

Sermon November 14 2021 David Figliuzzi

SCRIPTURE: : 1 Samuel 2:1-10

Hannah 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. ‘There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed. The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those 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. The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up. The Lord makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts. He raises up the poor from the dust; he 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 he has set the world. ‘He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed.’

SERMON: “Hannah’s Barrenness” Pastor David Figliuzzi

A few words before we explore this Biblical text today. I want to acknowledge that as we explore stories of infertility, sometimes these Scriptures have been misused to cause shame and to oppress people. I believe that God ordains and blesses all family structures in the variety of ways that families are formed.

Our text for today is the song of Hannah. But before we get to her rejoicing, we need to understand her story. And in her story, in her barrenness, we find ourselves. Hannah is important in the Biblical narrative. Her son is Samuel. Samuel is a prophet who ushers in a new age in Israel’s history, starting with King Saul and then King David. King David, who is ultimately in the direct lineage of Jesus. All of a sudden, Hannah seems a whole lot more important.

So, Hannah, Samuel, Saul, David – the names might be familiar to us. But let’s dig a little deeper. I’ll give a little context for the historians. We’re about 1,000 BC. This means we’re halfway through Israel’s history, some time between Abraham and Jesus, right in the middle. And the Books of I and II Samuel follow the Book of Judges and precede the Book of Kings. So Hannah is introduced to us just as the period of the judges is ending. That’s important because Israel is not at a high point. The country is in chaos. The country is deeply divided. They’re fighting each other, and they’re at a political crossroads. It’s not hard to find ourselves all of a sudden in this story.

They’re in the Promised Land, but their identity is crumbling. They’re in a morally perilous time. In fact, the Book of Judges ends by saying, “Every man did what was right in his own eyes.” Sounds like a moral free-for-all going on. Not being subtle here, this is a story that is just as much about us.

If we look at the Scripture before today's reading, if we go back to chapter 1, we hear the story of Hannah. And I just want to take a moment to share it:

*Elkanah "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. Now 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. On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. Her 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?"*

*"After 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. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. She 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." As 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 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." Then Eli answered, "Go in peace."*

So the first character we meet is Elkanah, and he has these two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. Hannah does not come from a remarkable lineage, and she shares Elkanah with another wife. If you've ever watched a television show about polygamy, you can already guess that this is not going to end well. There will be some conflict between these two wives.

But the real tension in this story is that Hannah does not have a child. And this comes up in Scripture time and time again: Abraham and Sarah and how old they were before they had children, Isaac and Rebecca, Jacob and Rachel, the parents of Samson, even Zechariah and Elizabeth who much later in life had John the Baptist. Why does this keep emerging as a theme? It seems like the Biblical narrative should focus on those who are fruitful and multiply like it says in Genesis.

So here's the point. Birth, new birth, is an important image throughout the Bible's narrative. Can you think of some others? Bread, water, and, yes, birth. The Old Testament prophets, when they talk about barrenness, they talk about the barrenness of people, of Israel. It is a metaphor for the spiritual condition. And new birth is God's promise to God's people. You see, regardless of how one becomes a parent, new life, new family, the ongoing act of creation remains in our midst.

In the cultural context of the ancient world, having children was kind of a practical thing. It meant you can work a larger field. You can have more people to take care of you when you're old. Your children could help defend the nation. It was almost a patriotic duty.

And then we see Elkanah. Can you picture this? Big table, two wives – Hannah and Peninnah, and as the Bible story tells us he gives a portion to Peninnah, a portion to her children, and a double portion to Hannah. It's not about the food. He loves Hannah the best, and Peninnah is none too happy about it. So Peninnah continues to do her best to make Hannah feel inferior. Today we might think of Peninnah as always posting those pictures on Facebook of her perfect children, her fabulous vacations, the incredible gourmet meals she manages to produce after a day at work. Peninnah represents a culture that continues to tell us we're not getting it right. We need bigger houses, we need more promotions, we need a more exotic vacation, we need six-pack abs. Hannah is crushed by what she sees as her failure rubbed in her face day after day. Like today, in the ancient world the culture was saying "Here's what success is, and you're not living up to it."

This is the gift of these stories. They're bigger than just the characters in them. They're bigger than the circumstances. It's why we keep mining the Bible for new wisdom. And each time we do, we find ourselves. All of us know the pain of having it placed in front of us when we're not meeting expectations, when we're not living up, when we're falling behind. So, you see, in this sense, each of us has a share in Hannah's barrenness – a sense of failure, a sense of not doing enough, a sense maybe that we are not enough. And it seems like Hannah is just about to succumb to this feeling of failure. She's crying, she refuses to eat. Maybe you've been at a point like Hannah. Maybe you find yourself there today. Hannah doesn't give in. She does something so powerful.

Hannah's husband Elkanah, I believe he's a good, well-intentioned man. He loves Hannah, actually beyond what would be the cultural norm of the time. And in the face of Hannah's despair, what does he say? "You've got me! Aren't I worth ten sons?" Well, the Scripture doesn't record Hannah's answer, but I'm pretty sure we can guess that she's thinking, "Do you really want me to answer that question?" And so Elkanah represents well-meaning advice. All of us get it. All of us hear it from time to time. It's not that Elkanah is horribly wrong. But what he does is leave out the possibility that God is up to something even bigger for Hannah.

Hannah, crushed by the culture, tempted to think only of her own feelings, but she – inside -- knows that God is up to something. And it's right there in verse 9, two simple words. They're sitting at the table, and it says, "Hannah rose." This isn't just standing up. Hannah arose. Hannah takes control. She is about to do something new and important. She goes to the temple to pray.

She's praying, she's pouring out her soul. What happens? The high priest Eli sees her crying and decides that she's drunk and he wants her gone. This is the highest priest in the entire nation, the man who never confronts his sons for their drinking, for forcing themselves on women, for stealing sacrifices. But he sees Hannah and he wants to clean up the temple. He's not concerned about Hannah; he's concerned about the practice of religion. It's easy to get caught up in keeping appearances and forget about people. I think that's one of the messages that Eli gives us. We

want the church to run on time, we want everything to be perfect. But Eli says don't forget; he reminds us that our job is to touch people.

So the highest religious leader in the country has decided Hannah is a problem to be dealt with. And what does Hannah say? Remember, she rose, she girded her strength. And she says, "Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman." Despite the culture, despite Peninnah's constant reminders, despite Elkanah saying "Just be happy," she says, "Don't. Don't regard me as worthless."

She makes a vow: "Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the affliction of your servant." Hannah knows that God pays attention to affliction. Any Israelite hearing or reading this story, hearing that word *affliction*, would immediately go back to God's promise to Moses, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people." "God, I know that you save and rescue. You must be paying attention to me," says Hannah.

It's easy to think that Hannah is working a trade, bartering with God. "Give me a son and I'll give him back to You." That doesn't make a whole lot of sense. She'd still be sitting at that dinner table alone with Peninnah and all her children. She's not making a deal, she's not making a trade. She's letting go. She's turning over to God what she has been so desperate for. In the act of this vow, in the act of laying her burden down, Scripture tells us that Hannah was sad no longer. In turning her pain to God, she finds joy.

And then, she goes back home and discovers that she is to have a son, Samuel. She names him "God has heard." You see, now Hannah and new birth are participating in all that God is about to do for God's people, and she rejoices.

Friends, Hannah's barrenness is ours. It's our own discouragement, our own failure. It's what we do when the world says you're not enough, or you don't have enough, or that your success isn't enough. What do we do when the thing that we longed for feels so far out of reach? Well, like Hannah, we can rise and we can trust that God is up to something bigger than we can ever imagine. May it be so. Amen.

*Our guest preacher: David Figliuzzi (he/his) is a third year Master of Divinity student at Yale Divinity School and part of the Andover Newton Seminary diploma program. Ministry is a second career for David who previously served as Cigna's Global Diversity and Inclusion Officer and the Executive Director of the Cigna Foundation. Feeling the call to ministry, David stepped out of his corporate career in 2019 to pursue ordained ministry in the United Church of Christ. David has served the First Church of Christ in Suffield, CT as Resident Seminarian, and he has extensive lay leadership experience at his home church, Asylum Hill Congregational Church in Hartford. David is excited about the power of the gospel to build vibrant and inclusive communities that work together to transform our neighborhoods and our world. David and his partner Rob reside in West Suffield, Connecticut.*