

Sermon 11-14-21
Paul Purdue preaching

Israel's royal editors helped shape the double volumes of Samuel and Kings. We see this in 1 Kings 15:23 along with words about King Asa's foot disease. These histories of Israel's prophets and kings begin with Hannah. (Full Stop) In Hebrew, "Hannah" means favor or grace. Hannah Grace launches a resurgent prophetic movement, not just by giving birth to Samuel, but by her prayers, presence, and prose. The Biblical editors chose ten of Hannah's verses to open a story of prophetic revival.

Hannah's story begins, "*Each year Elkanah and his wives Pearl and Hannah made a pilgrimage to worship and sacrifice to the Lord of heavenly forces in Shiloh.*" The word "sacrifice" appears in Genesis 4 without any rules or explanation, so scholars believe the practice of sacrifice predates the Bible. Theology around sacrifice evolves across the Bible. Abraham, Sarah, Jacob, and Joseph make sacrifices wherever they happen to be. In Exodus 20, Moses brings a new thing called the Law, which teaches that the use of chisels in making an altar defiles it. By the time of Deuteronomy 12, the code demands that all sacrifices be offered only at the well chiselled, but not yet constructed, Jerusalem temple. Finally, the prophets reject sacrifices telling us God despises blood sacrifices (Isaiah 1; Hebrews 9). The shrine of the Lord of Heavenly Forces is likely more aligned with a local deity than Abraham or Moses' beautiful monotheistic revelation "I AM" (Genesis 15; Exodus 3). The story's Shiloh shrine seems similar to the shrines that Numbers 33 bans and King Hezekiah will smash to bits. (2 Kings 18). Could it be that God is at work with people who worship and practice a different theology than you or I? Elkanah's marriage to both Pearl and Hannah raises questions as well! Does this ancient practice give pause to any who want to define Biblical orthodoxy around their understanding of traditional marriage? Can our theology progress? On a deeper and more personal level, do we believe God is working within people we may view as less enlightened or even theological opponents? When does God's perfect love ever stop assisting her even mistaken children?

The royal historians tell us whenever Elkanah sacrificed at the Shiloh shrine, he gave more of the sacrifice to his wife Hannah Grace, because Elkanah loved Hannah Grace and the Lord had kept Grace from conceiving. Now Hannah's rival wife Pearl would make fun of Hannah mercilessly because Hannah was barren (or that was the hateful label of those days). This bullying kept up year after year. And yet, Hannah kept worshipping year after year. Debie Thomas* in "Pouring Out My Soul" invites us to follow Hannah into "the holy work of lament". Hannah keeps coming to the altar across years of personal pain, injury, and grief. Amid her disappointment, she slows down, steps back, quiets her soul, and loses her words in worship. (Rev. Dwight Hughes) The overpromising of the market gods and prosperity gospels give little space for the slower healing work of lament. Do we understand Hannah's tears or Jesus' weeping over Jerusalem are mysterious pathways to deeper liberation? Authentic worship requires Spirit and truth. (John 4) Transforming worship comes by our authentic presence. God longs for open hearts- broken with tears or ascending in praise!

Now, the ancient pre-scientific mindset attributed everything good and evil to God. Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2:6 shows this, "*The Lord! The Lord brings death, gives life. The Lord takes down to the grave, and raises up!*" God did not close up Hannah's womb, although that may have been Pearl's cruel taunt. "Pearl would make fun of Hannah Grace without mercy." Hannah would cry and wouldn't eat anything. Eating disorders are not rooted in food. Do we mourn that such bullying, name-calling, and judging still goes on in our churches? Amid her personal troubles, Hannah leans into real soul-level worship, she will not give up, she keeps doing the healing work lament.

Now Elkanah seeks to comfort, "Hannah, why are you crying? Why won't you eat? Why are you so sad? Aren't I worth more to you than ten sons?" Hannah's deep sadness likely sprung from a culture

that treated women as property, limiting their work to domestic affairs controlled by men and tied to the production of children. (Exodus 22) The culture was barren, not Hannah. Elkanah tries to comfort Hannah, but most of us find better comfort in a friend's listening presence than their many words.

Year after year, Hannah worships. One year, Hannah presented herself before the Lord at the Shiloh shrine. Eli the priest sat in his official seat by the doorpost of the shrine. Hannah was very upset and couldn't stop crying as she prayed to the Lord. She made this promise, "Lord of heavenly forces, just look at your servant's pain and remember me! Don't forget your servant! Give me a child! Then I'll give the child to the Lord for their entire life." Grief or trauma can lead us to make deals with ourselves, people, places, things, and God. Hannah pledges to give away what she wanted more than anything else. Now, God does not want our bargaining prayers. Jesus cautions us to not pour out a "flood of empty words" thinking we can manipulate God by some magic formulas or phrases. We need not bargain or worry over our words either. Jesus reassures us "God knows what we need before we ask!" (Matthew 6) But hear this, God uses the sacrificial deal Hannah makes. Hannah's selfless sacrifice consecrates a line of prophets who will come to judge the nations, kings, politicians, and business leaders. The book may be called Kings, but the book's moral force belongs to the prophets. Prophets not kings are the heroes of the Bible. Hannah begins a line of prophets!

As Hannah kept praying before the Lord, Eli watched her mouth. Praying from deep in her heart, Hannah's lips were moving, but her voice was silent. Eli, who flunked Pastoral Care 101, thought she was drunk. Eli scolded, "How long will you act like a drunk? Sober up!" "No sir!" Hannah replied. "I'm just very sad." Let's celebrate Hannah's "NO", her power, her agency, and her rebuke of the seated patriarchy. Far too often we stifle our wounds and anger for fear of the Elis. We think we need to suppress our emotions for God or church folks. Did we forget we were once called "the shouting Methodists" who even howled in worship? Did we forget Jesus flipping over Temple tables or yelling, "My God, my God, why!" from the cross? Let us be as courageous as Hannah speaking our "No" and confessing the moments when we are "just very sad."

Hannah's courage to own her own feelings and confess "I'm just very sad" may be more empowering than her beautiful "no!" Hannah's owning her lament demands that Eli rethink his position, "Don't think your servant is some good-for-nothing woman. This whole time I've been praying out of my great worry and trouble!"

Confronted with Hannah's Truth, Eli recanted, listened, and offered a blessing, "Then go in peace. And may the God of Israel give you what you've asked." Hannah slightly recasts Eli's blessing, "Please think well of me, your servant." There is deep healing in confession, conversation and counselling. The writers tell us Hannah went on her way, ate some food, and wasn't sad any longer. Hannah's worship, lament, and "NO" helped heal her. Let those who gave eyes see: Hannah is named whole before she has a child.

Hannah and Elkanah got up early the next morning, worshipped the Lord, and traveled back home. The Lord remembered Hannah. In time, Hannah conceived, gave birth, and named the child Samuel, which means "I asked the Lord for this child." After nursing Samuel, Hannah brought young Samuel along with three bulls, sacks of flour, and jugs of wine to the Lord's house at Shiloh. They are wealthy people. After worship, Hannah addresses the priest Eli. Listen for her agency, naming, and truth! "Excuse me, sir! As surely as you live, sir, I am the woman who stood here next to you, praying to the Lord. I prayed for this child, and the Lord gave me what I asked. So now I give this child back to the Lord. Samuel is given to the Lord."

Prophets not kings are the heroes of the Bible. Hannah launches a renewed prophetic movement in chapter 2. *"My heart rejoices in the Lord. My strength rises up in the Lord! My mouth mocks my*

enemies because I rejoice in your deliverance.” The prayer does not break free from the cycle of religious bullying. Still I wonder, when we own our payback feelings in prayer, does grace creep in reminding us to love our enemies? Hannah continues, *“No one is holy like the Lord— don’t go on and on, talking so proudly, spouting arrogance from your mouth, because the Lord is the God who knows, and God weighs every act. The bows of mighty warriors are shattered, but those who were stumbling now dress in power! God raises the poor from the dust and lifts up the needy from hunger.”* Hannah is not stuck in meager personal faith, but embraces a communal vision of God breaking war and lifting up poor people. Her lips no longer move with unspoken grief, she speaks the word of God. The editors include ten of Hannah’s verses! Maybe the hard spiritual work of honest lament, resisting patriarchal inertia, and years practicing worship always helps us find our voice! Amen,

*The holy work of lament. *Pouring Out My Soul*, by Debie Thomas. Posted November 7, 2021.
<https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay>