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“Hannah: A Woman at the End of Her Rope”

1Samuel 1:4-20

F.U.C.A.

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The story of Hannah--her barrenness, her misery, her bold perseverance, her willing sacrifice and her dynamic faith does nothing less than usher in an entirely new era in Israel's history. In the initial reading of ancient stories about Biblical characters, like this one about Hannah, these stories can seem quite strange to our modern sensibilities and values. But the longer we look at them, sit with them, allow our own feelings and our questions to surface, and do a bit of research into their history and how the story fits into the entire history of Israel, these stories become more powerful and meaningful to our own lives.

What does it mean to say that Hannah's story ushers in a new era in the history of Israel? This birth narrative was obviously written with a purpose in mind. It is more than the story of an extraordinary woman, however impressive that woman may have been in her own right. It has a larger socio-political purpose. The placement of Hannah's story as the first story in the books of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel has significance in itself. Her son, the prophet, Samuel, was the last of the judges before Israel became a monarchy ruled by a king, like the other peoples around them. Remember, Samuel was the prophet who anointed Saul as the first king of Israel. Samuel was a pivotal figure connecting the old order to the new while attempting to direct it in the way of God. The time being written **about** in Hannah's story is 11<sup>th</sup> century BCE, but it is likely that the story wasn't written until the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, in the time of the exile. In the 500 years between these two times: the time of Samuel's birth and the time of the fall of Israel and the Babylonian exile, Israel had become a great nation. The only authority that the judges had was that they were believed to be inspired by God. Now with a monarchy, authority became institutionalized. Leadership was now inherited or won in battle. King Saul, then David, then Solomon and the less well known kings reigned. The temple was built. History was written. And yet, for all the magnificence of this monarchy, history has shown that something was also lost when power became institutionalized.

So the writer of this story is trying to set the stage for the history which would follow, a history he already knows. How can he legitimize the rise of the kingdom as truly the will of God? Ah, the miracle birth. Barrenness turned into fertility through God's favor. The future under God could be insured if the prophet who would guide it was himself chosen by God. Enter, Samuel. His mother, Hannah, who so desperately wanted a child and who prayed with courage and intensity to the God who directed her life, found favor with God and bore a child and then gave him up, dedicating him to the service of God. Hannah, in Hebrew, means Grace. Hers was a profoundly graceful action in response to God's profound grace in the gift of Samuel's birth. If the people were going to demand a king at this time, (even though up to now they had felt only God could rule over their lives) then God's prophet, Samuel, would anoint this king, validating his reign and keeping him honest with himself and with his God.

But back to Hannah. Let's exit the larger stage of Biblical history, of prophets and kings and the rise and fall of a kingdom, and put the spotlight on this woman whose misery becomes joy and whose personal story is worthy enough to be told generation after generation. Hannah is not just a physical vessel for the birth of greatness, she has a spirit and a heart that are worthy of our attention in themselves. The two aspects of Hannah's greatness have to do with the power of prayer in her life and her insight into God as a God of justice for the oppressed.

Now, I know there are other characters in the story. Elkanah, Hannah's husband and the father of Samuel, Peninnah (Elkanah's other wife) who tormented Hannah, and Eli the priest who challenged Hannah on her odd behavior and then granted her petition. Their stories also deserve to be told. Each had a part to play in history, and each had qualities that we recognize in ourselves as human beings. But their stories will have to wait for another sermon. Hold me to this.

What can we learn from Hannah's praying? Well, here are a few possibilities. Hannah holds nothing back when she prays. She is direct, straight forward and entirely engaged.

She may be a humble woman but she isn't humble when she petitions God--she doesn't apologize for asking God for just what she wants. We are hesitant to petition God, aren't we? We are afraid that we will sound selfish and demanding, looking for favor that it is obvious to us that God doesn't always grant the next guy, so why should God treat us differently. Are we so skeptical about prayer (even though we hedge our bets and pray anyway) that we don't want to risk our fragile faith by asking for something that God won't or, even worse cannot, give.

A UCC minister, Kate Huey, in her commentary on this passage quotes Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann, on the nature of prayer today in contrast to prayer in Biblical times. She describes how "Hannah comes from 'a praying people' who experience God not just in the center of their life but all through it. And right at the center of their prayer life is the prayer of petition, the 'rawest and most elemental form of prayer....a real address to a real partner in anticipation of a real response,' even if that response is not exactly what we ask for." Huey goes on to say that Rev. Brueggemann sees the prayer of Israel as marked by a 'trustful theological innocence' that we lack today in our skeptical, scientifically minded society (and church): 'As a consequence,' he believes that , 'prayer is regularly adjusted in the modern world: either the prayer becomes anemic and does not really ask anything (in the confident suspicion that nothing would in any case be given), or prayer is transposed into a psychological act of catharsis so as to make us feel better, or prayer becomes a group process of sharing'."

Is our prayer life anemic, bloodless? When I imagine Hannah's passionate praying in contrast to my own, I think of the analogy of a wild animal in contrast to a domesticated pet. When we have trained a dog we gain the control we desire, but this animal, for all his devotion to us, pales in contrast to the magnificent power of his ancestor, the wolf. Do we keep our prayer life on a leash? Do we try to domesticate the power of the Divine in our lives? With our intellectual progress in this culture and time are we held hostage from our own souls?

Hannah also risks her dignity. Remember the priest's questioning her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." When I was in my 20's I was a hospital chaplain. Once a week, I was on call in the emergency room of a hospital that was the major trauma center and the charity hospital for the city of Dallas. In the emergency waiting room I had occasion to be with families of all ethnic backgrounds in their time of shock, distress and grief. I was young and inexperienced and was confronted with displays of grief with which I was completely unfamiliar—whaling and crying and calling out to God and fainting. Talk about anemic, I am sure my face was drained of what little color I started out with as I nervously tried to be a pastor to them. Although it was uncomfortable for me, I developed a certain awe about what I witnessed--the genuine and uncontainable expression of feeling some people allowed themselves in a time of grief. Like Hannah, I saw people enter their grief and dwell in it for awhile not denying it and rising above it to maintain their dignity while, at the same time, quietly dying inside.

As Denise Carmody wrote in *Biblical Woman :Contemporary Reflections on Scriptural Texts*, Hannah is a woman "at the end of her rope,"—a woman whose "prayer goes right to God, pouring out her grief, even her bile. She does not think of prayer as a tidy exchange or a proper little colloquy between herself, a genteel lady, and God, a Victorian parson." Her prayer **is** herself. If she aches, she cries out painful words. If she is angry, her emotions boil over. Her God is her life, her vitality. Otherwise, what use has (God), what significance? Biblical prayer regularly had an urgency, a high quotient of emotion, that separates it from our present day approaches to God. Abraham haggles with God over Sodom. Deborah sings of bloody victory much like a banshee. Neither is concerned with propriety. Both give God what they **are** at the time of their outcry." So, too, does Hannah.

What about the second aspect of Hannah, her insight into God as a God of justice for the oppressed? The next part of Hannah's story, which we didn't read today, is her familiar prayer, sometimes called, "Hannah's Song." We recited a piece of this prayer in our Call to Worship today. "God raises up the poor from the dust and lifts up the needy from the

ash heap to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.” While her first prayer is a prayer of petition, asking from God, this next prayer is a prayer of thanksgiving and proclamation. Hannah had a capacity for joy as wide as her capacity for grief is deep.

The belief in a God who stands not just for the status quo, but for those on the margins of society runs throughout the Bible. Again, most of us with full bellies, driving from our comfortable homes to comfortable churches can find the notion that God speaks for the poor, yes, even over us, a bit uncomfortable. In the Gospel of Luke, Mary responded to the coming birth of Jesus, in what has come to be called the “Magnificat”, echoing these words of Hannah, “(God) has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly and filled the hungry with good things.”

I have to pause here because as I sat at my computer this week writing this sermon, just as I was typing these words, “... and filled the hungry with good things,” my doorbell rang and a little boy about 9 or 10 stood there holding open a bag of can goods and asked in his halting English if I had any to share with the hungry. He was doing this with his classmates as part of a school project to collect for the local food bank. That little angel would have come to my door at that moment no matter what I had happened to be doing, but I found the timing between my quoting of Mary’s words and his actions to be very interesting. Powerful, really.

Hannah, as a woman and a barren one, was completely vulnerable in her time. Her worth, in her society, if she was to have any worth at all, was to bring a male child into the world. And God blessed her with this. Hannah didn’t stop here after having her prayer answered, with a simple, “Thank you God for taking care of me,” but rather understood her joy to be part of her larger celebration of a God who stoops to bless all those that the world ignores, exploits, and abuses. In Jesus’ own words, that is exactly why he **came** into this world. At the beginning of his ministry he said it like this, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the

Lord.”

Well, many many folks are at the end of their ropes today. We meet them or hear their stories in the media daily. And this, in the richest country in the world. Some of us feel like we ourselves are at the end of our own ropes, at times. Hannah’s story not only tells us that our pain can find powerful expression and that our suffering matters to God, but also that our capacity for joy and celebration, with its birth in the Divine spirit, is wide and deep.

I can get a little heavy at times in my thoughts and sermons so I was so glad to hear from our choir director that the choir would sing, “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore You” this morning. Last Tuesday evening many of us attended a musical celebration of the life of one of our long time members. It was led by his very talented children and long time friends. Music was always the joyful center of their family life as well as their professional lives. So the family chose to remember and honor their father with brass, classical piano, folk music, and jazz at a local restaurant. Generations of their friends gathered to celebrate not only this man’s life, but their own lives and all of life.

Celebration can be a powerful expression of our faith. It is contagious, binding us to one another and connecting us through time to the spirit above us, around us and within us.

Hannah’s story shows us that we have a capacity for joy as wide as our capacity for grief is deep. If we can push order and fear from center stage and let our genuine feelings speak, in both our profound joy and our deep grief, we will find our humanity and our God.