

Prayer and Promise
The Monroe Congregational Church, UCC
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
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1 Samuel 1:9-11, 19-20; 2:1-10

What do you do in those low moments when everything seems turned against you?

Today's story isn't an easy one. I've known too many couples who've had the heartbreak of wanting to conceive a child, but couldn't. My heart has broken with theirs and it seems insensitive to speak about how things worked out for Hannah without naming that there are so many others who have prayed and prayed and had different outcomes. So, let's enter this story mindful of them, and may our compassion and empathy flow.

Hannah felt the pressure that all women of that day and age felt, the pressure to have a child. In her day, a woman's worth was tied to ability to bear children (specifically, male children). A son was an almost certain guarantee of a future, especially if she became widowed. Of course, if she had more than one son, she would be even more secure! Childless widows were often forced to the margins to live in poverty.

Hannah would feel especially vulnerable because she was in what we might call today a plural marriage. Upon her husband's passing, all his property would have gone to the sons of the other wife, Penninah, causing Hannah to be left out in the cold.

And we learn that Peninnah was something of a bully, she treated Hannah poorly. She provoked her at every turn, just to get under her skin. What she did to Hannah was awful, unkind, unconscionable and simply mean. Maybe she was jealous. Their husband, Elkanah was more generous with Hannah. It was pretty clear he loved her more. So Peninnah acted out that jealousy, teasing her and saying cruel things every chance she got.

I try to live the phrase, "*No matter who you are, or where you are on life's journey . . . you're welcome here,*" but to be honest, I also have a difficult time showing kindness and love for folks who bully, manipulate, exploit, ridicule, and abuse others.

Hannah's despair grew so thick that she could not eat. She could not sleep. She could not stop herself from weeping. Her clueless husband tries to intervene. In the midst of her anguish he manages to make it all about himself, "*Am I not more to you than ten sons? Why are you so upset?*"

Dude!

Maybe Elkenah might have shown more empathy if he had said, "*Hannah, I'm sorry you are so upset. But you are worth more to me than ten sons.*" Maybe. But it's hard to make that line stick when the other wife is sitting in the next room laughing at them. Anyway, the point is that Hannah's husband didn't give her the emotional support she needed.

She felt that deep distress most keenly on the high holy days, when they all went to the holy place at Shiloh for the time of sacrifice. That's when she was bitterly reminded of what she did not have: a promise of a future, a name, a sense of hope. It made for the worst Thanksgiving meal ever!

But then there is this incredible action that she takes. In the middle of her despair, in the middle of her physical, emotional, and spiritual thirst, in the middle of her deep distress, Hannah rose.

Hannah rose.

One might have expected some other action, other than rose. Like, Hannah broke... Hannah took a knife... Hannah lashed out...

But in the middle of her soul-crushing experience, one morning at the temple, Hannah rose. She got up. She stood up. She pushed through her pain, through her hopelessness, and did something women did not do in those days without their husbands.

She marched right up to the sacred space, and she poured out her soul to God. The temple priest, an aging clergyman named Eli, saw her;

This woman without a husband anywhere nearby, this woman whom he had observed year after year unable to stop weeping, he saw her and noticed she was crying her eyes out and moving her mouth nonsensically.

"*You're drunk!*" Eli, said. "*You are making a spectacle of yourself. Put away your wine.*"

He is judging her, and to Hannah's credit – she doesn't punch him in the face!

"*No, I'm not drunk.*" She says "*I'm pouring out my soul to God*"

Maybe there's a lesson here about not being so quick to judge other people!

Hannah believed God would answer her prayer in God's time and in God's way. She even promised that if God looked upon her and gave her a son, she would give him back as a servant for God's purposes. She would hold her son with an open palm and be able to let him go.

After the prayer, Hannah rose again, returned to her husband, ate and drank until she was satisfied. As it says in the text, her countenance lifted, she was no longer sad.

The long-awaited son Hannah wound up having 9 months later was Samuel, and Samuel was the beginning of the monarchy of Israel, he was the one who eventually anointed King David, another new beginning for God's chosen people.

Something happens when we just let it go. When we trust God to work it out in God's own time and in God's own way.

And when Hannah delivered Samuel, she sang a song that Jesus' mother referenced when she was carrying Jesus. We hear Mary sing similar words every year in the Magnificat, reminding us that God responds to the needs of the people—especially those at the margins, and those who struggle.

Here is what I'm so mindful of today... each and every one of us is going through something right now. We all are. But there is nothing we cannot pour out to God in prayer. God can sift through our jumbled thoughts and powerful emotions. And prayer, more often than not, is what changes us.

So, bring your hot, holy mess!

Trouble forgiving someone? God hears you.

Made a mistake? God will listen.

Don't think you're good enough? God hears you.

Filled with bitterness? God hears it all.

I know the happy ending Hannah experienced isn't the way things always resolve. Maybe it's not even the way things usually do! I don't know why she can pray for a child and God miraculously intervenes. And at the same time, I don't know why any faithful, childless woman can earnestly pray for years and no miracle comes.

We sit in the tension and wait in the discomfort. In lack and abundance, in need and in blessing, Hannah poured out her soul to God, and God heard her. When we pour out our soul before God, our prayers will be heard too. We may or may not receive everything we ask. But the LORD is a God who knows. And in that I find great comfort. Amen.