

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**1 Sam. 1:1-20, “The Spiritual Life of Hannah”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 9/17/2017**

In Hannah’s day, the nation of Israel was a mess.

The setting for 1 Samuel essentially comes from  
the book of Judges in which Israel is on a spin cycle  
(if not a sin cycle) of their own making.

Peace leads to prosperity which leads to spiritual wandering from God,  
which leads to sin, decay, and societal collapse,  
which leads to God sending a judge to straighten things out,  
which leads again to peace.

Seven times they go through this cycle. It was a time when,  
the book of Judges concludes,  
“all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”

In the midst of this situation comes Hannah.

Hannah was married to Elkanah, a man whose family has a long history  
in the fertile hill country of Ephraim.  
Importantly, Elkanah had two wives.

One of them, Peninnah, had children. But Hannah did not.

Hannah is a favorite wife who is unable to conceive.

We’ve seen this many times, haven’t we?

First Sarah and Abraham.

Then Rebekah and Isaac.

Then Rachel and Jacob.

Hannah stands in a long line of biblical women  
facing similar circumstances.

Year after year, we learn that the same scenario played itself out.

Upon arriving in the temple courts,

Elkanah would give preferential treatment to Hannah,  
because “the Lord had closed her womb.”

He gave her double the amount of meat  
to offer in sacrifice to God.

(Every woman’s dream, isn’t it?)

But in turn, because the Lord had closed Hannah's womb,  
Peninnah, called Hannah's "rival" in v. 6,  
would provoke her.

We aren't told what kind of provocation this was,  
but clearly it concerned her inability to conceive,  
and was unbearable to her.

Verse 7 says "Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the Lord,  
she wept and would not eat."

Hannah's condition brought kindness from one household member,  
and persecution from another, all in the context of worship  
at the Temple of God.

Eugene Peterson notes, "It is an odd thing, but amply verified  
in any place of worship and among any gathering of worshipers,  
that religion brings out the best in some people,  
the worst in others."

For Hannah, the impact of corporate worship was that,  
whether being coddled by Elkanah,  
or prodded by Peninnah, the result was the same:  
she was made more aware of her status  
as a barren woman,  
and felt further away from God.

Hannah went to worship, and she felt further away from God.

Was there a problem with the worship happening at the temple in Shiloh?  
Were the sacrifices performed too slowly?  
Was the music too loud, or unfamiliar?  
Were the scripture readings unhelpful for those  
in attendance?

I don't think Hannah's persecution had to do with  
any particular problems with the worship at Shiloh.  
But she noticed a connection between the two.

Some of you wonder why your kids or grandkids,  
or maybe your cousins or siblings aren't interested in going to church.

It's possible that there are issues happening in the church service  
which cause problems or fail to grab this person's interest.

Sometimes the issue is essentially that church isn't cool enough.  
If so, that's an easy fix. You can find a cool church  
without too much hassle.

But more often, there are painful or distasteful experiences  
that are connected to Christian worship that they find hard to ignore.  
This could be anything from judgmental attitudes,  
to unrealistic expectations, to sexual abuse,  
to financial misconduct,  
to rigid cultural expectations.

These situations, like Hannah's,  
don't so much have to do with worship itself,  
as much as the behaviors of people  
that are encountered when one goes to worship.

For Hannah, the outcome of all this is deep, hurtful despair.

Elkanah attempts to comfort her with what strikes me  
as a very countercultural message for ancient times:  
"Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?"

Rather than go along with the cultural pressure of assigning a woman  
worth that is based on how she functions sexually,  
he is telling her that they should be glad in their love  
for each other even without having children together.

Even several thousand years later, such intrinsic worth and love  
is not often offered to women.

But this does not assuage her despair.

Having finished their travel, the family shares in a meal,  
and all these things are eating at Hannah from within.

V. 9 says, “Once they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh,  
Hannah Stood up.”

Nothing unusual here, at least at first.

At the same time, the narrator introduces a new character:

“Now – Eli the priest was sitting on his chair  
by the doorpost of the Lord’s house.”

So Hannah stands while Eli sits. And from afar, he watches her.

Just then, in the midst of her pain and disgrace, Hannah is moved to prayer.

She makes a vow that if Yahweh would look on her misery  
and remember her by giving her a son,  
that son would be dedicated to serving Yahweh.  
And so she prays.

Nothing wrong with that.

But—it’s not the “right kind” of prayer.  
You see, in Jewish worship, prayer is an activity  
that is undertaken out loud.

The narrator says that Eli could see her lips moving, but there was  
“no sound in her lips.”

No big surprise, given the topic of her prayer,  
and the fact that her husband and rival  
were with her at the table.

Not only is prayer a thing to be done out loud,  
it’s also a thing to be done in the right times and places.  
Instead, Hannah leaps over the liturgy and the sacrifices –  
and the priest.

Eli sees her mumbling lips with no sound coming out,  
having just stood up from a meal, and he figures she’s drunk!

Perhaps this scene is alluded to in the book of Acts,  
when the apostles are filled with the Spirit and speaking in tongues,  
and the townspeople say, “They must be drunk!”  
but in reality, their speech is animated  
by quite a different kind of Spirit.

Hannah’s spirituality, then, is unusual. It doesn’t fit the typical pattern.  
It’s not being done “the right way.”  
In her prayer, it may even seem like  
something inappropriate is happening.  
But she’s not drunk. She’s crying out to God with all of her being.

“How long are you going to stay drunk?” Eli asks her.  
“Put away your wine.”

“Not so, my lord,” Hannah replied, “I am a woman who is deeply troubled.”

Hannah’s spiritual life is not one that glosses over  
the problematic aspects of being human.  
We don’t leave the story with easy slogans to apply to our lives.  
More likely, we leave with questions, encouragements, inspiration,  
conviction, and investment in what God is doing in our own story.

Many women today know the specific trouble that Hannah describes:  
dreams of motherhood that have not come to pass,  
or have been tragically taken away.  
These women share Hannah’s spirituality.

But I think her statement reaches farther than that specific circumstance.  
In a country where race still matters greatly when it comes to  
education, employment, and rates of incarceration,  
there many black and brown mothers who share  
her spirituality.

They cry out, “I am a woman who is deeply troubled.”

In a time when sexual misconduct and objectification  
continue in both public and private settings,  
resulting in violence and discrimination of various kinds  
that is often swept under the rug,  
many women today share Hannah’s spirituality.

They cry out, “I am a woman who is deeply troubled.”

Yes, there are many women, and I hope more and more men,  
who share Hannah’s approach spirituality.

We find in Scripture that while the cries of those who are hurting  
may not seem to be heard for many years,  
God does, in fact, hear them.  
And God is, in fact, near to those who call out.

“I am a woman who is deeply troubled,” she explained to Eli,  
“and I was pouring out my soul to the Lord.”

Eli immediately understands.  
“Go in peace, and may the God of Israel  
grant you what you have asked of him.”

Hannah walks away...she eats something...and her face  
is no longer downcast.

Upon returning to their home in Ramah, Elkanah and Hannah make love,  
and the Lord remembers her.  
She gives birth to a son, and names him Samuel,  
saying, “Because I asked the Lord for him.”

Samuel means, “Heard by God.”

Hanna’s prayer and attentiveness to God, her painful pathway to spirituality,  
set in motion the basic themes of the story found in 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel.  
It’s Hannah’s faith in God  
which brings about the prophet Samuel,  
and it’s Samuel who would be used by God to anoint  
the greatest King in Israel’s history.

After her prayer is answered, and her shame is taken away,  
she prays the psalm found in 1 Samuel chapter 2.  
This psalm is the backbone for Mary’s own prayer  
when she was pregnant with Jesus, the Magnificat.

What are we to do when people won't come to church  
no matter how cool it is?

How can we address the fact that for some,  
simply being at church – any church – brings up a lot  
of unwanted hurts and obstacles to connecting  
with God?

There's no easy answer, to be sure.

I suggest that we begin in our own personal spiritual formation  
by seeking the face of God in the places we find pain in our world.

Typically we emphasize finding God in the places of joy, goodness,  
renewal, and hope. And for good reason: Those are characteristics  
of God's activity.

But if the church is going to be a place for people who have been hurt,  
we must also recognize God in the places of pain and difficulty.  
We must be willing to open ourselves to connecting with God  
there – both in our own lives,  
and in the lives of others.

We have to be ready for the fact that some people will not approach God  
in the way that we expect. They might break away from custom  
they might encounter God in places and times and ways  
that make people wonder if they're okay.

The good news is that God hears the cries of his people  
whatever setting they come from.

There is no wrong way to call out to God in our pain.

Let's take some time right now, even if it's uncomfortable,  
to ask the Spirit to show us where we might make space for people  
who are crying out to God as Hannah did.