

2021 11 21 – Hannah’s Song

1 Samuel 1:1 - 2:11 (The Inclusive Bible)

First, thanks to Nicole for reading that extra-long scripture passage this morning. The story of the conception and birth of the prophet Samuel is one of several miraculous pregnancies that we find in the Bible. Samuel eventually becomes not only a prophet, but also a priest, a warrior and a judge. In fact, near the end of his own life Samuel anoints Saul, the first king of Israel. Samuel will become a great leader and a key part of the history of the Israelites, but as this story begins, Samuel is just a glimmer in his mother, Hannah’s, eyes.

This particular story is really about Hannah. Hannah lives with her loving husband, Elkanah, and his other wife, Peninnah. Hannah is very depressed because Peninnah has children but she has none. To make it even worse Peninnah teases her relentlessly. And it seems that the taunts grow worse every year during their annual pilgrimage to the temple in Shiloh. During these trips, Hannah cries her eyes out and refuses to eat.

On one trip to Shiloh, Hannah is so desperate for a child that she goes to the temple and prays silently through her tears, “YHWH Omnipotent, look with pity on your handmaid. Don’t forsake me. Remember me. If you will give me a child, a male, I will dedicate him to you.” The priest, Eli, sees her lips moving with no sound coming out and figures she must have had a little too much wine at dinner. He accuses her of being drunk. Hannah explains that she has been pouring out

her broken heart to YHWH and Eli replies, "Go in peace. And may the God of Israel grant you your wish."

The family returns home and Hannah, conceives and gives birth to a baby boy. She names him Samuel. And, once the child is weaned, Hannah returns to Shiloh and presents Samuel to the priest saying, "I asked YHWH for this boy and God granted my request. Now I give him to YHWH, for his entire life is given to YHWH."

Hannah has just given away her only son and what does she do? She prostrates herself on the ground and prays. Hannah prays a song of thanksgiving. She prays, "My heart delights in YHWH, to YHWH I lift my horn high."

My first reaction to this prayer was to ask, "Why is Hannah so happy?" She seems to have no regrets about giving her only child to God. At Bible Study we wrestled with this question and then realized it was probably like sending your child to a convent or monastery. There would be some prestige in having your offspring living and serving at a temple. And, of course, YHWH had granted her wish. So maybe Hannah did have reason to be thankful and even joyful. But I still think there were probably a few tears on the trip home that year.

Once we moved past that question, our study group looked more closely at Hannah's prayer, her song. And we realized it was also a song of retribution! Hannah prays,

I gloat over my foes,
I rejoice in your deliverance!...

...The bows of warriors are broken,
while those who stumble gain renewed strength.

Those who had their fill now sell themselves for crusts of bread
while those who were hungry are sated.

Childless women bear seven children
while mothers of many are forsaken.

“While mothers of many are forsaken?!” Yikes, it’s as if, Hannah is praying that her rival Peninnah would suffer. Hannah seems to have this zero sum view of life where if one person eats, another must go hungry; if one person grows strong, another must weaken; if one woman bears a child, another mother must grieve; and if somebody does us wrong, they must suffer.

Hannah’s prayer fits with the ancient world’s understanding of a God of wrath, a punishing God, a God that literally “shatters foes.” But does this prayer work today? Does this prayer make sense in a church where we believe in a God of love, a God that loves unconditionally and for evermore? I would argue that if we truly believe in a God of love, then we also must believe in a God of forgiveness, a God of healing, a God of transformation, a God of new life.

So instead of condemning Peninnah for her taunts, maybe we should be asking ourselves what it was like for her to be Elkanah’s second favourite wife? What was it like for Peninnah to watch Elkanah give Hannah a double portion while she and her children received half as much? What emotional pain was causing Peninnah to act out in that way? These are the kinds of questions that lead to

healing in relationships. These are kinds of questions that are the basis for restorative justice.

Today is the first day of Canada's Restorative Justice Week. Every year during the third week of November in our country we acknowledge the impacts and achievements of the restorative approach to justice. Restorative justice refers to "an approach to justice that seeks to repair harm by providing an opportunity for those harmed and those who take responsibility for the harm to communicate about and address their needs in the aftermath of a crime." Instead of focussing on punishment, restorative justice focusses on everyone who is impacted, including the offender, and works toward healing and reconciliation.

<https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/cj-jp/rj-jr/index.html>

I'm going to end today by sharing part of a true story that I found on the webpage of the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) Canada.

The story is about Chuck,* a man who was charged and convicted with possession of child pornography. It's also about the people supporting Chuck – his father John,* his therapist Andrea and his Circle of Support and Accountability (CoSA). CoSA is a small group of volunteers plus an MCC staff person who support a person (called a 'core member') in their re-entry to the community after finishing a prison sentence.

In Chuck's words,

There was no question. I was guilty of my crime and I wasn't going to ever even contemplate, uh, not pleading guilty. When my lawyer presented me with what the Crown was going after as far as sentencing goes, it's, um, they were proposing six to nine months.

And I knew I needed therapy and a lot of therapy. I knew I needed help. I knew that, uh, I'm going to jail as much as it is as a punishment, I just wasn't going to be getting the help I needed.

Chuck had heard good things about the Ontario Correctional Institute, or OCI as it's called. He knew about its thorough psychiatric and therapy-based rehabilitation program for Ontario male offenders. The problem was that Chuck's potential sentence of six to nine months was at risk of being too short to qualify for OCI. So Chuck did something very unusual: he asked for a longer sentence.

He said,

And it was, it was a hard decision. I mean, to ask for more time, I was really scared to go into jail. I knew it wasn't going to be a good time.

Andrea, his therapist said,

I don't use the words evil and that type of thing when I'm working with people [but] I have fellas that will use those terms. We do explore, "Is that fair? Is that compassionate towards yourself to think of yourself as an evil person?" Some of the guys I work with have this really long history of self-loathing and this really destructive relationship with their self.

Chuck falls into this category. After a lot of therapy, he has identified several traumatic incidents with his peers from when he was around 12 years old that were sexual in nature and contributed to his poor mental health and depression later in life. We won't unpack that here, but it's worth mentioning because, to paraphrase addictions specialist Dr. Gabor Mate, "The first question is not 'Why the abuse?', it's 'Why the pain?'" This is where therapy can truly be life-changing.

<https://mcccanada.ca/stories/episode-about-chuck-sneak-preview>

Thankfully, Chuck has a therapist, a caring father and a support group to work with him as he returns to life in his community. This is a story where everyone benefits. This a story of restorative justice. This is a story of God's love working in the world.

What would Hannah's song have sounded like if it had God's wrath, it had God's healing love at its core? Would it have sounded more like this?

(choir sings Jim Strathee's *Fields of Praise*)