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The National Presbyterian Church

**Fellow Followers:**

**"Hannah – Returning What You Borrow"**

1 Samuel 1:1-18, 20, 24-28

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In our sermons through the summer months we've been looking together at different people whose stories are preserved for us in Holy Scripture. They are members of our spiritual family and by *their* lives *our* lives are to be shaped. To be sure, our lives are to be shaped and re-shaped by the ideal model and person of our Lord Jesus Christ, but God also gives to us these other people, men and women like us, and by what they do or do not do, what they are or are not, our lives are also to be influenced and changed; sometimes by copying their example, but also sometimes by avoiding their example, because, unlike Jesus, their lives are imperfect.

Today we're going to be focusing on the woman who is at the center of our passage in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel 1 – a woman by the name of Hannah, who lived just over a thousand years before the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, at a time of increasing chaos, of increasing hopelessness, for God's ancient people, the 12 tribes of Israel. Hannah lived at the end of a period called the time of the Judges (and we've looked at some of those religious/political leaders called "judges": Gideon, Samson, Debra). Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann says of this particular period of time that "Israel was a community in moral chaos engaged in brutality and betrayed by undisciplined religion." (Interpretation Commentary, I & II Samuel, p.10). There was, in other words, no moral center to God's ancient people; no moral power, no moral drive; but instead, as the last verse of the Book of Judges puts it (21:25): "everyone did what was right in their own eyes".

Sounds a little bit like much of what we see today whether it's in our own country or around the world. Indeed much of the conflict in the Middle East today sounds like the description of Walter Brueggemann. Communities in moral chaos, engaged in brutality, and betrayed by undisciplined religion. Certainly it's a description of history as it's been at different times and at different places but not just in the past.

There was no easy and obvious way out of this particular situation, out of the predicament, and no great hope for the future that anything could really ever change. This was true of Israel as a nation but it was also (we see as we begin to read in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel) true for Hannah as an individual. On the national level, true; and on the personal level, true. So we are told as the book

of 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel opens that she is childless. And in her childlessness she is in despair. She hopes and she waits and she faces disappointment, no doubt again and again and again, hoping things will be different, and that a new future will arise. But it never seems to turn out that way, and the despair is made worse by her husband's second wife who has a number of children of her own and who taunts and teases Hannah mercilessly.

So we have this picture of the nation which is in great pain and great despair and we have the picture of Hannah who is also in great pain and great despair. And yet in the end what we find as we continue to read this story, is that God provides a future that nobody could see or manufacture. Indeed, as the story unfolds, what we discover is that it will be through the turn-around in hope-less Hannah's life, the most unlikely person, that the larger history of the nation begins to turn around. In time, Hannah's childlessness will end. She will have a son whose name will be Samuel, and through Samuel's leadership, through his stature politically, religiously and morally, the nation will begin to turn around and to change. And it will be through Samuel's hand that a new king, the greatest king that Israel would ever have – King David – will be identified and will be brought to royal power.

Indeed most of the story of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel (and we've just read the opening chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel!) will in fact be about the kind of power that we see exercised in the political realm – force, intrigue, and so forth. This is the kind of power at the center of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel.

But the writer of the books to begin with, quite deliberately, I believe, begins with this single chapter from which we have read, as if to make it inescapably clear that the power involved in the political sphere (to which we will be introduced in the rest of the book) is small compared to the power of God. It's important but it is small.

- So, in chapter one, here is a word to the powerful to say, “Yes there's a time to use your power but remember that there is one whose power is far greater than yours. And if you think you're powerful you have less power than you think.”
- But that's not all. As the books 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel open, there's also a word for those who feel powerless. And that word comes to us through Hannah, a word which says “You think you're powerless? Let me assure you, you are actually able to access more power than you can imagine. All power comes from God whether it's to those who appear to be powerful or to those who appear to be powerless.”

God certainly can use the human tools of wealth and force, and beauty and brains, and plotting and scheming, and fame and charisma, to change the world – and God does. God uses all of those tools. But a significant part of the message of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> Samuel (and our chapter in particular) is that God can use other tools as well, like prayer and promises, to turn things around in ways that we could hardly imagine.

Wealth and force and beauty and brains and plotting and scheming and fame and charisma belong to a few.

But every single one of us has the opportunity to be an agent of God through prayer and through promises (we sometimes call these promises “covenants”; promises that we can make before God); and it’s through her promise or covenant, that God calls and uses Hannah in his service.

So let me remind you again of this story. In the first chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel, we read of a faithful, God-fearing man by the name of Elkanah who takes his family on an annual religious pilgrimage to a place called Shiloh (not too far from the present capital of the Palestinian territory, Ramallah). Shiloh is the national worship center at that time when the temple has not yet been built in Jerusalem by Solomon the son of David. So there they go to Shiloh to worship the Lord and Elkanah takes his wife Peninnah and he takes his wife Hannah with him. And on one occasion, this is what happens. After Elkanah and his wives had sacrificed and feasted at Shiloh:

Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the door post of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed Hannah was and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly.

She made this vow, *‘Oh 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 Nazarite, that is I will dedicate him to you until the day of his death.’*

And she continued praying before the Lord.

Eli observed her mouth (Hannah was praying silently only her lips moved but her voice was not heard) therefore Eli thought that she was drunk. So Eli said to her *‘how long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself. Put away your wine.’*

But 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. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.’*

So Hannah’s praying. And when she prays, it’s not a perfunctory prayer. It’s not a rote prayer. It’s a prayer which involves all her heart, all her emotion, all her soul, all her body.

There’s clearly a time for prayers which we might call liturgical prayers. We use them in our service of worship week by week. We have the Lord’s Prayer and we have our prayer of confession and adoration. Indeed it’s very clear in the gospels (we see this especially in Matthew’s gospel, chapter 6) that when Jesus teaches the Lord’s Prayer he teaches it in such a way that it can be memorized; it’s formal, liturgical. For Jesus, an important part of our prayer life, our conversation with God.

But the fact of the matter is this that unless there is another kind of prayer in our life, then there is a great chance that in our formal prayers we’re *just* going through the motions. The only real evidence that we’re not “just going through the motions” is if there are times when in fact

we break away from the formality and we enter into a conversation with God which lets everything loose, in which everything is permissible, in which we lose control of what we say, and deeply engage with a God who is real. Unless we've experienced that, then the chances are that our conversation really is *only* perfunctory, *only* rote – and that is not the kind of relationship we have been called to enter when we come before God in prayer.

Think for a moment about prayer in the context of our relationship with other people. When other people around us are “real to us,” there are going to be times when our conversation is stiff and formal (even repetitive and liturgical!). But when they become an integral part of our lives, when we fall in love with them, or when we work with them as colleagues, there will inevitably be those times when formality disappears and we simply have to get down to it, and speak the truth as we see it, and engage deeply with each other. If this never happens, however, then the chances are that the relationships are superficial, and will rarely be important or powerful agents for change.

Think of this, in particular in the relationship of marriage. Pastoral counselor David Augsburg speaks of the need not only for formal conversation but of this emotional engagement in conversation in the following interview of a counseling session that he once held. So he asked this question to a wife who comes in for counseling.

He asks: How's your conversation with your husband?

To which she replies: It's been months since I really talked to my husband. We've grown so far apart. He has his life, I have mine, we see each other but we don't meet. Our jobs demand long hours. We're tired each time we reach out to each other. Five years have gone by without much conversation.

So the counselor asks another question: Why don't you tell your husband how you feel?

To which the response comes: There's no point. He wouldn't hear me anyway. Small talk. That's all it is. But he doesn't really hear me. [DR: No engagement in the conversation]. If he knows at all what I think he certainly doesn't understand how I feel. He lives on superficial friendships. I get so lonely. (Caring Enough to Confront, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 2009, p.34).

I suspect God may feel that way sometimes with us in our conversation with God. The formal is good, not bad. Jesus teaches it. But unless there's this kind of engagement as there is with Hannah, then I doubt that the relationship is as profound and deep as God wants it to be.

It's the Book of Psalms which brings us into contact with one prayer after another, one conversation after another, which engages with a God who is not merely “out there,” but intimately involved with the life of the Psalmist. And this is what we see with Hannah: the kind of engagement that God loves with us ‘mere mortals.’ In fact, Hannah is so engaged in this conversation with God that she appears to go overboard; to the other extreme! Eli the priest thinks that she is drunk; though of course, in reality she's not. But in this appearance of a drunken stupor it certainly appears that way, as if in fact Hannah has lost control of her motions

and emotions, but of her mind too! It's in this moment that she makes a promise to God which she surely could never keep; a deep and profound promise to God, which if you are merely "staying in your right mind" you are unlikely to make. The promise is this – *that if God hears her prayer for a boy and grants it, that she'll give the child straight back to God: "Hear my prayer, grant my prayer, I will dedicate my child to you all the days of my life."*

What of course is remarkable is that we know she's not drunk and she's fully aware of what she's saying and promising. Indeed, having read the story to the end, we also know that she not only receives the answer to her prayer, but actually fulfills the commitment, keeping her promise to God. Here's the passage again:

In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel for she said I have asked of the Lord when she had weaned him she took him up with her along with a 3-year-old bull, an ephah of flower, and a skin of wine. She brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh and the child was young. Then they slaughtered the bull and brought the child to Eli and she said to Eli the priest oh my Lord as you live my Lord I am the woman who was standing here in your presence praying to the Lord for this child I prayed. And the Lord has granted me the petition I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord as long as he lives he is given to the Lord and she left him there at Shiloh for the Lord.

And as he grew there, that would be the place where Samuel in the night would hear God's voice calling to him (1 Samuel 3), and where his ministry, his powerful and effective ministry, which would lead on to the kingdom of King David (1 Samuel 16), would begin.

Now this story is powerful. It's also problematic. Maybe some of you with your children feel some days as if you want to say with Hannah, "Let me take them to the church and leave them there!" Sorry to have to say that if you leave them with me, it's not going to work. Social Services will be around in a few moments, and the family mess would simply be enormous. Ours is clearly a different age: so we could easily dismiss the story and Hannah's response as unrealistically or inappropriately extreme. For us – maybe so! But what I think is important to point out is that something was going on in Hannah which belongs to every age and which is crucial for us to discover and embrace: *a way of understanding her life and the world which enabled her to make such a promise as this in her right mind, and to keep it.* A way of understanding God that you and I desperately need in our lives.

It's linked to a word that she uses repeatedly as she talks both to God and to Eli and that word is the word 'servant.' She understands her whole being, her whole self, as a servant of God (and of Eli too!). A servant: it's not peripheral to her understanding of herself. It's not a casual phrase: "Your servant." It reflects her understanding that she *doesn't own anything*. She's God's! God is the one who owns it all, including her life. She doesn't control anything: God is the one who controls things, including her life. All she does is hold her life and all she has in trust before this God with whom she intimately engages; this God, who is not merely "somewhere far out there," but with whom, in this conversation, her life and God's life become inescapably

intertwined. And her life's business is really a matter of handing back to God what God first gives to her.

In 1999 Robert Coles, professor at Harvard University wrote a book called The Secular Mind. It's a remarkable book. In one passage he describes two kinds of faith in God. He tells the story of a woman interviewed by one of his friends, William Carlos Williams.

She was a young grandmother born in Italy who came to the United States when she was 15. She was married and had brought up a family and now was helping her daughter bring up another family. She said "It's become different going to church here than it was when I was in Italy than when I first came here. I used to sit there and talk to God and try to figure out what God wanted. Tried to please God. Now I mostly think about what is going on in my life and my kids' lives and I ask God to make it better. She said it used to be that I prayed to God that I would learn what God wanted from me and how God wanted me to behave. I wanted God's help to be that kind of person – the kind God wanted. But now I pray to God that God help us with this problem or that. It used to be that when I prayed to God I was talking to God. And now it seems as if it's me talking to myself and I'm only asking God to help out with things."

I don't know if you see the revolution that's taken place in her faith – but it really is a revolution: as to who's at the center and who's at the periphery.

- Are we at the center, and God is "there for us"? (Which is true. God *is* there for us. But it's a half truth and it's a dangerous half-truth).
- Whereas the faith which she had when she first came to this country, which I believe profoundly is Biblical faith, Hannah's faith, is the faith in which God is at the center and owns our lives, owns all that we have. We revolve around God! Our prayer, then, is for us to connect with the center in God, and to ask God to take everything that we have which has come from God in the first place and to use it wisely, prudently, extravagantly within God's service.

And Hannah got that. Hannah understood that, and *so engaged with God in prayer, and so committed her life to God with a promise, that her life, small and insignificant as it may have appeared to others, became a channel of God's grace through which the rest of the story of Israel rise out of hopelessness began*. It was all so unlikely in a time of hopelessness, of chaos, when it seemed that nothing could change, that change would come through this person. Through her engagement with God in prayer and through her promise, her powerful promise -- the making of it and the keeping of it -- God began to change what she could never have changed, and what others could not have changed, in any other way.

Oh to be sure God uses wealth and force and beauty and brains and fame and charisma and all kinds of other gifts to do his work and his will within the world. God would use David and God would use Samuel. But all power comes from God, and God can use any single one of us in his service in ways beyond our knowing as he did with Hannah.

Prayer: Do not take the gift of prayer lightly. There's a time for the formality: but make sure that there are times when you engage with God as Hannah did. God is real and sometimes lonely, hungering for that kind of engagement just as we hunger for engagement with one another.

Promises: Our God is a promise-making God. Our lives depend upon God's covenant faithfulness. And he says to us step out and return the favor! Make a promise of your life to me, and ask me for the strength to keep it. And as you do that your life and mine will be ever more closely intertwined and I will find ways to use you more deeply and profoundly in my service than you could ever, ever imagine.

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