

First Presbyterian Church
Rev. Pen Peery
November 18, 2012

Hannah Rose
1 Samuel 1:1-20
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There was a certain man of Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. He had two wives; the name of one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.

Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the Lord. On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb. Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb.

So it went on year after year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah said to her, 'Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?'

After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. She made this vow: 'O Lord of hosts, if only 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 him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.'

As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, 'How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.' But Hannah answered, 'No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.' Then Eli answered, 'Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.' And she said, 'Let your servant find favor in your sight.' Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

They rose early in the morning and worshipped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, 'I have asked him of the Lord.'

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This is the story of the birth of Samuel.
Samuel would go on to play a significant part in the story of God's people.

You see, Samuel's purpose was to be the anointer of Kings: first King Saul, then King David. The line continued...Solomon, Jereboam, Uzziah, Josia.

Many, many moons after today's passage, you might remember, a young couple took a journey from Nazareth to pay their taxes in a small city called Bethlehem where they gave birth to their first-born son. They were in Bethlehem because Joseph was from the house and lineage of King David. This Bethlehem-born child from the Davidic dynasty would become the King of Kings. The greatest and last in a line of Kings among God's covenant people.

That line of kings had its genesis through the help of a young priest named Samuel – whose life was dedicated to God's service by his mother whose name was Hannah.

While today's scripture is the story of the birth of Samuel, what is more significant – at least in my mind – is the faith of the mother who brought Samuel into the world.

A mother who – before she was a mother - suffered the indignity and cultural shame of being a childless, married woman. Hannah suffered the scorn of other women, the pity of her husband, and the feeling that her life was incongruent with the way God intended life to be.

And yet, with all of that, in what is the most remarkable part of today's passage – we hear that from the depths of her despair, "Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord."

Until that moment, Hannah depended on someone else to do her bidding before God. Her husband was the one who would present himself to the Lord on Hannah's behalf. This was a day and time when women were not allowed to present themselves for prayers in the temple. But, for Hannah, it was time for her to make the case before God on her own. She was tired of her life the way it was. So she rose.

* * *

Can you imagine the courage it took for Hannah to rise?

If you have ever been a fellow companion on the journey of infertility you could.

At first the questions and comments are easy to shrug off:

Do you have any kids?

When are you guys going to try for number two?

You know, you're not getting any younger?

People don't really mean to be cruel. They are just asking questions.

But after a while – those questions start to wear you down.

The news of other people's pregnancies no longer fill you with joy the way they used to.

Baby showers become events to avoid.

And it feels as if your worth as a person – as a man, or a father...but especially as a woman, or a mother – starts to diminish.

Inside the world of infertility, hope is difficult thing when you are under the weight of constant disappointment. When your hope is dim the world is a lonely place. It is as if there is no one who can understand your struggle; like there is no one to whom you can turn.

Hannah lived in a time when, literally, a woman's worth was directly tied to her ability to her ability to procreate.

Scripture doesn't tell us how long Hannah lived with this burden. Only that it went on "year after year."

Long enough to shape Hannah's identity.

Long enough to define Hannah as a woman who was "barren."

Which makes the fact that Hannah found the courage to rise and present herself before the Lord that much more surprising.

The Bible is filled with barren women.

Sarah was labeled as such before she and Abraham had Isaac.

Rachel was barren before she gave birth Joseph.

Elizabeth was thought to be barren before she gave birth to John the Baptist.

Of course, all of these stories have happy endings.

All of these women end up having their deepest desires met in the soft cry of a baby's voice.

So what about the other women? What about the countless other stories that continue in struggle and disappointment and despair?

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Mercy Oduyoye has one of those stories.

Mercy Oduyoye is from Ghana, Africa.

She is widely considered Africa's greatest female Christian theologian – but before *this* was her identity, Mercy's identity was defined by something else. For a long time, Mercy suffered under the weight and the stigma of being a married African woman who was childless.

Like Hannah's time – in Ghanaian culture a married woman with no children was considered to be less than a woman. Year after year, Mercy labored under the chronic disappointment of no pregnancies, or failed pregnancies. Until one day as she lay in bed, fresh from another disappointment, she had a revelation. In her words,

“Just as Hannah rose, so on that day, [I] rose to the realization that children are God's gifts to creatures who need to survive by procreation. I had prayed to join in obeying the command to increase and multiply, and God was saying a clear no to my offer. I felt free; I felt open and fertile, a new person for whom God has a purpose. It was like putting my life on the altar for God to consume what is not necessary for my journey. Rather than being consumed by my childlessness, I rose, like Hannah, as one who had experienced a secret conversation and a secret pact with God. I was convinced that something would be born of this experience. I was pregnant with expectation of great things to come to me from God. I have not been disappointed.”¹

For the past 35 years, Mercy Oduyoye has dedicated her life to creating a place for women...child-bearing and child-less...in the fabric of Africa's churches as well as being an advocate for women's health in the face of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa.² Indeed, something was born out of her experience.

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Maybe you have walked a similar journey as Hannah or Mercy.
Maybe it is something else –

Maybe you aren't known (or valued) for anything outside of your job;
Maybe you are imprisoned in the patterns of addiction;
Maybe you are the one who is always bullied at school;
Maybe it feels like the world has left you behind.

It is easy to feel stuck.

And when we feel stuck, it is easy to be cynical and to believe that nothing will ever change.

It takes courage to imagine that things can be different.
That there might be future filled with hope.

¹ Oduyoye, Mercy, *Liberating Eschatology: Essays in Honor of Letty M. Russell* (Westminster/John Knox, 1999) p. 119.

² <http://www.christina-landman.co.za/mercy.htm>

Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord because she was counting on the fact that God would be faithful. She rose and poured out her soul through her prayers because she needed the God who created her to hear them.

And, if you remember the story – what lifted Hannah from the place of despair...what reclaimed her life apart from the identity that had previously defined her...was not the birth of Samuel. No, what lifted Hannah from her despair was the act of rising, of offering herself and her prayers, of being in relationship with God, and trusting God to hear her deepest desires and her deepest hurts.

The news that Hannah became pregnant is the epilogue to the story. Hannah's transformation came from the courage it took to present herself before God in prayer.

Encouraging the life of prayer, Fredrick Buechner writes:

“Keep beating the path to God's door, because the one thing you can be sure of is that down the path you beat...the God you call upon will finally come, and even if he does not bring you the answer you want, he will bring you himself. And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers that is what we are really praying for.”³

The Christian life is one that requires the courage to see past the place where things are to the horizon of where things will be. That doesn't mean we get all the things we want, or that we will go through life without struggle...but it does mean that we can count on God to be faithful and present in every circumstance.

We find the courage to rise – like Hannah – because we are a people of the resurrection.

We find the courage to rise because the God we worship through Jesus Christ is in the business of calling new life out of the tombs of our despair.

Thanks be to God.
Amen.

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³ Buechner, Fredrick, *Wishful Thinking: A Seeker's ABCs*