

Grace Alone

1 Samuel 1:4-20; Hebrews

November 18, 2012

Rev. Damaris D. Whittaker

This morning, as we celebrate Thanksgiving and Consecration Sunday, we rejoice! As we look back at the accomplishments and also challenges of this year, we come to this Meeting House with hearts full of gratitude, because through it all, God has been faithful.

What a wonderful opportunity to share the great story of Hannah.

Hannah was one of the wives of Elkanah, a man who came from a distinguished family line and of some means. Elkanah had two wives – Peninah, who had children; and Hannah, who did not. So, Hannah suffered greatly.

You see, barrenness was considered a source of disgrace in the ancient world. Therefore, Hannah lived under a cloud of shame. Those around her probably wondered what she had done to deserve such a punishment. This is the case with her co-wife, Peninah, who, as we read in the scripture this morning, “to make her miserable, would taunt her that the Lord had closed her womb.” (1 Samuel 1:6)

Children, particularly sons, represent life beyond the present generation in a very real and concrete way. Israelites imagined “life-after-death” as unfolding in the lives of their descendants. Therefore, Elkanah’s future was assured through Peninah’s sons. Hannah’s was not.

If Elkanah died suddenly, his sons through Peninah would have inherited everything, leaving Hannah dependent upon their good will (or lack thereof.)

Hannah was not only dependent upon Elkanah’s kindness and generosity, but his life as well.

As time passed, Hannah would weep and refuse to eat during the family pilgrimage to the House of the Lord at Shiloh. Her husband, based on his response, did not understand her pain. He loved her deeply. It is said that he loved her more than he

loved his second wife, Peninah. However, in trying to be comforting, he asked her, “Am I not more to you than ten sons?”

Had Hannah been a woman of today, she would probably respond, “Seriously, this is NOT about you – I’m just saying.” Perhaps an alternative statement would be, “Hannah, you are more to me than ten sons.”

It is my opinion that Hannah’s suffering is further complicated by the systemic issues of her time – from feeling destitute from God, suffering the public shame of being without children, bullied by her co-wife, misunderstood by her husband – Hannah would appear to be in the margins.

Her only option in this system is to return to God. Here is a distressed and powerless woman at prayer. Now, Hannah is at Shiloh, a very important place of worship, with the ark and the tabernacle present (since at the time, the temple does not yet exist.) So, the priest Eli has a high degree of duty. A person cannot just pass the man at the door and go directly to God.

But Hannah had reached the end of it. This was the last resort. Here, at the temple, she is yet once more misunderstood – this time by Eli, the priest. He thought she was drunk because she was praying, and as she prayed, she moved her lips.

Hannah was engaged in the “prayer of the heart.” She had broken protocol and dismissed the person who was an intermediary to have access to God directly. (You know, there is transformation when we are in God’s presence.)

This morning, let us consider what it would mean for us to enter into a place in God’s presence where we are free to present the prayers of our hearts. Not a prayer we may read, not a prayer that had been prepared for us. But, let us consider what it would mean to venture and enter an unpredictable path to get to God. To enter a place of vulnerability. A place where we are willing to be disarmed by the Holy Spirit and surrender. A place where we can name the suffering and name the promise of God – God’s grace.

We can learn from Hannah the importance of expressing our need before God. Sometimes we are more intent on presenting a portrait of the strength of our faith than in confessing our struggles, our anxieties, and our pain. This is true of individuals and congregations. In our religious life, we admire goal setting, problem solving, and program planning. We often seem to believe that the right strategic planning process will meet our needs.

But, Hannah simply and straightforwardly expressed her need to God. In doing so, she recognized that wholeness in her life lay beyond those things she could control and rested in God as the largest reality in her life. When all there is left is God, we bypass the liturgy, we bypass the formality, and we go straight to God. And there in God's presence, we are allowed to name our realities.

- The reality of loss;
- The reality of loneliness;
- The reality of hopelessness;
- The reality of illness and death;
- The reality of brokenness and pain; and
- The reality of need.

But there also, in God's presence as we are uttering all of the "petitions of our heart" – as we might be having our own experience of the Abba prayer, I invite you to name your realities of

- Gratitude
- Of healing
- Of community
- Of love and forgiveness
- Of new life

And there – claim your wholeness. Because when Hannah got up from her prayer, she was no longer a woman in distress. She was a woman with renewed faith, with a resolve that God was going to answer her prayer. And when God answered her prayer, she promised she was going to return her blessing to God. When God blessed her with a son, she promised she would return her son to be dedicated to serve God. And so it happened.

Samuel was born, and when he was three years old, Hannah left him at the temple, because the proper response to the gift of God's grace is to give it back. When grace gives new life, we, too, must give back of the grace we have received.

And yes, grace may find us first, it may find us in the corner of vulnerability and brokenness, like it found Hannah. But, how beautiful when Grace sees us!

There is a gospel song I heard once that said something like this: “Beautiful, that’s how Grace saw me. For, I was broken and so lost, but Grace looked past all of my faults. Not what I was but what I could be, that’s how God’s grace saw me.”

Hannah’s story is in essence a story of salvation. New life comes out of barrenness. Hope rises from hopelessness. Despair is transformed into thanksgiving and praise.

But it’s in the arena of the prayer of the heart that extraordinary things happen. Hannah’s prayer has been known through the ages. Her son, Samuel, was a significant leader that led the Israelites to their first monarchy. Hannah was made whole.

What if this morning we could look at this story from another perspective, and consider what it would mean for us NOT to look for God in our story, but, as Eugene Peterson proposes, that we would see our story in God’s.

Hannah breaks the protocol and goes straight to God and found herself in the story of God. Found God’s Grace and purpose above and beyond what she asked for. I encourage you this morning to do the same.

May we lift up the prayers of our hearts to God with persistence and boldness. May we find God at the center of our lives. May we find our lives inside of God’s own story. Maybe then, we may be able to pray as Hannah prayed:

“My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in victory.” ~ 1 Samuel 2:1. Amen.