

Wading River Congregational Church

SERMONS IN PRINT

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1 Samuel 1-2 Mother of a Prophet

We have moved on maybe 700 years from the patriarchs and the stories of Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel to around 1100 BC, when Israel as a nation is established in the land of Canaan. At the birth of Samuel, Israel has had 100 years of rule by *judges* – Joshua, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Deborah – and a new era is about to begin: the *monarchy*. At the same time the first of the *prophets* will appear, and Samuel can be seen as the last of the judges, the first of the prophets, and the one who anoints kings. Who was this man? How did he get to oversee such remarkable changes in Israel?

Samuel was born to a pious, rural couple named Elkanah and Hannah, who lived in the “hill country” of Ephraim – the central area of Israel north of Jerusalem. His birth, like that of many “great men” of the Bible, was something of a miracle. As you are now used to hearing in the OT, his mother was in the line of “barren women” who after prayer and God’s intervention, give birth to sons who are major figures in God’s plan for his people. You can probably think of many biblical examples!

1) *Loved But Childless*

Hannah is loved but childless, and we meet her as the family makes an annual pilgrimage to offer sacrifices at “the house of the LORD,” which at this point is at Shiloh, a major shrine for about 100 years. The

Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant had initially been placed in Shechem, but after that city was destroyed by invading Canaanites, the “house of the LORD” was moved to Shiloh. It is now attended by an established priesthood from the tribe of Levi, the main priest being Eli. We quickly learn that the line of Eli is corrupt: his two sons Hophni and Phineas are disasters, and the narrative contrasts them vividly to Samuel. Before long, Shiloh will be attacked by the Philistines, the Ark will be captured, and the priestly line of Eli will be destroyed.

The family of Elkanah is riven with domestic trouble – Elkanah has made the cardinal error (like so many men before and after him) of marrying two wives, one of whom he loves more than the other, one of whom has children and the other not. You already know what is going to happen! Elkanah’s second wife is Peninnah, whom he probably married because Hannah had produced no children. Peninnah is mean and vindictive to Hannah, and loses no opportunity to demean her – especially, it seems, on the annual family pilgrimage to Shiloh. It will not be the last time that family events are used by some members to score points off others. (Is this the reason some families still dread major holidays and family gatherings?)

So poor Hannah is loved by her husband but constantly provoked by her rival, and on this particular pilgrimage she is reduced to tears. They are all at the meal which is part of the pilgrimage: portions of meat from the

“thank-offering” or the “peace-offering” are given to the families to feast on so that they can celebrate their renewed relationship to the LORD. Hannah, provoked to tears by Peninnah, flees the meal and runs to the sanctuary, bitter and angry. She sits down and weeps, and then she prays: “O LORD Almighty, look down on my misery and give your maidservant a son!” To reinforce her sense of utter dependence on God at this point, she even vows to him: “if you will remember me, *I will give my son to you* for all the days of his life.” She declares that he will become a Nazirite – a man consecrated to God who will never drink alcohol or shave his head.

It is a remarkable, brave, risky moment. Hannah’s prayer is one of very few prayers by women recorded in the OT, and the rabbinic commentators remarked how bold it was for a woman to come into “the house of the LORD,” to address him directly as “LORD Almighty,” and then to speak to him of personal and domestic concerns that were in her heart. Hannah’s vow is, of course, dramatic – “give me a son and I will give him back to you.” Few people then or now would dare promise such a thing, or have the courage to go through with it! The Law of Moses made clear that a husband could rescind a wife’s vow, but Elkanah does no such thing – rather he affirms her promise, and aids her in carrying it out.

But Hannah has to deal with more than Peninnah and her provocations. She is also accused by Eli the priest of being drunk in the sanctuary of God. Perhaps she was praying in some ecstatic fashion, but the text says something rather different: that she prayed silently, from her heart, while still moving her lips. Now this was an era when prayers were offered aloud, and Hannah’s silence, her distress and agitation, and her lip movement, cause Eli to think she is behaving inappropriately. She will not be the last

woman to be criticized for praying in the wrong way in the wrong place.

But here Hannah shows her character: politely but firmly, she rejects Eli’s criticism, and explains that she is “pouring out her soul to the LORD.” She is *not*, she says, a wild or wicked or good-for-nothing drunken woman in the LORD’s house! – ironic, in that precisely this language will be used a little later to describe Eli’s sons Hophni and Phineas; truly good-for-nothings and a disgrace to the priesthood. Credit to Eli at this point for recognizing the truth of Hannah’s words, and replacing criticism with his priestly blessing, that “the LORD may grant her request.”

2) *My Son the Prophet*

So Hannah is “remembered by the LORD,” becomes pregnant, and delivers a son whom they name Samuel – a play on “asked of God” or “heard of God.” But now she is faced with her vow: *can* she give up the son she longed for to serve the LORD all his days in “his house”? She maybe prevaricates a little, telling Elkanah she will wait until Samuel is weaned – probably about 3 years – but then she takes him, with bulls and flour and wine for sacrifice, to Shiloh.

She approaches Eli: “I am that woman who wept and prayed... the LORD heard me and gave me this son, and now I am fulfilling my vow and bringing him here to serve before the LORD. All his life he will be given over to the LORD.” And so it is; Eli takes the boy under his wing, Hannah and Elkanah return home, but yearly Hannah returns to Shiloh to bring Samuel the new cloak she has made for him. In time, we know that Samuel will hear a direct call of the LORD on his life, and will learn from Eli to answer “Here I am, LORD – speak, for your servant is listening.” From then on, we are told, “the LORD was with Samuel as he grew up, and he let none

of his words fall to the ground, and all Israel from Dan to Beersheba recognized that Samuel was attested as a prophet of the LORD." Hannah's son became "the prophet."

3) *Hannah's Song*

Hannah cannot foresee all this, but she knows the LORD well enough and she knows that he "lifts up" those who are faithful to him. So she utters a remarkable "psalm" of praise to her LORD, one that will be remembered and quoted down through the ages.

"My heart rejoices in the LORD... I delight in your deliverance. There is no-one like the LORD, holy, our Rock, all-knowing, just. He breaks the bow of the warriors, but the poor, the hungry, the barren, he provides for. He humbles and exalts, he puts down and he raises up; life and death and even the grave are in his hands. He takes the needy from the ash heaps of the world and sets them beside princes. He guards his saints... and he gives strength to his king, his anointed one."

It is a remarkable prayer of praise and gratitude to her LORD for his character; that he looks down on the likes of her and raises them up. A thousand years later, another young mother will take up Hannah's song and make it her own; she will celebrate the same LORD who does mighty things for his humble servants... her name is Mary of Nazareth, and her song is also remembered for generations, and sung in her honor, and in praise to the LORD who raised up Hannah and Mary and gave them great sons.

Hannah is also remembered as a prophet in her own right, because she is the first person in the OT to apply the name "anointed one" – in Hebrew, *messiah* – to a coming king of Israel. Hannah is a prophet as well as the mother of a prophet. To this day, Hannah is held up among Jews as an example of

prayer, and indeed the rabbis took her mode of praying silently, with movement of lips, as a model for much Jewish prayer by males and females. Hannah is cherished by Jewish women who sense that her combination of humility and assertiveness, her willingness to even challenge a priest of God, marks out a way for them to develop their own expressions of faith.

To this day, Hannah - like Rachel - is a symbol of faith and hope for women who struggle with the pain and grief of infertility. Many a woman has been loved by her husband, and heard him say "Am I not as much to you as ten sons," and say "yes, my dear, of course you are;" but deep inside be unable to communicate even to her husband the desperate ache of not being able to conceive; of wanting a child more than anything or anyone in the world. It's an ache that men cannot in general understand, and too often probably do not sympathize enough with. Hannah, like all her OT sisters, stands as an example of a childless woman who brought her shame, her tears, her grief, her bitterness, her fatigue, her lack of desire even to eat, before the LORD in heartfelt prayer, and who was answered by a merciful God. Does it always happen? No; the LORD controls life and death, conception and birth, and his ways are not our ways. He does not always give us what we are sure would be good for us – perhaps he knows things we don't know!

For Christians, Hannah stands as an OT woman of faith who was *not afraid to lay everything on the line* before God, no matter what anyone else thought of her. She "poured out her soul to the LORD," *she faced down the priest*, and she went back to the table cheerful and ready for her meal. She was *sure that God had heard her prayer*, and would answer it. Hannah *gave to God the most precious thing she had* – her son – and she remains a model for all of us of a truth that

Jesus insisted on: that nothing and nobody - not even family! - can come ahead of our love for God and our discipleship. Hannah *asked*, Hannah *vowed* (not because she thought she could bribe God - she knew better than that, and so should we), and Hannah *thanked* God for what he had done for her. Hannah *carried through* on her vows and commitments, at whatever cost to herself, because she *trusted* God.

Hannah is a model for men, as well for women; for Christians, as well as for Jews. True faith, honest prayer, courage, promises kept, continued caregiving year after year - we *all* need them. And we all need to learn to praise and thank God, in music or word or poetry, in work or in commitment - whatever is the best way for us - to show our gratitude for his mercy to us. The Hebrew name *Hannah* is the same as the Greek name *Grace* - with all that means for appreciating the true character of God, and the character of his true disciples.

Let us pray....