

Haydenville Congregational Church

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1 Samuel 1:4-20

1 Samuel 2:1-10

“Hannah Rose”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Hannah’s song, which is found in 1 Samuel, Chapter 2, is one of the hidden gems of the Old Testament, or Hebrew Scriptures. And, as you might have noticed when you just heard it read, Hannah’s song has clear parallels with Mary’s song, the Magnificat, the song of praise found in the New Testament in Gospel of Luke (1:46-55)—the song Mary sings when she learns she is pregnant with the son of God.

To mine the gems embedded in the story of Hannah and her song, let’s review what is happening in these two Scripture readings from the Book of 1 Samuel in the Old Testament. Let’s put what we have just heard in context so we can unearth the lessons found in this powerful story.

Elkanah was a Levite from the area around Mount Ephraim. He had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Hannah longed to have a child but could not conceive. The Old Testament expression for a barren woman is that God had “closed her womb” (1 Samuel 1:5). Remember: during Hannah’s time Hebrew woman had what was believed to be a sacred duty to bear children; it was considered an honor and a blessing from God to have sons and daughters. In ancient times, the identity of most women was tied to being a wife and mother. In Hannah’s case, her inability to conceive was made more painful because Elkanah’s other wife, Peninnah, produced many children and she cruelly and repeatedly taunted and ridiculed Hannah for being infertile. Peninnah’s unkindness caused Hannah to weep and refuse to eat.

Hannah’s name derives from the Hebrew words for “grace” and “favor.” She was full of grace and she did find favor with God. Despite her suffering, Hannah was faithful and diligent in her love for God, praying to God often to bless her with children.

Hannah was so desperate to have a baby that she promised God that if she could conceive and bear a male child, she would give the child to the service of the Lord as a Nazirite. The child would remain the rest of his life in the tabernacle. Hannah vowed that "...no razor shall touch his head" (1 Samuel 1:11), a symbol of a life of dedication to God.

Let me remind you what a Nazirite is...

The Law of Separation and Consecration, found in Chapter 6 in the Old Testament Book of Numbers, presents guidelines for the children of Israel who were consecrated as Nazirites. When these children were weaned (which was probably when they were toddlers), they were separated from the general populace to become servants of God: they lived in the tabernacle or sanctuary, they could not cut their hair, drink vinegar, wine, or strong beverages, or eat grapes, whether moist or dried. They were servants of God—their days were spent in prayer and study with specific dietary rules and other disciplines that kept them holy and focused on spiritual practices.

Hannah felt profound misery over her inability to conceive and went with Elkanah to every year to pray at the tabernacle in Shiloh. The Hebrews believed that the tabernacle was the holy dwelling place of God on earth, and that it was originally established by Moses following precise geometric criteria. One year while at the tabernacle when Hannah poured out her heart to God, Eli the priest was seated near her and he saw Hannah praying and noticed that her lips were moving while she prayed but her voice was not heard. Eli watched her mouth—lips moving, but no words coming forth. Hannah was praying in silence but Eli thought that she had been drinking and asked her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine" (1 Samuel 1:14). Hannah explained to the priest that she was very sad and that she had not been drinking at all. Eli believed her, took pity on her, and prayed on her behalf. And he said to Hannah, "Go in peace: the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him" (1 Samuel 1:17).

As the story goes, Hannah and Elkanah rose the next day, went out before the Lord to say their prayers and then returned home and were intimate. God had heard the prayers of Hannah and Eli and Hannah conceived a baby boy. Hannah delivered her son and named him Samuel and true to her word, she returned Samuel to God once Samuel was weaned. Hannah took Samuel to the tabernacle in Shiloh and left him there with the priest Eli to be raised as a Nazirite.

Every year after that when Hannah went to the tabernacle at Shiloh with her husband Elkanah to offer the yearly sacrifice, she would leave Samuel a little coat

she made for him. Over time, Hannah—who it is believed had pleased the Lord—was blessed with more children: three more sons and two daughters (1 Samuel 2:21). These children were to bring Hannah joy in the place of Samuel, who lived with Eli the priest at the tabernacle at Shiloh. Samuel grew to be a priest, a judge and a prophet—a most significant biblical figure.

When we read 1 Samuel Chapter 1 and 2, we find that poor Hannah is really very mistreated—not by her husband Elkanah who actually favors Hannah and loves her more than his other wife Peninnah and shows and tells her of his great devotion to her. But Hannah is badly mistreated by Peninnah who taunts and is cruel to Hannah—repeatedly. It is Peninnah who causes Hannah to weep and stop eating as we heard in the reading.

But notice that Hannah has a deep faith and inner strength. Even in the face of her great sorrow and the verbal abuse she is subjected to by Peninnah, Hannah rises and presents herself before the Lord.

Hannah and Elkanah make the yearly pilgrimage to the tabernacle in Shiloh to pray to the Lord. It is there, as we heard, that the Bible says, “Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord.”

Even in the face of we would now call trauma and loss, Hannah rose....and spoke to God. I love those two words in the midst of the story. Hannah rose! She got up, she did not give up, and she presented herself to God. She asked for what she needed and said she would loan her son to God if she were to be blessed with a male child.

Hannah had deep faith, inner strength, and an expansive heart. Hannah rose and said if I am able to bear a child I will make him a Nazirite, I will give him to you God. In the face of her despair, the abuse she received from Peninnah and the emptiness she felt because she was unable to conceive, Hannah rose and went to talk to God.

Elkanah prayed for Hannah, Hannah prayed for Hannah, and Eli the priest prayed for Hannah and Hannah conceived and bore Samuel.

Hannah’s song, which Donique read this morning, is Hannah’s act of worship when she brings Samuel to the tabernacle, the sanctuary to loan him to the Lord. Hannah’s song is a psalm of thanksgiving, a hymn of praise. I will read Hannah’s song again. Listen how it begins with the declaration of her intention to praise

God (verse 1) and then affirms that Yahweh is the incomparable God who knows all (verses 2 and 3). In the remaining verses, God is praised as the one who protects and cares for the weak, who is indeed Lord of life and death and who executes justice.

*Hannah prayed and said, 'My heart exults in the Lord;
my strength is exalted in my God.*
My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my* victory.*

*²'There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you;
there is no Rock like our God.*

*³Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.*

⁴The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength.

*⁵Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.*

The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn.

⁶The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.

⁷The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts.

*⁸He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.**

For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world.

Hannah's story is a powerful, although not often told, story. And her song foreshadows the Magnificat by the Virgin Mary. And there are lessons for us today in Hannah's story—the story of a woman who rose up to present herself before God, mourning her barren state, finally conceiving a son, and then taking him to Shiloh to the tabernacle and loaning him to God giving him to Eli the priest to be raised as a Nazirite. There are lessons for us in Hannah's story AND in her song of praise, the hymn of thanksgiving she offers to God when she enters the sanctuary to give up her son.

First we pause and note that Hannah is a much abused, infertile but faithful woman in deep despair and we realize that God often works through and with unlikely women like Hannah and Jesus' mother, Mary, who was a poor, simple teenage girl innocent and unassuming, a virgin suddenly pregnant with the son of God. Repeatedly in Biblical stories God works through and with unlikely women and makes them messengers of the good news and bearers of offspring who change history. Like Hannah, there are many woman in the Bible who are unable to conceive and then do conceive, to everyone's surprise, and in each case the woman

bears a son who serves the Hebrew people and changes history. This is true for Sarah (Abraham's wife), Rebekah (Isaac's wife), Rachel (Jacob's wife), Michal (Samson's mother), and Elizabeth (Zacharias' wife). We recognize that Hannah's unique and powerful story also sounds familiar. God continually finds women who are too young, too old, too unimportant, or too wounded to conceive, God even chooses virgins, and yet each woman conceives and each bears a child who changes the world. Hannah's story reminds us that God reaches out to the lonely and the oppressed, the young and the old, the unwanted and the poor, the despairing and the forgotten and God makes them messengers of God's good news, and actual vessels for the continuing story of how God moves through history. Forgotten, despairing and seemingly unimportant women are God's chosen people.

Another lesson we can take from the story of Hannah is that we must be at our most honest when we worship God. I believe this story reminds us to tell God in prayer exactly what we are thinking and feeling. Hannah does not mince words or pretty up what she takes to God in prayer. Hannah rose, the Bible says, and she presented herself as she was before God. How many times have we prayed nice words while holding anger, pain and resentment inside....as if our nice words can mask what is really in our hearts? How many times have we been furious inside or felt hurt or overlooked and yet we pray "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven"? How many times have we sung songs in Church without thinking about the words coming out of our mouths? How many times have we spaced out or gone elsewhere mentally when we are singing or praying in Church or at home? I believe God hears our words while reading the real truth in our hearts. Hannah rose up, we are told in Scripture, and told God of her pain and her hopes, her love for God and her sorrow, her desire and her need. Hannah is a model and a lesson for us, we are called to be at our most honest while worshiping God.

And Hannah's song reminds us that God brings justice in God's time. Hannah is mistreated by Peninnah—taunted and wounded. But in time, Hannah too is able to conceive and Peninnah's haughty superiority is brought low. "The arc of the universe is long," Dr. Martin Luther King once said, "but it bends toward justice."

It may be hard for us to see just outcomes in every situation in our lives, but our God is a God of justice and in the end the arc of the universe bends toward justice and justice triumphs. Dr. King did not see, nor have we seen yet, the true freedom and equality of all God's people. But Dr. King was able to say that it may not be in my lifetime, but in God's time justice will reign.

Hannah rose from her place of despair and abuse to talk honestly with God. Her strength and her clarity can give us hope. Hannah's ability to put her faith in God when she was hurt and suffering can inspire us to turn to God, trust God and give our sorrow to God. Rather than feel that she had been abandoned and complain that God had turned God's back on her, Hannah rose and wept before God who I believe wept with her. And Hannah rose a second time...she gave birth, at long last, to a beloved son and yet she was still faithful to God and to her word. Hannah took her precious Samuel to Shiloh, as she had promised, and she left him there in the tabernacle with the Priest so he would know and serve God. Hannah rose...to many challenges. Hannah rose.

For me, Hannah's story and her song are a testament to faithfulness that cannot and will not be shaken or diminished by suffering. Rather than turn away from God in her sorrow, Hannah rose and turned toward God.

Hannah's story with the caring Elkanah and the cruel Peninnah and Hannah's unquenchable desire to bear a child reminds me of a powerful two-word prayer than some of us say often: "Help me."

And Hannah's song, when she takes Samuel to the Tabernacle to be raised as a Nazirite, reminds me of the two-word prayer some of us daily: "Thank you."

Hannah rose and said Help Me.
And when she loaned her son to God, she said, Thank you.

Let us be inspired by Hannah's story and by her song.
Let us bless her memory, and learn to rise and present ourselves in complete honesty to our God—a God who sides with the lowly, works through the unlikely, and brings justice in God's time. Amen.