

Celebrating other possibilities (1 Samuel 1:4-20)

Not all who struggle with infertility have their prayers answered.

by [Frank A. Thomas](#)

November 12, 2021

To receive these posts by email each Monday, [sign up](#).

For more commentary on this week's readings, see the [Reflections on the Lectionary](#) page. For full-text access to all articles, [subscribe](#) to the Century.

Traditionally, this text is preached from the vantage point of the rewards of piety and faithfulness in prayer to God regarding one's concerns.

Hannah is in deep anguish and travail. Her troubles leave her desperate such that she leaves the banquet table and goes to the house of God to pour out her heart—to voice her silent desperation to God.

Eli the priest at first thinks that she is drunk, but when Hannah persists and explains her petition of prayer and anguish to Eli, he prophesies that God will grant her petition. After some time, Hannah becomes pregnant. This text is generally preached from the perspective of Hannah's victory and celebration in God's answering prayer. Hannah's desperation, pain, and travail are resolved in the grace of God to give her a son.

This is great for traditional families, for people who have become parents in traditional ways. But shouldn't the sermon cover as much of the actual lived experience of the congregation as possible?

A friend of mine—a woman of God, a powerful preacher and church leader—has struggled with infertility. She now has a ministry to the many women and couples who experience the same thing Hannah does in this story. What if their heartfelt prayers are not answered the way Hannah's is?

My friend works with couples to open the door to other possibilities. She asks them this question: Do you want to have a baby, or do you want to be a parent?

Many find that responding “to be a parent” opens them up to alternatives not often discussed in church: fertility drugs; medical infertility procedures; sperm, egg, or embryo donation; adoption; living child-free; surrogacy. With the possible exception of adoption, I rarely hear these options talked about in worship.

What if we celebrated all of them? What if we as preachers were the priests like Eli who blessed each of these options? What if God answers people’s prayers with peace about one of these other options?

A fresh perspective on this text could encompass the lived experience of many silent congregants who struggle and suffer but might not feel able to bring their concerns to their pastor and their church.