

ONE **BEFORE I HAD A THUMB TO SUCK**

Mom tells me that my digestive plumbing didn't work right when I was a baby. That first year I was fragile. She and Dad had tried for two years to have a baby. They married in 1950; I was born in 1952. Couples got pregnant quick back then. Now they wait a decade . . . which is really unfair to prospective grandparents.

When they were trying hard to conceive, they resorted to prayer. I was promised to God before I ever came to be. Their words were calling me into existence. I wasn't able to offer my thoughts on the deal. It was a straightforward contract. "God, you give us a child, and we'll give him back to you." I was bargained off before I had a thumb to suck. As I recall, neither of my younger sisters were sacrificed this way. They were "keepers."

When I was really sick that first year, the bargain was reinforced. My parents called God's bluff. "If you want him back, you can have him. If it weren't for you, we wouldn't have him in the first place." That may sound a little crass, but they were simply doing what their psalm-writing foremothers and forefathers had done before them. Remember Pss. 88:10 and 115:17. These folk are saying, "God, you let us die and there'll be no one to praise you. The dead don't go around telling everyone how good you are." And then there was Moses telling God, "If you destroy your people out here in the wilderness, what will the neighbors think? The Egyptians will get a bad impression of you" (see Num. 14:13-15). I suppose God has a reputation to uphold. I like to think that Mom and Dad got their prayers from Bible verses like these.

When I hear my parents talk, I hear echoes of the Samuel story. Hannah is a woman in a man's world. In her culture, the only thing of worth she can produce is a male child. But Hannah is barren, as barren as Israel. She is not alone in her grief. Her husband, Elkanah, gives her double-meat

sacrifices to offer to God when they go to Shiloh. He loves her. He levies no shame on her for her barrenness. He is tender with her, trusting God's timing. They cannot bring into existence the future they desire. This couple is not likely to be the carriers of God's future. They are fragile.

Does it seem to you, as it seems to me, that at every turn of the biblical story, God is calling people who are fragile? God never shows up to people who are developing their strategic life plan, or asking divine approval for their personal mission statement. God seeks out these who have been opened by impossible life experiences, those trapped in inescapable places, those emptied by waiting and wanting. God calls these folk into His future. Abram of Ur, Moses of Midian, Mary of an unexplainable pregnancy, Paul of deadly persecuting certainty, John of Patmos exile, and Hannah of the childless womb.

Hannah prays. Eli, the priest of Shiloh, thinks she's drunk. It says something about the sad state of worship in Israel, that a priest can't tell the difference between sober prayer and sauced parishioners. Eli will fail at other things too. Parenting. His own boys, Hophni and Phinehas, turn out to be self-centered opportunists hiding behind priestly robes. They paint a frightening picture of what preachers can become when left to their own devices.

The storyteller says, "In those days the word of the LORD was rare; there were not many visions" (1 Sam. 3:1, NIV). Seems that Hannah is the only one conversing with God about the future. She is paying attention to God, which is, in simple terms, the best definition of a saint—one who gives full attention to what God is doing right now.

Hannah prays, "O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life" (1:11, NIV). I call this a bargaining prayer. Samuel was offered to God before he had a thumb to suck. It's what saintly parents do . . . and then they wait for God's timing to unfold.

I survived my plumbing disorder. But my parents never told me about "the deal" until I was well en route to being a God-called preacher. I wasn't hamstrung into the service of God. I was called.

Saintly parents and saintly people are given a sacred responsibility to prepare children to hear the call. This call is sacred to each person, whether

it is to preach, build furniture, run a grocery store, or tend the sick. The call tells us who we are in a world of need, a world loved so deeply by God that God wishes to touch it through flesh and blood called ones.

But the call cannot be rushed. It must come in God's own time, in God's own way. To inject our anxiety is to do great harm. Wanting to "make things happen" for our children, we do great harm. Nikos Kazantzakis tells this story.

One morning . . . I discovered a cocoon in the bark of a tree, just as the butterfly was making a hole in the case preparing to come out. I waited a while, but it was too long appearing and I was impatient. I bent over it and breathed on to it to warm it. I warmed it as quickly as I could and the miracle began to happen before my eyes, faster than life. The case opened, the butterfly started slowly crawling out and I shall never forget my horror when I saw how its wings were folded back and crumpled; the wretched butterfly tried with its whole body to unfold them. Bending over it I tried to help it with my breath. In vain.

It needed to be hatched out patiently and the unfolding of the wings should be a gradual process in the sun. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to appear all crumpled, before its time. It struggled desperately and, a few seconds later, died in the palm of my hand.

That little body is, I do believe, the greatest weight I have on my conscience. I realize today that it is a mortal sin to violate the great laws of nature. We should not hurry, we should not be impatient, but we should confidently obey the eternal rhythm.¹

I'm thankful for parents who were not overly anxious for me to embrace God's call. They trusted the God who was at work in a womb, a cocoon, and a child's heart. God isn't helped by our impatience.

When you look back on your call to preach, you probably find a story weaving its way into your life before you were born. The call of God is humbling, because it comes through the faithfulness of others. Before it had anything to do with us, it had to do with others. It seems, looking back, that it was a secret that God knew, and that Mom and Dad were keeping until the ripe moment. They let God tell me first, in God's own time, in God's own way. Only God can call us to preach.