

*Rev. Jennifer A. Gleichauf  
Covenant Presbyterian Church  
1 Samuel 1:4-20  
Birthpangs  
November 14, 2021*

After several years of reading aloud together as a family, taking a few breaks along the way, Evie and Brian and I finished the Harry Potter series last week. Much like Chronicles of Narnia, Lord of the Rings or whatever your favorite is, the best stories appeal to us because they are full of adventures where we get to imagine what we would do in the characters shoes. We cheer the characters on when they do well; have empathy for them when they suffer and shake our heads at them when they make choices we know will cause more trouble. We see ourselves in them.

But the best kinds of stories, the stories that withstand the test of time, the stories that people read for generations, are great because they aren't just about the individual characters. The best stories show us more about our own life. They teach us about love and loss, sacrifice and suffering, courage and truth.

And we find a lot of these kinds of stories in the Bible. Today's story about Hannah is a perfect example. Hannah's story is both a personal story about an individual, in whom we should be able to see some of ourselves, but, like most of the Bible, it is also a story which shows us something bigger – something about who God is and what God is doing in the world.

First, let's look at the personal. Hannah's story is about a woman suffering deeply because she is unable to have a child. I happen to know about this pain very intimately, as prior to adopting our beautiful Evangeline, Brian and I experienced years of

disappointment and sadness in not being able to conceive. But while infertility is its own special kind of sadness, we are all meant to be able to relate to Hannah's grief, even if your grief has been about a different kind of loss or disappointment or pain. For anyone who has known the kind of grief described here: weeping, the inability to sleep or eat or find relief, Hannah is a character for whom we can feel empathy and even slide into her shoes.

And Hannah is not only grieving not being able to be a mother, but also dealing with significant social ramifications that have left her an outcast and in danger of being destitute. First, we hear that Hannah was an outcast among other women. Her husband's other wife tormented her for being childless. And while her husband seems to genuinely love her, he could dismiss her if he wanted if she did not bear children. And worse still, if she was still alive when her husband died, her life as a widow would be very precarious without a child to take her in and provide for her. She could find herself completely destitute – alone, homeless and a beggar. So, this is not just a story about Hannah's personal sadness, but a story of a woman desperate to find acceptance and security for her life. And many of us may know something about this desire too – to be accepted by others and to feel safe.

Hannah suffers for years when finally one year, on their annual pilgrimage to the temple to pray, there are these two little words on which the whole scripture hinges. In verse 9, it says, **Hannah rose**. Pastor Shannon Kershner says of these two words: "In the middle of her despair, in the middle of her physical, emotional, and spiritual barrenness, in the middle of her deep distress, *Hannah rose. Hannah rose.* ... in the middle of all that soul-crushing weariness and hopelessness, one morning at the temple, Hannah rose. She got up. She stood up. She pushed through her pain, through her hopelessness, through her barrenness, and she rose.

The same verb, by the way, the one for “rose,” is used for those times in the New Testament when Jesus heals someone and brings them back to fullness and life, when he raises them up. ... And after rising, Hannah marched right up to that temple, right up to that place where she believed God made God’s home, right up into that holy, sacred space, and she poured out her soul to her God—unfiltered and unashamed. Smack dab in the middle of her deep despair, Hannah dared to rise and Hannah dared to pray. As soon as she had courageously poured out her soul—all her bitterness, all her despair, all her weariness, all her pain—to God in prayer, she rose once again, returned to her husband, ate and drank until she was satisfied. (It) says that her countenance was sad no more. ...Apparently, Hannah (finally came to a place of knowing) that, despite appearances to the contrary, her God *was* a God who remembered her.”<sup>1</sup>

And God does remember her, because Hannah’s prayer is answered. But this is where sometimes things go wrong for people reading this story. Some people interpret Hannah’s story to mean that if we just pray hard enough, just bargain the right way with God, we can get God to give us what we want. And by extension, if we haven’t gotten what we want from God, we must not have prayed hard enough. This puts God in the position of magic fairy wish granter.

But, I can tell you from my personal experience that praying hard enough, long enough, with more than enough tears, does not turn God into a genie or Santa Claus. That is not who God is. None of my many prayers ended with me being pregnant. And I imagine

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<sup>1</sup> Kershner, S. (n.d.). *A letter to Hannah*. A Fourth Church Sermon by Shannon J. Kershner | Sunday, November 18, 2018. Retrieved November 16, 2021, from <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2018/111818.html>.

most of you have your own examples of prayers you have prayed deeply and sincerely which have not been answered the way you hoped or expected. This is not the lesson we are meant to learn from Hannah's story.

Yes, Hannah's prayer is answered. Yes, Hannah gets her son. But what Hannah's story tells us is not that God is a wish granter, but that "Hannah's God (*is*) a God who ...bring(s) life out of barrenness, hope out of hopelessness, joy out of despair. Her God, your God, my God, our God, (*is*) a God who (can) be trusted, who (will) act, and who (will) respond in God's good time and in God's good way."<sup>2</sup>

This is why this story gets told. Ultimately, Hannah could have been just a footnote in Samuel's story. When the Bible was being written, and still today, there aren't a lot of times that the story of a marginalized, outcast, vulnerable woman gets told. Samuel's story could be told without hers. But here it is. Because thousands of years later Hannah's story continues to tell us something about our story. Hannah's story is a promise that God is at work in our suffering, in our pain, in our hopelessness, in our sorrow. That no matter how hard life gets, God is always birthing something new-- new hope, new joy, new love --always. God is full of a fertility that can never be extinguished. God continues to make a way forward for us – individually and as a people.

And birth is beautiful, but I don't know anyone who would say it is easy. While I haven't had the opportunity to give birth myself, I have been in the room for quite a few of them. Birth is messy, painful, sometimes scary, full of anticipation and wondering. Birth

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<sup>2</sup> Kershner, S. (n.d.). *A letter to Hannah*. A Fourth Church Sermon by Shannon J. Kershner | Sunday, November 18, 2018. Retrieved November 16, 2021, from <https://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2018/111818.html>.

pangs, contractions, make many women feel as if their whole body is being ripped apart. During birth pangs the mother can't imagine the child coming, can't yet see who that child will be and the pain feels like it may never end. But then, with the final push, there it is – what we could not imagine arrives.

And so, yes, Hannah gave birth to her son. She brought Samuel into the world. But the very next chapter of 1 Samuel shows us that more is born than Samuel. Chapter 2 is the song Hannah sings after Samuel is born and it is Hannah giving birth in her own life to a new understanding of who God is and what God is doing in the world. This song is recorded and remembered because it is also a creation that came through the birth pangs, the suffering, Hannah went through. And Hannah's reflection on God has helped generations of people better see God, more so perhaps than Samuel ever did. After all that weeping, all that grief, all that torment and suffering, Hannah rose, prayed, and gave the world this song which says:

"My heart rejoices in the LORD;  
in the LORD my horn is lifted high.  
My mouth boasts over my enemies,  
for I delight in your deliverance.

<sup>2</sup>"There is no one holy like the LORD;  
there is no one besides you;  
there is no Rock like our God.

<sup>3</sup>"Do not keep talking so proudly  
or let your mouth speak such arrogance,  
for the LORD is a God who knows,  
and by God deeds are weighed.

<sup>4</sup> “The bows of the warriors are broken,  
but those who stumbled are armed with strength.

<sup>5</sup> Those who were full hire themselves out for food,  
but those who were hungry are hungry no more.

She who was barren has borne seven children,  
but she who has had many sons pines away.

<sup>6</sup> “The LORD brings death and makes alive;  
God brings down to the grave and raises up.

<sup>7</sup> The LORD sends poverty and wealth;  
God humbles and God exalts.

<sup>8</sup> God raises the poor from the dust  
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;  
God seats them with princes  
and has them inherit a throne of honor.

“For the foundations of the earth are the LORD’s;  
on them God has set the world.

<sup>9</sup> God will guard the feet of God’s faithful servants,  
but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness.

“It is not by strength that one prevails;

<sup>10</sup> those who oppose the LORD will be broken.

The Most High will thunder from heaven;  
the LORD will judge the ends of the earth.

Hannah recognizes God as one who is turning the world upside down. A God who raises up the humble and reminds the proud and arrogant of their true place. A God who is worthy of praise. A God who comes to us, knows our suffering and pain, hears our

prayers and is determined to bring hope to the hopeless, and new life into places of barrenness and death.

So, we may know something about Hannah's suffering – we may be able to put ourselves in her shoes. But do we also know something about Hannah's hope; Hannah's praise; Hannah's rising? Hannah's story invites us to ask ourselves: What do we think is hopeless? What grief do we think will never lighten? Where are we sure we, individually or as a people, will never heal or get better?

And having considered these questions, Hannah's story bears witness to the promise that not one of us has been forgotten by God, not one of our lives is outside of God's grace, not a bit of our suffering has been missed by God who hears us and is not done working yet. Hannah's story is meant to remind us, whenever we are hopeless or grief stricken or sure there is nothing better ahead, that our God is a God who turns hopelessness to hope, sorrow to joy, pain to praise. And so just like Hannah, we rise. It may not be right away, but we find the strength, in time, to make sure our own stories have those two little words "Jenny rose" "Nancy rose" "Eddy rose" "Frank rose" (etc). And in our rising, in our praying, in our giving our lives to God, we join our lives with Hannah's in writing more stories of hope, courage, strength and the kind of joy only known when one has also known suffering. So, however you answered those questions about hopelessness and grief, may you hear the invitation to rise, to pray, and to trust in a God who is still at work in your life and in the world. Amen.