

“Hannah’s Song of Praise”

1 Samuel 1: 4-20 and 1 Samuel 2: 1-10

November 14, 2021

In his heyday, it is said that every word the British poet and short story writer Rudyard Kipling wrote was worth twenty-five shillings. Hearing this, a group of college students got together and wrote him a letter that said, “We understand that every word you write is worth twenty-five shillings. Enclosed is twenty-five shillings; send us your best word.” A couple of days later, these college students received a telegram from Mr. Kipling. The telegram consisted of one word. That one word, his best word, was “Thanks!” Kipling proposed that the best word in the English language is “thanks.”

With Thanksgiving around the corner, I thought it might be time for a gratitude check. How often do you and I say “thank you” – to strangers, to friends, to the ones we love, to God? How often do we thank our brothers and sisters in Christ for their gifts of ministry here at Peace Presbyterian Church? Are we thankful people? Do our actions demonstrate a grateful heart? Or do we tend to complain and criticize? Are we so focused on our own agendas that we don’t say thank you to those around us? I think it is time for a gratitude check!

A Thanksgiving Day editorial in the newspaper told of a school teacher who asked her class of first graders to draw a picture of something for which they were

thankful. Her school was located in one of the poor neighborhoods in her town. She thought of how these children who had so little and wondered how they would respond to her assignment. She assumed that most of them would draw pictures of turkeys or tables with food and that is exactly what most of the drawings reflected. The teacher was taken aback with the picture Douglas handed in a simple childishly drawn hand. Whose hand was it? The class was captivated by the abstract image. "I think it must be the hand of God who gives us food," said one child. "It's the hand of a farmer," said another, "because he grows the turkeys." Finally, when the other children were at work, the teacher bent over Douglas's desk and asked whose hand it was. "It's your hand, Teacher," he mumbled.

The teacher remembered that frequently at recess she had taken Douglas, a scrubby forlorn child, by the hand. She often did that with the children. But, apparently, it meant so much to Douglas. Perhaps this was what Thanksgiving should mean for everyone. Thanksgiving, not for the material things given to us but for the chance, in whatever small way, we can give to others.

This morning's scripture reading is about someone who was pivotal in the life of Israel and whose song of thanksgiving will foreshadow Mary's song of praise as she waits for the birth of her son, Jesus. This morning's scripture reading is Hannah's story. Let's listen.....

Prayer for Understanding:

God of signs and wonders, God of everyday surprises, we are eager to hear your Word, thankful you choose to dwell among us and lead us to your new day. We want to celebrate your blessings, share them with those who most need them, and together learn to live as responsible, compassionate people. Amen.

Read 1 Samuel 1: 4-20

Walter Brueggemann, retired professor at Columbia Theological seminary in Atlanta, in his commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel says this:

“Troubled Israel, as the books of Samuel begin, is waiting. Israel is portrayed as a marginal community. We are soon to learn from the narrative that Israel is made marginal by the power and the pressure of the Philistines. In the face of that external threat, Israel is politically weak and economically disadvantaged. But there is also a moral, theological dimension to Israel’s trouble. By the end of the book of Judges, Israel is shown to be a community in moral chaos, engaged in brutality and betrayed by undisciplined religion. Israel does not seem to have the capacity or the will to extricate itself from its troubles.”

At the close of the previous Old Testament book of Judges (which recounts a particularly violent time in Israel’s history) we read: “In those days there was no king in Israel and everyone did what was right in their own eyes.” It was chaos. Lots of political intrigue, bickering and violence. At the opening of 1 Samuel,

Israel is headed toward an economic, political and moral cliff! And so it is that Israel demands a king from God – a king who will protect, defend, gather, liberate and legitimate the community of faith – a king who will compete with all the other kings of the nations. A king! He will fix things! They seem to have forgotten that it has been God who has protected, defended, gathered, liberated and legitimated Israel as God’s chosen people. But they want a king. When David appears later on in this Old Testament book, Israel’s fortunes will indeed begin to change. But the story of how Israel’s kings are made does not rush to David; there is a long period of waiting. A waiting that is confused; a waiting that is bitter; a waiting that is uncertain; a waiting that cannot envision the future. God, however, is doing some amazing things while Israel waits. The origin of Israel’s future and the source of its great leaders are located in the story of a bereft, barren woman named Hannah. Israel’s story, Hannah’s story (which will embody or reflect Israel’s situation), our story, begins in barrenness wherein there is not hint of a future.

As the story opens, the problem is immediately articulated. The man, Elkanah, who has an impressive genealogy and proud past, is married to a woman who is barren and therefore they have no future. Each year, they travel to Shiloh, Israel’s capital, north of what today is Gaza, to worship; it is a holiday of Thanksgiving. And this is how the conversation goes in this one particular Israelite family:

Penninah (Elkanah's prolific second wife who has no problem conceiving and bearing children): "Hannah, aren't you excited to go to Shiloh? So we can say thank you to God for all of our blessings, for all our children? Oh wait. You don't have any children, do you? Silly me. I forgot. So, what do you thank God for?"

Hannah, remembering that her mother taught her to keep silent if she didn't have anything nice to say, does not reply. Elkanah, who loves Hannah deeply but seems a bit clueless here says, "Why are you crying? Am I not better than 10 sons?"

So Penninah walks into the temple with her children, proudly, knowing that God has blessed her greatly. Elkanah walks in, dutifully, appropriately. Hannah walks in, deeply distressed and weeping bitterly. She pours out her soul before the Lord, begging for a child. Hannah prays persistently while she is patiently waiting for God to remember her in her barrenness. Hannah is practicing what I call the "three 'P's of faith". Persistence in believing that God will respond to our cries. Patience as we wait on God's presence. And prayer.

Eli, by all accounts a good priest, sees her praying. Her lips are moving, but no sound is coming out. He determines she must be drunk and chastises her. Hannah is the one person in the whole place who has come before God with humility and honesty. She is not hiding behind any self-righteousness. She is not

there to impress God. She is there to pour out her heart to God, trusting that God hears our cries. Eli, rather than telling Penninah to take that smirk off her face, interrupts the one person in the sanctuary who is honestly praying. Some days we clergy types just don't get it! But Eli quickly recognizes his mistake when Hannah responds to him. He hears the integrity and honesty in her pain and despair. "Go in peace" he says. "May the God of Israel grant your prayer."

Hannah asks/knocks at heaven's door and God answers, God remembers. Our God is a powerful rememberer. And when God remembers his promise for new life, the future becomes full of possibility. The hopeless one (Hannah, and Israel) is now the one given a future. Nineteen verses prepare for the birth and only one verse narrates it. Hannah gives birth to a son and names him Samuel. Samuel will grow to become one of Israel's greatest prophets. He will grow to anoint Israel's kings. The waiting is long, but when God hears and remembers, the action speeds up at a dizzying rate! Hannah is faithful. God is powerful. And Hannah is grateful. And so she sings.

Read 1 Samuel 2: 1-10

Walter Brueggemann says: "This song becomes the song of Mary and the song of the church. It is a song of how God will turn and right the world. It is a song of hope in the world wherever the prospect and possibility of human arrangements have been exhausted. When people can no longer believe the promises of the rulers of this age, when the gifts of well-being are no longer given

through established channels, this song voices an alternative to which the desperate faithful cling.”

Hannah is our great great grandmother in faith. She teaches us the lessons of patience and prayer; but most of all she teaches us to praise God, recognizing that all that we have and all that we are, are truly gifts from God. Gifts to be shared.

Thanksgiving is around the corner. I hope it will be a joyous occasion for you and your family. It is not about the turkey or the dressing or the tables or the centerpieces. It is about being in relationship with each other; reaching out to grab the hand next to you. Or perhaps the holidays are empty or filled with pain for you. The good news of Hannah’s story, is that our God draws nearer to us at just such times of conflict and grief and grabs hold of our hands. Thanksgiving is a time to be grateful for the God who loves us and will never abandon us.