

November 25, 2018

Women of the Old Testament

Hannah - Giving Over To God What Matters Most © - Rev. Seth D Jones

1 Samuel 1-2

Hannah was the mother of Samuel, the prophet. She was a devoted follower of the Lord and prayed often. Israel at this time was a chaotic place and Hannah knew this. It was a time of spiritual darkness. At the beginning of chapter 3, it reads, *“The word of the Lord was rare in those days; visions were not widespread”*.

Eli the priest at the temple, seems to embody that lack of spiritual discernment. He mistakes Hannah’s state of deep prayer for drunkenness (1:12-14). Eli is a devoted priest, but it takes him a while to recognize what is going on around him. Think forward to his experience with Samuel. Again in chapter 3, Eli’s sight has grown dim, a manifestation of his inner spiritual state. Eli cannot recognize that the Lord is calling upon Samuel. It takes three times for Eli to realize the Lord is calling Samuel in the night. Eli has no ability to deal with his sons, who are basically thieves and rapists, who take bribes at the Temple Gate. This also is an image of the state of Israel at this time, this dark, chaotic time.

My question about this story of Hannah is this: given everything that is going on in Israel at the time, why would Hannah want to give over her son to a spiritually dim priest in a broken and chaotic world?

Imagine how hard it would be for Hannah, who has been barren, like so many women we have talked about so far, to be granted a child by God, and then to give away that child at around 5 years old. It seems a strange decision, and a strange request. Well, maybe not so strange, because we have heard a variation of this story in Mary and Jesus, have we not?

But let’s come back to this story. On a first pass, we might think, *“Well, in this society, what defined a woman would be having a child. This is what would make her a true woman in those days.”* While not wrong, it is not the view of her husband, Elkanah, who loved Hannah deeply. *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 would give a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb (1 Sam 1:4-5).* Or perhaps, like with Rachel and Leah, we might think, *“Having a child would give Hannah a kind of revenge against Peninnah, who lorded it over Hannah for having so many children while she couldn’t.”* Again, this might make sense, except then we have to deal with Hannah giving the child away.

I think the reason Hannah asks for a child and then gives the child to a corrupted, broken, dim Temple and its priest is because Hannah is meant to be seen as a prophet of Israel. She is not called this in any commentary, nor is there any Scriptural wording that implies this. But I make my case by looking at how prophets work in the Bible. Many of the prophets in Scripture turn their prophecy into a kind of performance art - prophets enact what God has called them to speak to the people. Isaiah preaches naked in the town square to symbolize the vulnerability of Israel. Jeremiah smashes clay pots in the Temple to symbolize that what the potter has made is in danger of being destroyed. Hosea marries Gomer, a prostitute, to symbolize that Israel is selling itself out but God loves Israel anyway.

Hannah, though, does what many of the women we have seen thus far have done. Hannah takes on in her body the future of Israel. Hannah knows that Israel is in darkness. She knows that Israel will want a king. She knows that a spiritually dim and blind Temple will not be able to choose a God-appointed king. Hannah knows that if God grants a king to Israel, then the one who chooses that king should be guided by God. Hannah is willing to bear that person and give over that person in an act of unbelievable trust, so that person can be trained and brought up in the ways of God. This is what makes Hannah a prophet, and this is why she asks to be the mother of the child who chooses the first king of Israel. She knows before the people know and want a king, and Hannah seeks to ensure the future of Israel.

And they are going to need it, because kings and earth-bound governments are a terrible idea in the eyes of the Lord. After Hannah's son, Samuel, has taken over the priestly duties of Eli, and is called by the people of Israel to choose a king for them, he tells them what the Lord has told him:

'These will be the ways of the king who will reign over you: he will take your sons and appoint them to his chariots and to be his horsemen, and to run before his chariots; ¹²and he will appoint for himself commanders of thousands and commanders of fifties, and some to plough his ground and to reap his harvest, and to make his implements of war and the equipment of his chariots. ¹³He will take your daughters to be perfumers and cooks and bakers. ¹⁴He will take the best of your fields and vineyards and olive orchards and give them to his courtiers. ¹⁵He will take one-tenth of your grain and of your vineyards and give it to his officers and his courtiers. ¹⁶He will take your male and female slaves, and the best of your cattle and donkeys, and put them to his work. ¹⁷He will take one-tenth of your flocks, and you shall be his slaves. ¹⁸And in that day you will cry out because of your king, whom you have chosen for yourselves; but the Lord will not answer you in that day.' (1 Sam 8:10-18)

Hannah knows, when she prays her prayer, that God's ways are not the ways of earthly kings and governments. In God's kingdom, the feeble are given strength (2:4), the hungry are fed, while those who starved them now have to work for their food (2:5), the poor and the needy are lifted up and given dignity (2:8). Hannah knows God is the only true authority over all the people, and she knows that any earthly king only has strength because of God alone (2:10).

Hannah, a woman with nothing of note to distinguish herself, prays a prayer to the Lord, the prayer is granted, and all of history changes. Because of Hannah's prophetic act of asking for and then giving away her first-born son, a God-led prophet is able to choose kings for Israel. Saul and David owe their appointment as the first kings of Israel to Hannah's prayer at the Temple, a prayer mistaken for a drunken rant by a spiritually blind priest of a spiritually and politically corrupt temple.

If any of this story sounds familiar to you, it should. There are two reasons for that.

First, this story of Hannah is a very clear example of how stories echo and resonate through the pages of Scripture, from beginning to end. A spiral of God's love, attention, and guidance grows in Eden, builds through the Torah, then into the stories of Israel's history, then through the Wisdom of Israel's teachers, then through the Prophecies of her prophets, then through Jesus to the disciples and beyond, all the way to the last lines of Revelation. Throughout that spiraling story, we come again to places that are like where we have been before and we hear echoes of previous stories.

This spiraling, echoing, resonant sense of Scripture is intentional. It is not only intentional in the writings of Scripture, it is intentional in how the Holy Spirit guides us through our faith lives. This happens because the Holy Spirit is weaving each of us into the story of our faith, the story of Christ, the patterns of God. The intention is that our lives, lived as they are in the shadow of God and Christ, will begin to also echo and resonate these deep and ancient stories of Scripture.

Secondly, this story should sound familiar to you because it is retold and recast in the story of Mary and Jesus. Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1 mirrors in structure and theme Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2. And so, it is also appropriate that we are discussing Hannah on the last Sunday of Pentecost. Next week, we begin Advent, the time of waiting, the time of expectation. Hannah knows that God's chosen kings will come in their own time, chosen by God's chosen prophet, Samuel. Hannah expects that God will guide her people, Israel, into better ways and deeper faith. That is an ongoing expectation that I would say we are still living into, even now, 2700 years later.

To speak personally for a moment, these stories and their echoes and resonances matter deeply to me. I believe that the stories we choose to frame our lives deeply influence our thoughts, how we see the world, and how we live our lives. All of us here today must choose the story we will live into. In many ways, that story may choose you, but I would also say that the story you choose cannot be the one we tell ourselves as soon as we wake up in the morning. The thing inside of you that calls us “I” is often a great storyteller, but the story the “I” tells is only a story that was created and centered on the “I”. For the “I”, the best story out there is the story I tell you, and that story is made even better when the story is all about me. The “I”, then, is a profoundly unreliable storyteller. The story we tell ourselves day in and day out is not a story that leads to the things we care about.

Even so, we have to choose the story we will live into and the story we will tell others and ourselves. That story cannot be our own story, the “I” and “me” story, if we care about and value things like love, freedom, relationship, beauty, truth, goodness. Only a story that is beyond ourselves can lead us to those values. And then, the story we tell each other may involve “I” and “me”, but it is not a story about “I” and “me” anymore.

And so, when I read Hannah’s story and hear it resonate through to Mary’s story, the question I ask myself is, “How is the Holy Spirit trying to weave me into this story? Where does the story I have chosen to live into resonate in my life, or where has it echoed in the past?” Because, for me, the things I really care about in this life are love, freedom, relationships, and beauty. The story that resonates and echoes those things most deeply in my life is the Christ story. And so, for me, when I live into the story of Christ, I sense that I come closer to the meaning of love than any other story. I have a deeper understanding of what freedom means for you and for me than I do with any other story. I feel a depth in my relationships when I hear and feel hints of the stories of Scripture resonating in my time with friends and family, in a way no other story does for me. And there is no more beautiful story I have read, heard, or experienced than the one that says a son was born to a woman who chose to live into her story in order that the people whom she loves will be saved by a God who loves, frees, and seeks to make every relationship, every creature, every person a more beautiful reflection of the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

Amen.