

1 Samuel 1:4-20

1 Samuel 2:1-10

**- Hannah's Story - On Prayer And Trust In God**

The CNN journalist Rheanna Green was in Jerusalem recently, interviewing everyday people who had been affected by the violence between Palestine and Israel. While she was there she heard about a man who went to the Wailing Wall 3 times a week to pray. Not only that, she understood that he had been doing this for over 50 years. There was no question about it. This was a story that had to be covered!

And so she decided to go to the Wailing Wall. The Wailing Wall, the last remaining wall of the great temple of Jerusalem, that place where for centuries and centuries prayers have been offered, many of them tucked in between the stone.

And there she sat and waited.

Her informant ran to her with great excitement when he appeared. "There he is! There he is!" Green waited patiently while the man said his prayers. Being a woman, she also had to wait until he left the area that the men prayed in. When she was able, she approached him respectfully and asked if he wouldn't mind if she asked him a few questions. He agreed, and they introduced themselves.

Rheanna proceeded to ask David Adom how often he came to the wailing wall. "Three times a week; morning, afternoon, and sundown each of those days."

Ms. Green asked, "And how long have you been doing this?"

"Oh, about 65 years now."

"That is amazing. May I ask what you pray for Mr. Adom?"

"I pray for my children, and my children's children. And my children's children's children. I pray for lasting peace - a true shalom between Lebanon, Palestinians, Arabs, Christians, a peace in all the world."

"That is truly wonderful, Mr. Adom. Can I ask you one more question? What has it been like for you to pray at this wall 3 times a week for 65 years?"

**“It’s been like talkin’ to a brick wall!”**

Poor David. After all those years he just didn’t feel heard. ☺

Have you ever felt like no one was really listening to you? I think Hannah did. Nobody really listened to Hannah. I mean really listened.

The story we heard in 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel this morning begins with a voiceless woman in distress. Hannah had problems at home. She was ridiculed, abused, and felt like an utter failure as a woman. Out of her great anguish, she prays and bargains with God.

Hannah’s story is a very ancient one, dating back to about a thousand years before Jesus was born. It was a time before Israel had any kings, and when worship was held in a place called Shiloh (just north of Jerusalem) high on the rocky hills. Shiloh was the centre of a tribal government, which was led by leaders called ‘Judges.’ Judges were raised up by God and called to lead God’s people – the tribes of Israel. Hannah’s story tells about the birth of Samuel, who became the last of the Judges.

Ancient Israel was characterized by many practices related to gender and kinship that are quite different from modern ones. It was acceptable at that time for a man to have more than one wife, and Hannah’s husband Elkanah was no different. He had another wife named Peninnah as well, who had children. Elkanah, his wives and children went together on the annual pilgrimage to the temple at Shiloh, where Elkanah participated in a sacrificial meal. However, Hannah had no children. As the scriptures say, the Lord had closed her womb.

Hannah not having children could have been enough reason for her husband to reject her, but his affection for her was noted in the fact that after the sacrifice was made, he gave her twice as much to eat as he gave Peninnah. Perhaps Penny was jealous. Perhaps she was proud. And just as an aside: A lack of acceptance in the tribe/family because of infertility still happens in some parts of the world. Amnesty International reports that this is still an issue in some parts of the world, stating “Women are often valued for their fertility, and are abused, repudiated, and ostracized if they are unable to bear children.”

But Elkanah loved Hannah, and treated her with tenderness,

and yet he didn't seem to notice that Hannah was being treated with such scorn over her failure to provide more heirs. In fact, Peninnah ridicules and provokes her so much that she is recorded as Hannah's rival. She is no friend to Hannah. Penny has no ear of sympathy or understanding for a woman who is upset. In spite of her husband's love and considerate attitude towards her, Hannah has reached the point where she can take it no longer.

And Hannah weeps bitter tears and will not eat. Elkanah goes to her and asks her, what is going on. (Oh Elkanah. Where have you been?) Hannah tells him her sorrow, but he doesn't really hear her, despite his love for her. He tells her that he doesn't mind that she doesn't/can't have children. "Cheer up! You've got me, sweetie!" he says. "Am I not more than 10 sons?"

With clumsy but well meaning words he tries to 'make it better'. But Elkanah isn't really listening to Hannah. Have you ever tried to be sympathetic, but found that the problem was too draining to listen to? It can be a temptation to offer platitudes, a word of popular wisdom, and change the subject. It's a temptation we probably all know.

Elkanah shuffles his feet and seems to want to move on here. He doesn't hear how much sorrow she is in, and how much it hurts to be an outsider. And so Hannah gets up from the table when the meal is over and goes to the temple to pray to God. It is a desperate act, because, up until now, it seems that the Yahweh, The Holy One, isn't exactly listening either. But as the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr once said, "the ultimate form of hope is prayer."

Hannah makes a promise to God. It's a promise that is difficult to comprehend. I know I can't wrap my head around it. It seems like a horrible promise to me. But it was a different world three thousand years ago.

She vows that if God gives her a male child, she will offer him to God's service in the temple. Besides that, she promises that if God gives her a son, he would be a Nazrite; which was a person who never let a razor touch this head or drink alcohol. Not much else is known about the Nazirites.

Eli, the prophet and priest who lives there, watches her, and sees her lips moving, but hears no words from her mouth. Prayers would normally be said aloud, and so he concludes from her movements,

that she must be drunk, and he accuses her of such. This only rubs salt in her wounds of course.

But Eli then listens to her predicament and hears what her prayer is. He dismisses her with a blessing. Ironically, Eli will one day be served by the boy Samuel, and he will recognize that God has chosen Samuel to lead Israel.

And the story goes that Hannah and Elkanah did have a son. Hannah does fulfill her promise. When Samuel is weaned, she takes him to Eli in the temple and gives him to the Lord. Samuel is God's gift to an oppressed woman; his life is God's gift, and in return his mother gives his life to God. She promises with the most unusual dedication.

**She gives back to God the very answer to prayer she had prayed for.**

No one is really listening to Hannah's plight. Except for Eli who eventually does listen. And except for God: The Holy One of Israel, who listens to her plight (and always listens to ours). The Lord truly listens to her, and answers her prayer with a yes.

Our understanding of family and success are obviously different than what Hannah and Elkanah knew. There are parts of this story that rub up against our 21<sup>st</sup> century minds and grates uncomfortably against us. But I would venture to guess that all of us at some time have felt that no one was listening to us including God. When our prayers seem to only go as far as the ceiling, it is important to remember that God isn't just over the ceiling and far away. God is under the ceiling too, and as close as our breath. God listens. We aren't just talking to a brick wall.

God hears the cry of Hannah. And God hears the cry of the poor and the oppressed, the despondent, and depressed. God listens to the immigrant, the outsiders, those of a different faith who have come into our society. Although our world views differ from Hannah's we all still want to belong. We all know what it is to be lonely or without hope. God hears. And God hears our cries too.

But here's the clincher: In fact, God listened so well, that God came to us in the flesh, to live with us and laugh with us and to cry with us too. Jesus not only lived and laughed with us, but he died with us too, and rose again to be with us, and tells us that he is with us always. God came to us, in another baby, born to a young girl named Mary. And

Mary sang a song, just like Hannah's song. You'll find it in the gospel of Luke in the first chapter. It is based upon Hannah's song of praise.

Hannah's song was a song of unmitigated praise. Her joy leads her to praise the God who not only gives children to the barren, but also "raises up the poor" and "lifts the needy" (1 Samuel 2:7-8). She is not concerned only about her own liberation, but speaks also about the liberation of others. Her song is, in truth, a community song of praise that was later inserted into the story but how fitting that she sing a national song of praise and thanksgiving, a sign that she belongs. Mary too sings a song of praise and thanksgiving about a God who has filled the hungry with good things and lifted up the lowly.

We come to worship and give praise and thanksgiving in our words, our songs, our prayers and in our actions. And we are called to listen to the needs of those who cry out to be heard. That person next to you may be the one God is asking you to really listen to. Or maybe God is asking you to truly hear someone else – a child, a neighbour...

And how shall we listen? And what shall we do?

We pray. We act. We respond to the needs of our community and our world. And we dedicate what we can and are able to God's use.

Hannah gave out of her joy, gratitude, and out of her flowed a most unusual sacrifice of love. We are called to listen not only to those who are around us, but to listen to God, to listen to Jesus, and to 'Pray more attention.'

We are the hands and feet of Jesus Christ. Jesus told his friends, "Just as you did it to one of the least of these, who are members of my family; you did it to me." In giving we are blessed, the world is blessed, and the healing touch of Christ, is poured out with transforming grace and hope.

Amen

## **PRAYERS OF APPROACH AND CONFESSION**

God of all creation, shaper of the seas and the stars, sculptor of rocks and people, we praise and bless you. You design the patterns of butterfly wings and forever hold the details of our lives close to your heart. You have known each one of us from the very beginning and we rejoice to be a part of this living world that you love and sustain.

We give you thanks for your intimate and redeeming love, especially as we have seen in Jesus, your Son. Jesus Christ, tender in your compassion and mighty in your deeds, stand among us this morning and render your peace and joy. Help us to be aware of your Spirit dancing in and among us.

Holy Spirit, breath of the universe, fill us with wonder for the mystery of your comfort and leading. Create in us, hearts that long to love and serve you in this place, in our homes, in our work, and in how we live.

Holy and merciful God, we confess that we have failed to see you in places other than here. For when we have ignored the beauty in other people or in your creation, forgive us. For when we have missed your face reflected in the face of others, forgive us. For when we have chosen to live more by our fears than by faith, forgive us. For when we have grown disillusioned, discouraged, or indifferent, refresh our hope and vision.

Help us to rely on your Holy Spirit in all that we do. Enlarge our capacity to care for the world you have made and for all who live in it. Mold us and re-shape us according to your perfect will and endless grace. For we pray this in the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.

### **Pastoral prayers**

They that wait on the Lord shall renew their strength! They shall mount up on wings as eagles. Let us pray.

Loving and eternal God, we bring you our praises and our thanksgivings for the myriad of ways we are able to see your fingerprints in our lives. Teach us to listen to those around us with accepting and generous hearts. And when the fabric of our own lives frays, help us to be still while you mend us and make us whole.

Set us free from our fears, our misdirected concerns, and the burdens we need not carry.

*July 12, 2009, Knox Presbyterian Church, Victoria.*  
*Hannah's Story*

*The Rev. Cathy Victor*

In your love and in your power, bring healing; bring peace. Jesus, our redeemer, whose words and touch poured out the power of love on all who entered your presence, we bring to you those who need your healing touch, for those whose illness is long, painful or difficult to cure, in your love and in your power, bring healing; bring peace.

Holy Spirit, Spirit of gentleness, in words and in silence, we pray for your church in all places; in troubled and broken countries and in peaceful ones.

We pray for those in positions of power and leadership in our world...  
... For those who serve as teachers, healers, caregivers.  
... For the poor and all who are outcast, unaccepted, isolated or held suspect.  
... For those who are sick, or facing death.

We pray for all who cry out to you for your mercy, justice and love...  
... We name before you those who are troubled in mind,  
... Those who feel trapped, those who have lost hope,  
... And those who are burdened with grief and those who have endured great loss.

May a window of light surprise them and bring hope and peace.  
... Teach us your people, to love with an expanding heart  
... In your love and in your power; bring healing bring peace.

Hear now the prayers of our hearts and the prayers for those who are carefully cradled there.

God of grace, bring us closer to the time when all creation will learn the dance of joy and all humanity will taste the wine of peace. Hear us now as we pray in the words that Jesus taught us - Our Father.....

Amen.