

rePOSE - HANNAH - PROVOCATION TO PROVISION
A SERMON BASED ON 1 SAMUEL 1:1-20
PREACHED AT CHIPPAWA PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
NIAGARA FALLS, ONTARIO
SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 24, 2019
10:00 a.m.

It was Scott Peck in his book 'The Road Less Travelled'
who began his book with a simple, often quoted statement.

Life is difficult.

It's true.

Sometimes life is more than just difficult.

Sometimes life grabs you by the scruff of the neck

throws you against the wall

begins punching you in the gut so hard

and so many times that all you can do is slump to the floor.

Some things are so hard, we can barely talk about them.

It was Fred Rogers, of Mr. Rogers fame,

who was also a Presbyterian minister who said,

'Anything that's human is mentionable,

and anything that is mentionable can be more manageable.

When we talk about our feelings,

they become less overwhelming,

less upsetting and less scary.

The people we trust with important talk

can help us know we are not alone.'

We are not alone.

This is why I wanted you to meet Hannah today.

We read her story in the Scripture lesson today.

Hannah would have given a resounding yes

to the first line of Scott Peck's book,

'Life is difficult.'

Hannah was married to Elkanah.

He was a man with lineage,

son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zuph.

He was an Ephraimite, right from the heartland,

right from the centre of things.

Elkanah had two wives.

In the day, and actually this is still true in some cultures today

having more than having one wife

and being able to support multiple families.

was a sign of prosperity, a sign of success.

Elkanah's family was in high tension.

His wife Penninah had children.

His other wife Hannah did not.

In a society where bearing a son meant everything for woman,

being barren was a massive blow.

It could leave a woman feeling she was a failure.

Peninnah, Elkanah's other wife was not a pleasant woman.

Scripture calls her a rival.

Penninah provoked Hannah to irritate her.

She upset Hannah to the point where

Hannah was weeping and wouldn't eat.

Elkanah, a man, tried to solve this problem by giving Hannah

more gifts than Penninah, a double portion -
of meat!

A 'perfect' gift for the woman who is not eating.

A perfect way to encourage Penninah to be more thoughtful.

I'm being cheeky.

He was giving Hannah twice as much
to offer God at the temple.

Increase the size of the bride so to speak.

It's not really a surprise to see Hannah push her chair back
and get up from the table in verse 9.

She went to the temple.

She went to God.

The account of Hannah takes place before the permanent temple was built
in Jerusalem,
so this is a tabernacle, a tent
in the town of Shiloh, north of Jerusalem.

This is where people would come to worship God.

Hannah went to the temple.

In bitterness of soul, Hannah wept much and prayed to the Lord.

She made a vow,

‘O Lord Almighty,

if you will only look upon your servant’s misery

and remember me, and not forget your servant

but give her a son,

then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life,

no razor will ever be used on his head.’

This last bit about the razor is making reference to the Nazirites.

Hannah would make him a Nazirite.

Think monk, or a nun, a person consecrated to God.

Samson was one, a person consecrated to God.

It’s why he never cut his hair.

Hannah promised that if God gave her a son,

she would give him back to God.

She kept praying there in the temple.

Eli, the priest came in.

Eli saw her praying, lips moving, no words coming out.

He, in his pastoral sensitivity, thought she was drunk.

He chastised her for drinking. Told her to get rid of the wine.

She corrected him.

“I have been praying here out of my anguish and grief.”

Thankfully, Eli recovered his compassion

and provided her with a blessing.

‘Go in peace,

and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.’

And here, in the temple, before God,

with the reminder that the blessing of God was upon her,

Hanna was transformed.

In giving her concerns to God,

in being reminded that God saw her,

in once again being able to wait on God,

she was transformed.

She went and ate something.

Her face was no longer downcast.

She knew. God saw her. And God was on it.

The family went to worship together the next morning.

Then they went home to Ramah.

Elkanah was with Hannah and the Lord remembered her.

She had a son.

The next time Hannah would go to the temple to worship God,

it would be to bring her weaned son, Samuel,

whose name means 'heard of God'.

In a remarkable move,

she left Samuel there, a gift of God, given back to God.

After waiting in pain for so long,

then being given the very thing she longed for,

she gave the gift back to God.

Hannah said,

'I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him.

So now I give him back to the Lord.

For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord.

And Samuel worshipped the Lord there.'

Hannah has shown us, we are not alone.

We are not alone in our experience of feeling empty, tortured,
irritated, confronted, provoked, downhearted.

We are not alone in the weeping,
not eating, and pleading before God.

The first argument that tempts us when I tell Hannah's story
is the fact that

God heard Hannah.

And Hannah got a son.

There are many who will tell you to pray believing,
in order to get what you want from God.

There are a lot of theologies out there that are about
getting God to do what you want him to do.

Just offer up a double portion of meat.

But what I want you to see this morning.

is that Hannah,

even in the midst of receiving from God what she asked,

nevertheless, gave the gift back to God.

Like all of us have had to, or will have to, in some fashion or another,

She gave it all back to God.

All of it.

Wise seniors have learned this truth, because life has taught it to them.

Sometimes with all the subtlety of a baseball bat to the stomach.

But you will give it all back.

It is more a question of your attitude and posture when you do.

You spend the first half of your your life getting.

When you are a kid you get bigger,

you get an education, or you get a job.

You get married.

You get a house.

You have children.

You get established.

You get your retirement fund together.

Then, whether you intend to or not,

you start giving it all back.

You give back your job when you retire.

Your kids grown up and head out on their own.

You give back the kids.

You downsize from the house to get something more manageable.

You give back the house.

You get reading glasses, start taking blood pressure medication,
have a surgery or two.

You start to give back your health.

You give back your driver's license.

You give back your spouse.

And on your last day, you give back your life.

And give whatever you did have left,

goes to someone else.

You will give it all back.

It all belongs to God.

The thing that is tougher to remember,

is it always has.

You are a steward. A manager.

Hannah knew.

That is a key to understanding the grief and confusion

and provocation that comes with not getting

what you think you want

or with anything we have to let go of or have to hand back.

We don't like to give it back.

As a kid I remember wrestling with my older brother,

when he had something I wanted and he didn't want to share.

Or those times he just wanted to torture me.

He would just take something that was mine.

He would just grab it.

I was considerably younger, and smaller

so he could just hold it in his fist.

I could try and pry his fingers open.

But it was a struggle to get it out of his hand.

I wanted it back. It was mine.

That is how we hang onto a lot of life.

In a clenched fist, tightly, fighting.

We do it with many things.

Sure, you may say Hannah at least had a son,

God gave her what she asked for.

You might think

better to leave him at the temple

then to never have had him at all.

But I've seen what parents can be like at the kindergarten door.

You'd think we were shipping four year olds off to war,

instead of to the sand table and finger painting.

Prying our fingers off is no easy thing.

Prying our fingers off.

Can you imagine Hannah walking away from Samuel at the temple,

after all the waiting, the prayers, the anxiety,

after Penninah?

I struggled leaving one at the airport.

I had trouble seeing on the drive away from the university.

Letting go.

It's hard. I'm not saying it isn't.

Life is difficult.

And some losses hit so hard they double us over.

But realizing it all belongs to God,

they all belong to God

that none of it is yours,

somehow that helps us breathe again.

It releases our grip, and eases the spiritual muscle cramps,

that come from clutching so hard.

I've had occasion this week to be reminded of my love for

Terrance Mallick's movie, 'The Tree of Life'.

In this movie

Mrs. O'Brien's son is killed in the Vietnam War.

The grief is horrible.

The pain is raw,

and it doubles the whole family over in half.

It hurts.

And the things people say in response hurt.

The priest, trying to be comforting says,

'He's in God's hands now.'

Mrs. O'Brien snaps back with a legitimate question,

'He was in God's hands the whole time, wasn't he?'

We see her in the quiet times when the pain roars up on her.

We see her asking God,

Lord, why? Where were you?

Did you know what happened? Do you care?

Watching Mrs. O'Brien is watching someone clenched.

It is a life of prying at the fingers to get it open.

It is tight, cramped. And it hurts.

It is one of the last lines of the movie,

Mrs. O'Brien is finally able to open her hand.

I give him to you. I give you my son.

And we see light, and freedom, and peace and love.

God remembered Hannah when she prayed.

Hannah had a son.

Then she said, 'the Lord has granted me what I asked of him,
so now I give him to the Lord.'

For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord.

It is powerful to know what comes after Hannah opens her hands
and her heart.

Samuel grows up to become the leading priest of Israel.

A nation of tribes which had been drifting,

begins to consolidate under Samuel's leadership.

He anointed the first king Saul,

then David who gave rise to Solomon.

It became a time of glory and strength for the nation of Israel.

God began that movement to glory with a barren woman,

bereft, broken and weeping,

he started with a woman

who had the capacity to give what was given to her

back to God.

So we learn and see the truth of the prophet Isaiah when he says,

Those who wait on the Lord

will renew their strength.

They will soar on wings like eagles;

they will run and not grow weary,

they will walk and not be faint.

So we can take the advice of the Psalmist who tells us,

Wait for the Lord;

be strong and take heart

and wait for the Lord.

God will accomplish his purposes

in and through those who can give it all back to him.

Amen.