

My Heart Rejoices in the Lord!

1 Samuel 1:4:20 Crossroads Christian Church

1 Samuel 2:1-10 November 15, 2015 Pentecost 25B

Last Sunday, I chose from among several lectionary scriptures to preach on the widows' might—m-i-g-h-t, with the stories of Ruth, Naomi, and the unnamed widow at the temple treasury. Stories of women of strength and courage, women overcoming obstacles, and women staying faithful to God have popped up several times in the lectionary these last twelve months. It began, of course, last Advent, when the young woman Mary said yes to God's incredible invitation though the angel Gabriel to bear, give birth to, and raise the Messiah, the Son of God. In September, we heard the story of Esther, the beautiful girl of humble origins who became the queen of Persia, and saved her people from a holocaust. Now, today, we are going to look at a story about yet another woman of courage and faith, whose name is Hannah.

John C. Holbert, asks, "Is it not amazing how every huge biblical event begins in some very small way?"¹ He goes on to say, "The creation of the universe, according to the Bible, begins with the simple sound of God's voice, in complete contrast to other such ancient stories that speak of combat among titanic gods. The founding of the nation of Israel begins with an infertile couple living in a foreign land. The salvation of Israel begins with the birth of a baby boy in the context of an edict to kill all such babies. And that particular baby is saved from death by five women, one of whom is pharaoh's own daughter! And of course, most famously, the birth of Jesus occurs to an unmarried and powerless couple, unknown and unregarded in the vast empire of Rome."² (unquote)

One of these huge biblical events with a small beginning is the story of Hannah, for it would become the story of Samuel—a prophet, a judge, a kingmaker, the conscience of the people of Israel.

Our story begins during the time of the Judges. The twelve tribes of Israel had settled in, but had no organized government. The tribal groups, the extended families, took care of the basic needs of their members. If the tribes came under attack from their neighbors, God would send a judge, a charismatic leader, who would unite as many tribes as he or she could—and yes, one of them was a woman--to fend off the enemy, then things would settle back down. Shrines were set up at holy places, and the priests at

1 John C. Holbert, *Opening the Old Testament*, www.patheos.com.

² Ibid.

these shrines tended to the religious needs. One such shrine was at Shiloh, where an old man, Eli, was the chief priest.

One family which lived nearby at Ramah worshiped at Shiloh. Elkanah had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah would bear child after child; Hannah bore no children. Peninnah wouldn't let Hannah forget it, either. Elkanah loved Hannah deeply and was generous to her. But Peninnah mocked Hannah, and Hannah grew depressed and discouraged. She wouldn't eat well, because she grieved for a child that never came. Although the name Hannah is connected with the Hebrew word for grace, she lamented that God had never graced her with a child. Her biological clock was ticking. Maybe she remembered the story of her ancestor Sarah, also childless for so many years, who was given a son, Isaac. "Why couldn't it be me?" Hannah might have wondered. "Why couldn't it be me?"

Hannah mustered up enough strength to go to the shrine to pray. It was dark there, with just the flicker of oil lamps that cast deep shadows on the wall. It smelled of smoke from burned offerings to God. The Ark of the Covenant was there, along with the altar. Levi, the old priest, had troubles of his own. His eyesight was failing. His sons served as priests, but they just were in it for what they could gain for themselves. Hannah didn't go to see a priest, though. She went to pour out her heart to God. Tears filled her eyes, and her voice was choked with emotion. "Lord of hosts, just look at your servant's pain and remember me! Don't forget your servant! Give her a boy! Then I'll give him to the Lord for his entire life. No razor will ever touch his head."³ In other words, she said, "Give me a child, God, and I'll give him back to you, to use as you see fit." People in those days who wanted to dedicate their lives to God took what was called the Nazirite vow—their hair would grow long, they wouldn't drink wine, they would be set apart. Hannah was taking the vow for her yet-to-be-conceived child.

Old Eli observed Hannah, her lips silently muttering and her body trembling, and he suspected she must be drunk. Walter Bruegemann notes "She is not drunk; she is desperate. Her desperation leads to an act of candid piety, speaking her grief and vexation to precisely to Yahweh."⁴

But Eli didn't know that. "How long will you act like a drunk? Sober up!" Eli told her.

"No sir!" Hannah replied. "I'm just a very sad woman. I haven't had any wine or beer but have been pouring out my heart to the Lord. 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!"⁵

³ 1 Samuel 1:11

⁴ Walter Bruegemann, *First and Second Samuel*, Interpretation Series, John Knox Press, 1990, p.13.

⁵ 1 Samuel 1:14-16 CEB

Eli now realized that the woman's grief was genuine, and he blessed her; he told her to go in peace, and prayed that God would grant her petition. Walking home, Hannah realized that she wasn't depressed any more. She sat down that night and ate her first hearty meal in months. The next morning, Elkanah and Hannah worshiped together. Later, they went home and knew each other in the biblical sense. God remembered her, and she became pregnant. Usually the father would name the child, but in this special case, when the boy was born, she named him Samuel, meaning "God listens." God did listen, and Hannah sang a song of triumph. You heard it read earlier. It began, "My heart rejoices in the Lord." She, a lowly and humble person, has asked, and God had granted, her deepest wish. She had gone from being pitied and from being mocked to one who had every reason to sing for joy. It was her joy, and it was God's power. She sung about the God who turns tables on the mighty and powerful, and has compassion on those who are humble and needy.

With Advent coming up, you may remember another song very similar to Hannah's. When God had given Mary the mission of bearing and raising the Christ child, she sang her own song. "With all my heart I glorify the Lord," it began, and she too sang of how God sends the rich and self-satisfied away empty, and who lifts up the lowly. Her song is called the Magnificat. Mary might well have modeled her song after Hannah's song, because they had both had such similar experiences—they were both chosen by God to bring new lives into the world, lives that would change the world for the better. Hannah and Mary were sisters across the centuries, because they had experienced both the power of God and the grace of God in their lives, and had become part of God's transforming work in the world.

Sometimes we experience barren, dark times in our lives. Sometimes they are short-lived, sometimes they last for years. Depression pulls us down. We wonder why our lives, once so full of joy and hope, seem now like dull, meaningless routine. Our dreams have died. We wonder if it's worth it just to get up in the morning. We feel like puppets whose strings are being pulled by people who care nothing about us. Sometimes, like Job, we wonder if God cares, if God listens.

But then, sometimes like Hannah, we mutter our prayers, our complaints, our deepest feelings, to God. Paul, in Romans 8, says that sometimes we just can't find the words for prayer, that the Spirit prays for us in sighs too deep for words. God does listen. God does care. God brings warmth to our cold hearts. God may or may not choose us to transform the whole world, like he did with Hannah and Mary. However, God can bring us the joy and peace of God's presence, and do wonderful things for us and through us. Like Mother Teresa said, we can do small things with great love. And as we let God's spirit in, we find ourselves changed. There still may be down days, but more and more our hearts will be warmed; our love will reach out to

others. Love will make its way and bring changed families and transformed relationships. The little things that we do with great love will help God do great things in our sad and troubled world. Then we can sing along with Hannah and Mary, "My heart rejoices in the Lord." Amen.

By Michael E. Dixon