

Hannah

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, May 19, 2019, by the Joy T. Barnitz, M.Div.
Scripture: 1 Samuel 1:12-28 and 1 Samuel 2:1-11, 18-21
Copyright © 2019 by Joy T. Barnitz

We humans are meaning-makers, story tellers. Describing the stories of indigenous people in her book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, Robin Wall Kimmerer says,

“We are told that stories are living beings, they grow, they develop, they remember, they change not in their essence, but sometimes in their dress. They are shared and shaped by the land and the culture and the teller, so that one story may be told widely and differently. Sometimes only a fragment is shared, showing just one face of a many faceted story, depending on its purpose.”¹

“A curated anthology” was how my seminary professor described the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament. Traditionally a curator is a keeper of cultural heritage (often in an institution such as a library or museum), usually a content specialist who interprets this heritage material. An anthology is a collection of literary pieces by various authors, usually these pieces are the same form (such as poems or plays), are from the same time period and are about similar subject matter. The Bible is a curated anthology of sacred stories, stories that have given life and meaning to our ancestors. Stories that have been passed to us because they convey something deep, rich and essential.

In this sermon series,² our pastors have been taking a look at some of the Bible women’s stories to re-interpret their meaning for us today. In her sermon on Miriam, Pastor Brenda described the role of story pivots: characters that are critical to the narrative arc, without whom the story wouldn’t happen. These characters often fill additional roles that can be overlooked. By now in this sermon series we are on the lookout for the distortions in the lenses of translation and patriarchy. We are very aware that the text has been redacted, edited ... curated. We are on alert, looking for the hidden people, listening for the missing voices.

Today, we look at Hannah, Samuel’s mother. Hannah’s story incorporates a number of familiar elements from the stories of other Biblical women. Like Sarah and Rachel, she is barren and is mocked by her husband’s other wife who has several children. Like them, Hannah’s son plays an important role in subsequent history: Samuel³ grows up to be the priest who anoints Saul, the first king of Israel, and Saul’s successor, David. Like Moses’ mother, Hannah gives her child up to another woman to raise. Like Miriam and Deborah, Hannah celebrates with song. And like their songs, Hannah’s may have been inserted into

1 Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Minneapolis, MN: Milkweed Editions, 2013) p. 386: from “A Note on Indigenous Stories” at the end of the book.

² The sermons in this series were preached in April, May and June 2019; they may be found at <https://www.nilesdiscoverychurch.org/ndc.php?page=Sermons>

³ In 1 Samuel 1: 20, Hannah names the child “Samuel, meaning ‘I asked the Lord for him.’” *The Jewish Study Bible*, (Jewish Publication Society, TANAKH Translation, New York, NY: Oxford Press, 2004), page 562

the text at a later date. Like Mary, Jesus' mother, Hannah gives her son to God's purpose. Even though Hannah has "loaned" her son to God for his entire life, she brings him "a little robe" every year as he grows up; her love for him and her connection to him continues to be manifested in a tangible way. Significantly, Hannah is the one making the decisions about her firstborn son: he is the answer to *her* prayer, *she* names him, *she* decides when Samuel will be given to God's service and *she* brings him to Shiloh and gives him to Eli, the priest. And, we are told that Hannah is rewarded for her faithfulness by having more children: three sons and two daughters. Hannah's status has risen in the community's eyes: she has borne children.

As a small child, my mother read to me from the Bible most nights as a "bedtime story" and we regularly attended church on Sunday; I liked to draw during the sermon. Much of what I remember about the Bible comes back to me in the words of a hymn sung in daily worship in the church school I attended through eighth grade. Sometimes those words come to mind and make it challenging to learn the new-to-me words for a hymn we sing here! But it wasn't until I returned from my 35-year walkabout beyond regular church attendance that I was drawn into deeper study through re-discovering the hidden voices of the women in the Bible. And I wondered, especially when studying the Christian Old Testament, how some of these stories ever made it into the canon that forms the basis of our faith. Why didn't they get edited out? What message is conveyed by *this* character in *this* story that is still relevant today?

When we meet Hannah, she is praying at the temple in Shiloh. The capital in Jerusalem had not yet been declared (that was David's doing) and Solomon's temple had not been built. The ark of the covenant is in Shiloh, where "the priest Eli was on duty at the entrance to God's Temple in the customary seat." Hannah is described as being "crushed in soul" and crying inconsolably, then she prays to the God who has "not given her children" saying:

If you'll take a good, hard look at my pain,
If you'll quit neglecting me and go into action for me
By giving me a son,
I'll give him completely, unreservedly to you.
I'll set him apart for a life of holy discipline.⁴

That's quite a bargain and a pretty direct prayer! Eli the priest is nearby and observes Hannah "praying in her heart, silently. Her lips moved but no sound was heard." Eli draws the obvious conclusion: she's drunk. He scolds her for behaving inappropriately. However, after she explains why she's there, Eli gives her a blessing and she departs feeling much better. I don't know about your reaction, but as I read several translations of Hannah's story, I was baffled as to why a priest would mistake Hannah's prayers coming from her desperation for drunkenness. And I was impressed with Hannah: she did not hesitate to explain that she was "hard used" and that the only thing she was pouring out was her heart, which she was pouring out to God. What is so unusual about a person in a temple praying, pouring her heart out to God?

⁴ 1 Samuel 1:11

I have a confession to make here: I love research. As a kid I often became waylaid in encyclopedias looking up one thing and, after wandering about looking at other entries, finally completed the task I had started. I loved the excuse to get out a bunch of my books and also to search the internet for answers to this question: what was unusual about this event where Hannah was praying at the temple in Shiloh? Scholars note that this is “the first story of someone coming to a shrine, not for public worship or sacrifice, but simply to speak to God from the heart.”⁵ Miki Raver calls Hannah “the mother of Jewish spirituality”⁶ Raver points out that:

“Hannah’s prayer was one of the first women’s prayers recorded in the Hebrew Bible. It marked a profound shift in Hebrew prayer and in ritual. In Hannah’s days, the sanctuary was primarily used for blood sacrifice. Hannah offered her rage as her burnt offering, her tears as her sacrificial lamb, her bitterness as her guilt offering. Hannah’s prayer marked the first time that heartfelt spontaneous prayer – ‘the prayer of the heart’ – replaced animal sacrifice as the central act of Jewish worship. Hannah understood that ceremony and slaughter were not substitutes for one’s presence in spirit.

Intuitively Hannah knew how to pray. She worshipped silently, her lips forming words that expressed her truth and her need. Her prayer gave shape to her longings. She allowed her emotions to pour out, and that emotional release opened the gates for holiness to come through.

Three characteristics of heartfelt worthy prayer are gleaned from Hannah: Pray in your heart, allow your lips to form your truth; and concentrate. The heart is honesty with self, the lips are acknowledgement to self and request to the Divine, concentration is focus and willingness to hear. Being fully present both physically and spiritually opens us to connection, understanding and action.

With focused intention, Hannah pleaded with the Divine ... (going) through a transformation during her prayer.”

Hannah spoke out. She took her request directly to God. She was not intimidated by “the system” – embodied in Eli the priest. She let herself be transformed by her prayer. And, by doing so, she “changed the system” of spirituality - individual, silent, heartfelt prayer took its place in the temple.

Hannah’s prayer teaches us to pray in three simple steps: The **first** is to pray with your heart while allowing your lips to move and form words. The **second** is to concentrate, to be focused and to be “willing to hear.” And the **third** is to be fully present: physically, emotionally, spiritually in order to be open to connection with the Divine and thus to be transformed. Note that Hannah is described by Raver as “humble and courageous.” Crucial to Hannah’s story is that she “followed through” on her promise: she dedicated her much

⁵ Irene Nowell, *Women in the Old Testament* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1997) p. 97. See also, Rachel Adler, “Hannah’s Prayer” <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hannahs-prayer/> (accessed 16 May 2019).

⁶ Miki Raver, *Listen to Her Voice: Women of the Hebrew Bible*. (San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 1998) pp.106-111

desired first-born son to God. And she was abundantly rewarded with additional children even as she maintained a connection with her first-born, Samuel, as the family traveled to the temple each year. After her long wait, and in response to her earnest, heartfelt prayer, her trust and faithfulness was rewarded with abundance. Perhaps that is another lesson here: that prayer opens us to creativity, heals our grief and births in us renewed resolve, renewed commitment to living out our faith in visible ways as the hands and feet of Christ, the body of Christ in the world. As the scholar Flora Slosson Wuellner notes:

“When the body is mentioned in the New Testament, it is often referred to by the Greek word *soma*, which usually implies the *whole* human self: body, emotion, intelligence, will. ... Because our faith is rooted in the incarnation of Jesus, any form of spirituality we claim must also be *incarnational*. Which by definition includes the wholeness of the person. This will profoundly influence our relationship to our communities and our world.”⁷

When answers are given to us before we are fully ready, they often do not answer the question we are really asking. Sometimes it is only in desperation that we become aware of our deepest needs and desires... and can cry out to God for relief. Perhaps God wants us to grow into the answers to our prayers. Perhaps God wants us to grow in our relationship with God.

In the faith tradition I grew up in, the Swedenborgian tradition, I learned that God is always flowing into us and that without this constant influx we would cease to live. When we pray, we focus on that inflowing and let it transform us. Only then can we **hear** and **understand** God’s response to our prayer. Only then can we turn our good intentions into wise action in bringing about God’s kin-dom on earth⁸. This awareness and transformation empowers us to do this work in the world. Perhaps, like Miriam, Deborah and Hannah, we will find we have been given the courage to enter the song,⁹ as our gathering hymn put it, to get on with the work of bringing about the “fire of (God’s) justice” and the compassion to “wipe away all tears” as God is turning the world around.¹⁰

As we enter a time of reflection, I encourage you to consciously engage your whole body as you do so. The image on the bulletin (reproduced below¹¹) shows Hannah in a pose of hopefulness.¹² You may want to look up, focus inward, and let your body relax into attentive receptiveness as you think about these questions:

- How has bargaining with God been part of your spiritual life?
- When and how has God granted a request you made?

⁷ Flora Slosson Wuellner, *Prayer and Our Bodies*. (Nashville, TN: The Upper Room, 1987) p.10

⁸ This section informed by the following selections from the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg: *True Christianity* No. 539, *Divine Love and Wisdom* Nos. 398, 406, 410 and *Divine Providence* No. 3

⁹ “Gather Us In,” words and music by Marty Haugen, 1981. *Chalice Hymnal* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 1995) N. 284

¹⁰ From “Canticle of the Turning” lyrics by Rory Cooney.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F9QeTmRCpW4> (accessed on 7 May 2019)

¹¹ From <https://www.myjewishlearning.com/article/hannahs-prayer/> (accessed 16 May 2019)

¹² Doug Pagitt and Kathryn Prill, *Body Prayer: the Posture of Intimacy with God*. (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2005) pp. 30-32.

- How did you feel when the request was granted? What happened as a result?

