

Hannah's Prayer & Song (14Oct18)
1st Samuel 1&2

The prayerful lament of a vulnerable woman. And then it turns to praise.

I wish this turning could be more broadly true in what have been especially sad and hard days for vulnerable women. And although this Bible reading isn't directly able to be extrapolated and applied to all vulnerable people, still I believe and expect that the fundamental message of the story is, indeed, for all.

We heard a rivalry, between two women, perhaps an unfortunate breakdown in what could've been mutually understanding and supportive. Hannah, whose name means "favored," certainly seemed out of favor. We heard her taunted and ridiculed and ostracized, yes bullied, for her infertility and lack of children, by one whose name means "fertile," Peninnah.

That situation is a miserable, lonely place to be in our time, but, as we've continued to hear, in this ancient culture it was downright dangerous. Even more than now, having a child was clearly a status symbol for a place in society and expectation of women. But it was also sustenance. Where we cite a statistic that it costs \$233,000 to raise a child to age 18*, the focus in Hannah's time would have been the opposite, that food and shelter wouldn't have been available to her without a child. She faced that vulnerability.

That's bad enough. Worse is that Peninnah taunted her about it.

Her husband would seem to be better. He really favored Hannah, so much as to give her the double share. But still he didn't seem to grasp her sorrow or difficulty. He asked, "am I not more to you than ten sons?" Not very empathetic, and, as commentators point out, it would have been more caring to have said, "Hannah, you are more to *me* than ten sons." At any rate, no matter how much he loved her, it didn't really resolve it.

Then there's the religious official, Eli. When Hannah was in distress, he responded with presumptuous accusation. Ironically, Eli accused

Hannah of being drunk, even while she's promising her offspring wouldn't drink.

Finally, there's God. Though the reading says God has closed Hannah's womb, we might try to say that infertility isn't the will of God. But we also have to expect that the response to infertility needs to tell us something about God. And, more broadly, what happens when we are amid suffering and longing and life not being what it should? When traumas linger? Where is God in that?

Here Hannah prayed, sharing her problem. Now, we should notice that there's no magical incantation or special words. She prayed good and strong and didn't tiptoe around it, pointing out her misery and asking God to be attentive to that. She trusted that God doesn't want us to be miserable, with faithful expectations that, when we're down and out, not only should God *want* to do something about it, but God can! "Don't forget about me, God!" It's just a version of "Lord, in your mercy, you hear our prayer."

One other comment on Hannah's petition. She made a promise about this child she hoped for, but it's not best to hear that as bargaining, that she'd make the boy into a priest as payment back to God for giving her offspring in the first place. God isn't in the business of making deals, of being connived, of any tit-for-tat relationship, in being our God only in response or reciprocation for our pious promises.

Still, we might well note that God did respond. We would typically say God answered Hannah's prayer. That makes us think she did something right, to get what she wanted. Or it makes us wonder what we ought to be doing differently when our prayers aren't answered, when problems remain, or we continue to feel ostracized, or when our place of vulnerability remains so tenuous and scary. If something worked out for Hannah, we want it, too.

We'd prefer to have it be so simple as getting just what we want, like she apparently (eventually) did. We'd like it to be that our vulnerabilities are removed and we're instantly strengthened. We'd wish to switch directly from

* <https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2017/01/13/cost-raising-child>

lament to praise. We're good at spotting injustice, especially when we're suffering it, and we've got no good reason to be patient with it. We want the secret code words of right prayers. I realize all that.

I'm sorry for those ongoing hurts. I'm not explaining them away, since they won't just go away. But we do need to see and believe God does something. So when we turn to Hannah's song, we may recognize we aren't left out. We are already contained in this story. Hannah sings our situation, even if not the exact circumstances.

I know to start that is a dissatisfying answer for your individual pains and hopes for wholeness. But let's carry forward to notice that Hannah's song is barely about her. She mentions those who had been childless, but she certainly doesn't gloat in the birth of her own son, but rather says braggadocio has no place anymore. In fact, it's a remarkable song because it situates this one birth amid a much larger scope of amazing work across humanity and creation, of feeding the hungry, of ending war, of wealth no longer lording it over others, of bringing justice and integrity and honor to those who had been ashamed and dismissed.

These are powerful words, that our God of reversals is working a revolution in society. Exchanges of fortune fill these words, of the lowly lifted up and the high brought down (whether this is a vision of equality and sharing or a vision of changing places, of the 1% no longer having their turn, of those who lived in palaces being out on the street and the homeless moving in). However it may come, this proclaimed godly way is not the way of our world.

Further, we also notice this God of reversals is not our normal conception of God. Even the sense of God is flipped when these words apply across all of our perceived hierarchies. This reversal strikes God's own self. I said before that God isn't into bargaining, but our God, especially as most clearly embodied in Jesus, does strike a deal and go into a free trade in what Luther termed "the happy exchange."

The Mighty One takes on the form of weakness, the eternal becoming mortal, and the one who is greatest and Lord of all comes to serve. With the song of Hannah, this God not only moves you up a ladder of societal stature, but gives you the riches and entity of God's own self. God takes your sadness and gives you joy, your tears and gives you laughter. God takes your loneliness and gives you community, even with God's own presence. God takes your vulnerability and gives you strength and standing. God takes your misery and fills you with promise, takes what it wrong and makes it right. God takes your shame and exclusion and gives you honor and calls you favored, just like Hannah. God takes your uncertainty and gives you faith. And all this is most clearly and emphatically true because on the cross Jesus takes your death in order to give you life. These are the happy exchanges, where God takes you and says, "All that I have is yours."

Yes, these are powerful words. And not just words Hannah claimed for herself. This isn't a self-congratulatory hymn celebrating that she is so blessed. It's not about her happiness or relief at becoming a mother. These powerful words are also more than for her time and place, of her nation moving from fragmentation to unity.

We're recognizing in this service that one of the most famous echoes of Hannah's song came from the mouth of young Mary, the Mother of our Lord, before his birth. It was true for her. And in him—in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection—we came to know and trust these happy exchanges that God is working.

But this wasn't about one mother 3100 years ago or an ancient faraway people. Neither was this about another mother 2000 years ago who could've been shamed or killed. It wasn't for her son's efforts against an empire.

Continuing forward with these powerful words, I learned this week that Mary's song was banned by the Guatemalan government in 1980's because it posed a threat to the military order they were seeking to impose.**

** cited in *Wisdom's Feast: An Invitation to Feminist Interpretation of the Scriptures*, Barbara E. Reid, p57

And so we keep singing them. These words continue to announce, to celebrate, to spread. They are words that echo across and through our world today.

And they are words for you, for your life. Even while you remain with your hurt and your worry, as society around you seems to still stifle your concern and preclude your place, as it feels yet so far from any resolution, as you can hardly envision a good way forward, still this revolutionary and loving word is for you, that God is turning the world around, that you will not be left out, because our God is always on the side of life, even to the point of God's own death. That is how our God most certainly turns vulnerability to power and lament to praise and you to what you should be.