

**November 18, 2018**

1 Samuel 1:1-20

Sermon: "Rise with Hannah!"

Michael Stanfield

There was a certain man of Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah. He had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none.

Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts at Shiloh. 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 gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb. Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, *Hannah rose* in order to present herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. (Hannah) was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. She made this vow: "O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a Nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head."

As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the Lord." *Words of God for the people of God. Let us pray. Bless these words you originally inspired that they may be an inspiration to us to faithfulness, goodness and discipleship. We pray in Christ's name, amen.*

Hannah is married to a man, Elkanah in a time in History when polygamy was rare but still lawful. As a result, Hannah shares Elkanah with his second wife, Peninnah. We know from the

story, that it is Hannah that is Elkanah's true love and it may very well be that the only reason, Elkanah chose to take a second wife was precisely because Hannah was barren.

At any rate, as the story goes, Penninah is so fertile that she appears to get pregnant at the drop of a hat while Hannah remains incapable of having even one child.

Many of us have experienced the emotional roller coaster of women today who want to have children of their own but cannot. But can you imagine how that would be magnified if you lived under the same roof with your husband and his second wife who was filling up every spare corner of the place with more children?

The depth of Hannah's suffering must have been unbearable. And to top it off, not only did she not get any sympathy from her rival, Penninah, Penninah would actually tease poor Hannah unmercifully about it.

And Elkanah wasn't much better. He seemed unable or unwilling to try and block Penninah from her cruel behavior, and he is a bit of clod when it comes to understanding Hannah's predicament.

Every year, Elkanah and his family would go to the tent of meeting in Shiloh where the arc of the covenant was located. In fact the whole nation of Israel was compelled by the scriptural mandates of Moses to go, in order to worship and sacrifice.

As was the custom, the bulls offered for sacrifice were cut up. Part of the carcass was burned on the altar of God as the real sacrifice and the rest was divided to be eaten. The priest and his family were given a part in payment for their work, and the other part was shared among one's own family. The larger one's family, the larger the part one kept for oneself so that all could share in this holy feast with God. In fact, the larger the part one got to keep, the greater it was believed to be God's blessing to the mother of the family.

This meant, of course, that Penninah was given extra portions for her brood while Hannah should have only been given one. Elkanah actually gives Hannah a double portion. And isn't that just like us men. He tries to "fix" Hannah's depression and grief instead of just being with her in it. The truth is that Hannah is a drag on Elkanah's and the rest of his family's celebration; he doesn't want Hannah to feel better for her. He wants Hannah to feel better for him. Of course, all this does is add insult to injury.

So, the predicament in which Hannah finds herself is doubly difficult. Never mind Elkanah's Neanderthal attempts to comfort his wife. Regardless of how he handles it, the fact is that the very place where God's people are supposed to find the most comfort and greatest closeness to God and God's family is the very place where Hannah receives nothing but one more bitter reminder of her awful predicament. So distraught is Hannah that she cannot even eat – and here at the highest holiest time of year.

Thanksgiving and especially Christmas these days can be this way for many people who are like Hannah – instead of a season of joy it is a season of acute suffering – a reminder of what one does not have as opposed to a season of celebrating one's blessings.

And Elkanah would have been better off if he had just kept his mouth shut. But he was like most of us men. He sees how sad Hannah is after he has given Hannah her extra portion and he can't resist. He blurts out with irritation, "Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

Now here's a clueless husband if ever there was one. His wife has been handed a raw deal, and all he can think about is how it affects him as if the fact that he loves Hannah should be enough to make any of her problems disappear.

We don't do our wives or partners any favors by responding to their emotional distress as if it is a problem to be solved or fixed. Much human suffering – especially emotional suffering can't be fixed – it can only be surrounded with compassion and empathy. The instinct to relieve one's suffering is noble; but we should discern whether that is what we are really doing or whether our behavior is more that of *managing* the other so that he or she has less effect on *us* – or worse we are callous to the need of our partner because our own need always takes precedent.

Whichever way Elkanah was trying to go, he made Hannah's burden heavier, not lighter. And so, for Hannah, it is the proverbial straw that breaks the camel's back. It is more that she can bear. She has reached the bottom of the pit.

But it is precisely at *that* moment that something happens to Hannah. She realizes that she is beaten. She understands that she is utterly alone among humans in her desolation. She reaches the depth of her despair from the particular burden *she* bears. Her barrenness is like a desert that stretches into eternity; her emptiness like a bottomless pit.

As Hannah looks around the table at Penninah and Elkanah laughing and the children gobbling down their food and all of the relatives and kin from near and far shouting and filling themselves up, Hannah sits apart, alienated, joyless, and empty...(pause)

There is the story of a man who came to a holy person seeking healing. The holy person listened patiently as the man listed his complaints and then asked, "Do you really want to be cured?" The man was shocked by the question and said, "Of course I want to be cured. Why else would I have come?" To which the holy person replied, "Most come, not to be cured, that is too painful. They simply come for relief." Joan Chittister, *The Rule of Benedict*(New York: Crossroad, 1992), 128.

Relief is what Hannah had wanted. Relief would have been having a child. But Hannah is now ready for more than relief; she is ready for the cure – even it means not having a child, she has got to find her way back to connection to life, connection to God. The loneliness and lack of belonging to anything and anyone – especially God – is just too much.

And so it is precisely here in this terrible state that Hannah experiences more than barrenness of her own womb; she experiences the barrenness of her own soul. She has lost touch with the image of God in her because she realizes that she has always equated that completely with bearing children. And so, she is at a place where she is willing to question her understanding of God and how God might be present or absent from her life. She is at that deserted lonely place.

Such a place is a Holy Place because such deep places, as painful as they are, are the very places where God can be experienced in new and life-changing ways. For, it is in the pit that the real need for God can be rediscovered and a new faith and a new relationship can be born.

Suffering, it would appear, makes us more open to finding our way back to that natural connection to the image of God stamped on our souls. Suffering can help us depend on God's promises instead of on ourselves or on our culture's prescription for living a fulfilling life.

Whereas before we may have approached the Word as a lifeless object of curiosity and study, in the midst of suffering we approach it as an anchor for our souls. In suffering we see the Word for what it really is, a living voice of God helping us, renewing, restoring, and reviving us.

And this is exactly what happens with Hannah. The words in verse nine of the text are sparse, but they tell us a lot. It says, "After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose." And that is the end of that scene. From here, the narrative moves to the temple where we witness to where it was that Hannah was led after she rose. But here, in verse 9 it says simply, "Hannah rose."

Hannah had been beaten down, her spirits crushed but at that low point she did not remain. Something happened in Hannah. A new perspective took hold so, HANNAH ROSE!

An opportunity for a different kind of relationship with God occurred to Hannah so, HANNAH ROSE!

A new kind of faith is beginning to bud in Hannah – one that throws itself upon the mercy of God, so HANNAH ROSE!

Hannah may never have children but now she realizes who this God of Israel is and that this God is not only one to whom she can speak but a God she is confident will listen to the anguish of her soul, so HANNAH ROSE!

This God, *this* God is the Lord of life and of death, of fruitfulness as well as barrenness, so HANNAH ROSE!

HANNAH ROSE! – From the impossibility of barrenness to the possibility of a new life with this stronger but wonderful God of Israel.

So you see where we next find Hannah. It should come as no surprise. She goes straight from the table of ridicule and barrenness to the altar of God where she pours out her heart – and in a way that is so soulful, involving all of who she is that the priest, Eli is put to shame. From a distance, Eli sees this woman talking away as if to herself. Of course, she is talking to God.

It is a testimony to the general spiritual barrenness of Israel that Eli had never witnessed a prayer so bold and so fervent that one might speak out loud, directly to God. Eli thinks Hannah has had a bit too much wine at the festival. But when he realizes that this woman has been praying with all her might, and he discovers what it is that she is praying for, he prays with and for her and gives her the blessing of God.

Now, not only Hannah, but Eli and all of Israel are about to be transformed; and it is because of the faith of Hannah; because of the movement of the Spirit of God anew among God's people; Why? because HANNAH ROSE! She rose to new life and so did all of Israel because Hannah found a link to God that was deeper even than that of bearing children.

Hannah tells God that before, she had wanted children for herself. Now she wants nothing but to serve God and so she is willing to make what at that time was the ultimate sacrifice of a mother: as a sign of her love for and recommitment to God over everything else, she tells God that any child she has now, she will turn over *to* God at birth to be raised as a Nazarite, a Holy man dedicated for God's for the child's whole life.

For better or worse, Hannah has linked herself to this God and as a result, together God and Hannah will bring forth a prophet – Samuel – the likes of which Israel had never seen up until that point and really never saw again...

And what about us today? How many of us know those, like Hannah, who feel barren? How many of you who are here to day feel like that yourselves? Life has lost its luster. You feel on the outside. The world seems to be celebrating and you, or that person you know just feels rather excluded and alone – with little or nothing to offer – little or nothing to contribute.

The story of Hannah reminds us that this place at the end of one's hope is a Holy place – a place where God wants to meet us and greet us and converse with us and say "Rise to new life!" The story of Hannah reminds us that the place where we are hardest hit, and seems the most barren is often the very place God is about to bring forth something brand new.

So rise with Hannah. Seek not only relief. Seek the full cure.

**Let us pray.** Gracious God, comfort us in our barrenness and suffering but more than anything help us to rise with Hannah; help us to be as dogged in our faith. Help us to know that regardless of where our suffering comes from, you have a plan even and perhaps especially for it to be used in your service. Help us to remember that your son suffered and in his suffering was the salvation of the world. And now bless these gifts that they may help those who suffer find your kingdom on the other side of it. We pray in Christ's name, amen.