part of bringing that justice into the world. They did so literally through their sons, but they had already been doing it in their own lives. And we can do the same, whether or not we ever literally give birth.

We can provoke each other to love and good deeds, and we can live lives in the light of God's Kingdom. Every small act of kindness, every word of encouragement, is a part of working with God to bend the arc of the moral universe toward justice. This is who we are, who we get to be, as Christians. Thanks be to God!