

A Faithful Gift
A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church
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Samuel 1:9-18
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Most of us are here today because, many years ago, women and men of our communities of faith took seriously, the promise and commitments they made at our dedications and baptisms, and so many points in between. They promised to share their lives with us. They promised to treat everyone of us a gift from God. They promised to show their gratitude for God's gift, by being lights in our lives – beacons that would always remind us of our inherent worth.

In today's text, we meet one of the original beacons of our faith: Hannah.

As this morning's text begins, Elkanah, and his wives Hannah and Peninnah, make their annual pilgrimage to the regional shrine at Shiloh, to worship and to offer a sacrifice to the Lord. We soon learn that Hannah, Elkanah's first wife and true love, is barren, but that Peninnah, his second wife, has born him children. Peninnah lords this fact over Hannah.

Hannah is grieved. In ancient Israel, a woman's worth was tied to her ability to bear many heirs for her husband – a large family ensured protection, and guaranteed that lands and possessions would pass from one generation to another. Hannah feels ashamed, broken, incomplete. And each year, as the family treks on up to Shiloh, her inadequacies are on display for the whole world to see. She cannot eat. She can only weep, for her heart is empty and sad – Hannah is vulnerable.

But out of Hannah's vulnerability comes the ultimate display of strength. When we're most vulnerable our inhibitions disappear, and we no longer rely on self-assurance, but instead, we rely with confidence on the power of God to affect our lives. We rely on the power of God to turn our vulnerability into resilience, into grace-filled goodness.

Hannah is active, assertive. She presents herself before the Lord. This is not a passive prayer – this is a prayer of passion. Hannah begins her prayer, she's weeping bitterly – Can you imagine her? Her fists are clenched, she's hunched over, she strains to make the words come out... "Lord of hosts, if 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 before you a Nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head."

"Give me a child," Hannah says, and "I promise, that I will give him back to you!!!"

So emotional, so physical is Hannah's prayer, that she catches the attention of Eli, the temple priest. In fact, from Eli's vantage point, as she's praying, Hannah is only mouthing the words of her prayer – no sound is coming out.

"Madam," he says. "The temple is no place to make a drunken spectacle of one's self. Put away your wine and get yourself together!"

Hannah responds that she is not drunk. She is deeply troubled, and she is pouring out her soul to the Lord – she needs God to know about the anxiety she feels because she believes God is the only force

that can offer her solace. Eli is moved, so moved, that he never even asks what favor she seeks of God. He offers her his blessing, and asks that God will grant Hannah's petition.

God remembers Hannah. God gives Hannah a son. And Hannah names him Samuel – He who comes from God.

The birth of Samuel is remarkable. But the next part of the story is even more remarkable. Hannah keeps her promise. She displays a sense of gratitude that is just as assertive as her prayers for wholeness. God had finally given Hannah a son. But the story does not end here. Hannah knows that Samuel (as is every child), is a gift from God. And in order to offer God proper thanksgiving, Hannah must allow Samuel to live into his intended calling.

Hannah had promised God that her son would become a Nazirite and live at Shiloh in the care of Eli. And though it surely pained her, she gave her son back to God.

Hannah's love was a like the beacon of a lighthouse. Just like the beacon circles around its perimeter, so too, Hannah circled back to Samuel. She visited him each year, bringing a new robe, and I imagine hugs that lasted for hours on end. I can even imagine her making a weekly care package full of brownies, maybe even some peanut M&Ms and Skittles, and heartfelt letters of encouragement. And I bet she was the kind of mom that when she bought him a new shirt, she would pre-wash it – he wouldn't have to wear something that smelled like the store and felt all scratchy. And I imagine that not a day went by, when she didn't thank God for Samuel, and pray that God would use him to the fullest. And I am betting that the prayers she offered each day for Samuel's wellbeing were just as vigorous, just as passionate, just as assertive as the ones she offered for his birth.

Samuel became the fruit of a garden tilled in the soil of Hannah's faithful covenant. Her nurturing helped him become the leader of Israel, and the man who would anoint Kings Saul and David. Samuel is a promise kept. Hannah's promise.

Just like Joshua two weeks ago, and Ruth last week, Hannah's is not a story without its flaws. But just like I've said in the past two weeks, I love this story, even if it does have some flaws. And even if there are some painful elements. And I would encourage you not to let any of its flaws blind you from its deep goodness.

What's good about this story?

Hannah is faithful. She is a covenant woman, even in grief, even in disappointment, even in a community that marginalizes her. And God rewards her faithfulness. And what does she do with that reward? She honors it back. Hannah is strong. And resilient. And generous. And humble. And honest. And full of integrity. Hannah doesn't live in a covenant that achieves an end goal. She lives in a covenant that is ever-growing, and ever-expanding.

And this story tells us God stands with folks who have been left out. God listens to them. And God responds to them.

And this story confirms for us that the covenant established with Noah and Abraham and Moses, has been extended through generations of faithful witness in people like Joshua, and Ruth, and Hannah and Samuel.

This is a good story! But there are some issues.

Hannah lives in a society where a woman's value is solely contingent on her ability to bear children. God's response in this story is to provide Hannah with a child. And the solution allows Hannah's dignity to be restored in the context of this flawed system. But God's response does nothing to fix this system on a macro-level.

Joshua's people have new land. And Ruth's got a new husband and newfound prosperity. And Hannah finally has a son. A few of God's faithful have been rewarded and remembered. But whether in ancient Palestine or modern-day Charlotte, there are still those who suffer Pharaoh's cruelty, or wander in a foreign land, or desperately long for a providing partner, or for the chance to bear a child.

And these folks may not have scripture passages written about them, but they are faithful nonetheless. And while I truly believe that God loves them and God listens to them – and I mean that, I do – so many of these souls will not be “rewarded” with deeded lands, or providing homes, or precious children.

I don't know why that is. Unfortunately, the world is not always fair. And it isn't always pretty.

But I will not believe the world's edges are made rough by the whims of a flaky or vindictive God. I will not believe that God doles out doses of prosperity or fertility on a subjective scale of faithfulness. I will not believe that people who do not have what they hope for, don't have it because they have neither prayed hard enough nor been faithful enough to attain it.

If the mortgage papers had fallen through, and the developers had backed out, and Joshua had not resettled Canaan, his is still a faith I'd want to emulate. If Ruth had not found Boaz, and she was left gleaning in the fields, hers is still a servant's heart I'd like to have. And if Hannah had not borne Samuel, hers is still a mothering instinct I'd cherish.

I think it's important for us to remember that back then, most folks believed in a zero-sum gain. That meant one's good fortune had to come at the expense of another's. And it meant a chain of abusive behavior. The powerful abused the weak. And the weak abused those who were even weaker. And so it went on down the chain. Women who had husbands and children, didn't think twice about ridiculing women who didn't.

As I've mentioned the last few weeks, I think oftentimes, our beloved stories were redacted by ancient editors to reflect a proof of prosperity for Israel – We're a chosen people, deeded with lands and blessed with children and abundance. And our neighbors aren't. Therefore, Joshua, Ruth, and Hannah have been twisted – the stories written to show Canaan, and Boaz, and Samuel as the proof of God's investment in Israel.

But let me offer a different take. If we live with Joshua's faith, our value is not deeded to us in land, it's given to us in God's presence. If we serve with Ruth's heart, our value is not restored in the acquisition of a sugar-daddy, it's ever-present in God's abundance. If we love with Hannah's resolve, our value is not measured in the number of children we bear, but rather, it's evident in our status as children of God.

Sardis Baptist Church, we are a covenant people. We come from Joshua. And we come from Ruth. And we come from Hannah. The fruit of such a covenant is not exclusive, nor is it always tangible. The fruit of this covenant is disruption – God's disruption to a solemn world, to a world that says, “This is how it

has to be.” Sure, sometimes God gives enslaved people new lands, and foreigners respite, and barren women children. But God also puts in us, just as God put in Jesus, the power, and the determination, and the faith to work for the transformation of broken systems.

Samuel, Hannah’s gift to our covenant, eliminated the abuses in the Temple by Eli’s sons. And he shepherded (reluctantly) Israel from tribal leadership to monarchy. Jesus, another gift of covenant, challenged us to think beyond the social boundaries of his day.

And the beacons of Hannah, and Samuel, and Jesus circle back to meet us each year. To affirm us, to challenge us, to provoke us into being of part of God’s disruption, into being Covenant people.

May God give us the faith and the strength to hear their stories anew, and to receive their light. And with that light, to be God’s change in the world.

Amen.