

Message Delivered at Christ Church
November 14th & 15th, 2009
TEXT: I Samuel 1:1-20
Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

I want to tell you the story of a woman named Hannah. It'll make us laugh; it'll make us cry; but maybe it'll help us stand up, let God in, and give the Lord a chance to make something happen beyond anything we might expect.

Hannah's name means "grace," and she was married to a man named Elkanah. He was not a particularly important man. He was of the priestly household of Levi, but apparently never functioned as a priest.

Her story begins by telling us who she was married to because that's the way a story about a woman would begin back then. But let's be clear here: This is Hannah's story—a private story with public significance about what God does with someone who has no privilege, status, or power. She is, in the eyes of her time—kind of like Ruth last week—a small person, and someone on the edges. But the Lord has a purpose for Hannah. God's going to do things through Hannah to further God's Kingdom. And if there's one thing worth taking from this story, it's that—that there ain't no vessel too small to further God's purposes. That it's God working in people on the edges that people write stories about.

Now Hannah's got problems. In fact, she's got two of them. The first problem is that she does not have a child. "The Lord had closed her womb," is how it's said in the story. Doesn't say why; doesn't say that there was some sin in her life; doesn't give any background at all, to tell you the truth. Just says that "the Lord closed her womb." When the writer of I Samuel tries to explain Hannah's barrenness, that's the way he does it. This may not be a satisfactory explanation for us, but it's the explanation we're left with.

So there was sadness in her life because she wanted to love a child. But also, because there was one in her life who would not let her be. It was a time when it was acceptable for a man to have more than one wife. And Elkanah, Hannah's husband, had another wife in his life named Peninnah. The name means "fertile." And she was. Peninnah's got lots of kids; and Hannah has none. That's bad enough. But Peninnah is the kind of person who won't let her forget it. It's true, that sometimes there are those thorns in our lives who find our most sensitive spots and take pleasure in needling them. That's Peninnah.

Here's how all this went down. Most likely, according to the custom of the time, Hannah and Peninnah, when they were home, lived in separate tents. It may have been that on a daily basis they had little contact with one another.

But Elkanah was faithful, so once a year he gathered his family together and they all hopped in the mini-van and made the two-day trek to a place called Shiloh. Now this story takes place before there was ever a temple in Jerusalem. Instead, the center of the Hebrew faith is Shiloh, about twenty miles north from where they lived. At Shiloh is the tent of the tabernacle where the priests minister around the Ark of the Covenant. Shiloh is the place where the Hebrews believe God is connected to them. So like a faithful man would, once a year Elkanah took his entire family to Shiloh to make their sacrifices.

And it seems that it was on these annual journeys, when all of Elkanah's family traveled together, that Peninnah most artfully cast forth her barbs towards Hannah.

Now, we've all been in close family quarters. We've all spent lots of time with our families. And so we all know how powerful the arched eyebrow or that peculiar tone of voice old Aunt Matilda adopts from time to time can be. It's amazing how surreptitiously family members can get on one another's last nerve. So my hunch is that rarely does Peninnah humiliate Hannah directly. My hunch is that more likely it's like this: "Come on, kids. Time for bed," said just loudly enough for Hannah to hear. Or "Hannah, I'm so glad Elkanah gives you a double portion, because you deserve it."

At some time, we've probably each had in our lives one person who is exactly like Peninnah, so that we each have some idea of how Hannah feels.

Now it's not as if Elkanah doesn't love her. He does. It says so. Because he loves his wife who has no children, he gives her the double portion. But I'm going to go out on a limb here, and later you can tell me if I'm wrong---I think sometimes there are parts of life that men just don't get; that we are constitutionally incapable of understanding simply because we are men. I know that sounds sexist. But I think it's true. I'd like to think that in our manly desire to fix things we are well-intentioned, but sometimes we're dense as clay. And Elkanah's one of us. "Come on, Hannah...don't cry; it'll be all right; come on and eat something; you'll feel better; who's the one you love; aren't I worth more to you than ten sons?"

I will state the obvious: Sometimes—and this doesn't make a difference whether we're men or women—sometimes there is never the right thing to say. Sometimes there is nothing we can do to fix the problems of those who matter to us, no matter how heart-breaking. Sometimes, there's nothing we can do to brighten the countenance of the one we love. Sometimes the best thing is to just be quiet. May it be the Lord graced Elkanah with this wisdom, but at least he loved her.

There are times we feel completely alone. My hunch is that's what Hannah felt. Peninnah pursued her like a harpy; Elkanah comforted her with the grace of an elephant; she's far from home; and still there is no child. One more time, Elkanah makes the sacrifice; gives Hannah her double portion; and the irritation; the suffocating pity; the humiliation; the sadness; and the loneliness continue.

So what's a woman to do?

Well, for years, Hannah did nothing. For years, she went with Elkanah and Peninnah and Peninnah's increasing brood of children to Shiloh and made the sacrifices everybody told her she needed to make. And then, she went home to what she always knew until the next year she returned to Shiloh childless again to do the same thing. Nothing ever different. Back and forth; back and forth; every year. Moving all the time, and still stuck. That story isn't told in I Samuel, because it's not a story worth telling.

Well, every once in a while in life we are given the grace (and I do believe this is a gift from God)—we are given the grace to step back from our lives for a moment; it's as if for a moment our eyes are raised up and we see, possibly, that what is is not what must be; to experience that we are free enough to choose how to approach the life we've been given. Not free to choose the results, but free to choose the actions.

Now I've struggled with how to speak about this, so I probably won't do so particularly well this morning—but my observation is that sometimes it's easy to get stuck in life; and to get so stuck, we don't even know we're stuck. At some point, it happens to all of us. But then every once in a while, we're given eyes to see clearly that maybe it doesn't have to be that way. You know, there's that rule about how life works...do the same thing, you get the same results. Its corollary is want something different, do something different. And sometimes, through the grace

of God, we are given a true understanding of that truth, and we decide to at least try something different...maybe we decide rationally, maybe impetuously; probably not knowing where it will lead; having no idea of the result or whether it will even work; opening ourselves, possibly, to criticism from others and the risk of even greater disappointment; but still...seeking a new way of living that may lead to a new way of life.

You see, sometimes it's revealed; or we discover; or both...that we've spent way too much time sitting stuck in the flotsam and jetsam of life, and it becomes clear that the first step in no longer sitting in all that stuff is simply to stand up.

And I'm saying all this to point out the two most important words in this story: **Hannah rose**. The great preacher Jim Forbes first pointed out the power of those words, and he once said that if you're looking for a noble name to give your daughter, give her the name Hannah Rose, for it points to one of the most courageous, creative, and faithful women and actions in the Bible.

Because finally Hannah rose from that table at Shiloh; whatever had happened before, this time...which is the reason we tell the story...Hannah rose from that meal and instead of trudging back to the land of Ephraim the way she always had walked straight into that tabernacle where people just don't go...by herself...to present not a sacrifice of some animal or a bushel of wheat to a priest...which is the safe act of piety she'd always made...but to present her very self to God...which is, as we know, the offering the Lord most desires.

She rose from the table and instead of going this way went that way, and decided in favor of a new kind of faith despite all the disappointment with God she'd experienced through the years.

You know, faith is trusting in something we do not see. Sometimes it's even trusting in something we do not see when all the evidence points in the opposite direction. And at least for me, my experience is that sometimes that's not easy. Sometimes, it's even difficult. That's when I try to remember that faith is an action, not a feeling; and that sometimes the only way to have it, is to just do it.

Which I think is what Hannah does. She rises up, and gives trusting in God another shot in a completely new way.

To give not a sacrifice, but herself. To pray not in the way she always had, but this time, to keep it quiet...just between her and God; no priest, and no sound, getting in the way. Just her lips moving silently. And maybe, even, to pray for something different than she ever had before...maybe no longer praying "give me a child," but this time praying "give me a child, that I may give him to you."

Eli thinks she is drunk, and tells her to stop acting so disgracefully. But she is not drunk. She merely is pouring out her soul; this time holding nothing back; abandoning all dignity for the purpose of being real with the Lord...something maybe she's never been before. Eli will prove himself a foolish father as the story progresses. But here and elsewhere he is wise enough to recognize that God is at work, that it's got nothing to do with him, and that he best get out of the way. His blessing is peripheral to the work God is doing, but it does give Hannah encouragement, and so she returns to the camp with a countenance sad no longer.

The blessing she received she chose to name Samuel. Later, Hannah will sing God's praises...she'll sing a song that 1000 years later will be the model for another song sung by another woman who is told she will bear not just a prophet, but God's Son. Hannah will keep her promise, and hand over Samuel to serve the Lord. And he will be the leader that Israel hopes for...the last judge; the first prophet; the man who listens to God and anoints a little boy named David to be Israel's king. Under David, Israel will grow strong and powerful; and from his line

will come the one both Samuel and David pointed towards, and for whom all creation waits; whose birth we'll celebrate in forty days. Her private drama has public meaning, and like Ruth, she is the linchpin that connects what was with what will be.

All because instead of sitting one more time, Hannah rose, and stood up from that table, and presented herself to the Lord.

Now, maybe you're not stuck. But maybe some of us are. And if that's us, maybe Hannah says something to us today...that maybe today is a good day to stand up, and walk a new path; to present not just a sacrifice to the Lord, but our entire being; to give in prayer not just the polite parts, but to pour out our soul. Maybe. To do so, there's no guarantee that our request will be answered as completely as Hannah's was. But at the very least, we will have opened ourselves up enough to the possibility that it could, and see the Lord doing things we've never seen before.

And that is Hannah's story. Amazing, sometimes, what God does when we're willing...