

1 Samuel 1:1-20

There was a certain man of Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephraimite.

²He had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.

³Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the Lord. ⁴On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; ⁵but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb. ⁶Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. ⁷So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, Peninnah used to provoke Hannah. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat.

⁸Her husband Elkanah said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?” ⁹After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord.

¹⁰Hannah was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. ¹¹She made this vow: *“O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.”*

¹²As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. ¹⁴So Eli said to her, *“How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.”* ¹⁵But Hannah answered,

“No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. ¹⁶Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.”

¹⁷Then Eli answered, *“Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.”*

¹⁸And she said, *“Let your servant find favor in your sight.”*

Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

¹⁹They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. ²⁰In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, “I have asked him of the Lord.”

1 Samuel 2:1-10

¹Hannah 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 The

Lord, 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; The Lord brings down to Sheol and raises up. ⁷The Lord makes poor and makes rich; The Lord brings low, and also exalts. ⁸The Lord raises up the poor from the dust, 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 Our God has set the world. ⁹"The Lord will guard the feet of the faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. ¹⁰The Lord's adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth and will give strength to the king, and exalt the power of the anointed one."

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

"The Women of the Hebrew Scriptures: Hannah ~ Getting Real in Church"

The prayer life at the church I served in Atlanta was a bit more robust than our practice here at Rocky River. I affectionately called the prayers of the people, "Open Mic Night" at North Decatur. Every Sunday, when it was time for the prayers of the people, one of the pastors would grab a wireless microphone and walk out into the congregation. We would take prayer requests from those gathered for worship – everyone would share their greatest joys or deepest concerns with each another.

Usually this was a truly sacred time in the life of that worshipping community, but on some Sundays, I admit, members of the congregation could end up feeling like Eli – uncomfortable and frustrated. You see, we had one faithful member, who happened to suffer from a slight mental illness; She would, on occasion, monopolize this prayer time with the great and small things of her life. When she rose to speak you could just feel the congregation groan. Of course, they never actually groaned - they were always kind and loving to this person - but you could feel the anxiety rise and see visitors wondering if she was drunk. To many, her prayer requests were tedious, and sometimes too honest. But to her, these were the important things in her life, and she wanted, no she needed, to lift them before God and the people that mattered to her - her family of faith.

I imagine Hannah could relate. She had important things to pray about – things that she needed to tell God. This was a woman with more than her share of misery. She lived during a time when women were worth very little unless they produced children. I think it's safe to say we are still on the journey of understanding that a woman's worth does not come from her ability or desire to produce children –in Hannah's lifetime, many viewed her as burden.

Thankfully, Hannah had a good husband, Elkanah, was a man who loved her deeply, but poor Hannah wanted nothing more than to be a mother. It caused her endless pain to not be able to bear children; a fact that Hannah's sister wife, Peninnah [Pen-In-Nah], used to torment her. When her tears and despair got to be too much Hannah went to church to pray. She went to church to escape the ridicule, to escape the constant torment, to pray for the Lord to hear her.

But in the church, in her place of deepest faith she was met by more contempt. The Priest, Eli, mocked her, accusing her of being drunk. But Hannah had moxie. She was not going to be discounted in her place of worship. Her prayers were not going to be devalued.

And in Hannah's moxie we see an **audacious faith** that believes and claims that God's grace is for her. In the barrenness of her life Hannah believes God is present and that God will act on her behalf, so she is going to pray. Her faithfulness, her audacious belief humbles Eli and beckons him to bless her. And as the story unfolds, we know that her prayers are answered. She gives birth to Samuel, who is the fruit of Hannah's faithful refusal to be comforted by anything less than a gift from God.

The birth of Samuel is a monumental moment in the Jewish tradition. Usually, his story eclipses that of his faithful and often forgotten mother. But in that space, Hannah not only becomes an inspiration to women the world-over who struggle with infertility, but she is an inspiration for all Jews and Christians who are living in barren times; who are yearning for God's presence and action.

In Hannah we see that our relationship with God is not about presenting our best selves, it's not about pretending to be perfect, or that everything is right in the world. Our relationship with God is about being real – about offering up our authentic selves and trusting that God's grace is for us and for all people.

Throughout her life, Hannah continues to model for us how live in response to God's grace – she follows through on her promise, even though I am sure it was hard.

When Samuel was born, she raised him to an acceptable age and then returns the blessing to God. In gratitude for this answered prayer Hannah dedicates her son to God's service. And afterward, her fervent prayer life continued – lifting up who God is – the One who cares for the downcast, the One who lifts up the fallen, the One who reverses the fortunes of the world and ensures that God's people will live in Glory.

The life of this congregation and world is marked by Hannah's fervent prayers – we are living in various forms of barren times: the world shaken by pandemic and loss of social norms, this church in a barrenness of “in-between” time after faithful staff departures and an unknown future. But Like Hannah, you are here – offering up yourselves in praise and prayer. Hannah's invitation is to keep it real – to come just as you are and know that you are the beloved children of God, come just as you are and trust that the gathered community has you and will be there for you. And then do the work of being there for one another – live into the promises of God's grace in your life by offering your gifts and talents that God may use them, as God used Samuel, to shape the world around you into a reflection of God intentions for creation – a place of Peace, justice, love and joy.

Amen.