

November 15, 2015

“Hannah -a Woman who did not give up...hope in God”

1 Samuel 1:4-20, Mark 13:1-8

Over 3000 years ago, lived a woman whose name was Hannah. She lived in the land of Canaan. She was a wife to Elkanah from the tribe of Ephraim. Elkanah had another wife, for Hannah was childless. The other wife's name was Peninnah and she bore sons and daughters to Elkanah.

Each year Elkanah took his family to a special place of worship, the house of the Lord, in Shiloh. It was before a temple was built, before the time of David and Solomon. It was the time of judges, like Gideon, Samson and Jephtha.

At the house of the Lord in Shiloh, the family worshipped and offered a sacrifice of an animal. Then they ate the meat. Elkana would give portions of meat to Peninnah and her sons and daughters. He gave a double portion to Hannah because he loved her. Maybe the portions of the meat were distributed so ritualistically or sitting and eating together made it so obvious that Hannah was childless, Peninnah took this opportunity to taunt Hannah for not having children. Maybe Peninnah was jealous that Elkana seemed to have favored Hannah over her. It was a very patriarchal time and women's value was measured by how “fruitful” she was. Having a male boy made a woman superior to others who did not have one since the boy would carry the family line of his father.

So every year when the family went to the house of the Lord in Shiloh, Hannah cried and refused to eat food. Elkana would say, “Hannah, why are you crying? Why won't you eat? Why are you so sad? Am I not worth more to you than ten sons?” I think it is one of the examples that meant well but was not sensitive. I'm sure Elkana knew the reason why Hannah was crying. He meant to console her, but he did not. His words, in fact, minimized her suffering. The fact that he wondered why Hannah did not consider him enough for her, even though he obviously did not consider her to be enough for him since he took another wife, showed his inability to feel with Hannah.

So one year, after the meal, Hannah stood up and went to the place of worship to be alone before the Lord. There she poured out her sadness and misery before God and cried bitterly and uncontrollably. Then in her anguished prayer, 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, and no razor will ever be used on his head.” “No razor on his head” means that the child is set apart as holy and dedicated to the Lord. As she prayed in her heart, her lips were moving.

Eli, the priest in the house of the Lord was watching Hannah and thought that she was drunk from the meal and said, “How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine.”

What insensitive words to hear from the mouth of a priest! He couldn't tell the difference between agony and drunkenness when seeing a distressed woman before his eyes and wasted no time in shaming her for her presumed intoxicated state.

Those insulting words from the priest, a man of authority, did not intimidate Hannah and did not have her jump up and leave the place. She stood up for herself and courteously but assertively explained what she was doing with clarity. She said, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief."

Her words helped Eli's misunderstanding to be solved and he sent her out with a blessing. "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him." "May your servant find favor in your eyes," said Hannah. Then she went her way and ate food. Her face was no longer downcast.

Later Hannah conceived and gave a birth to a boy, whom she named Samuel, which means, "I asked the Lord for him."

Like Hannah, all of us, sometime in our life, have poured out our souls to God in anguished prayers, haven't we? Or maybe we haven't. We may have pretended that everything is ok, under control, even to our God. We didn't want to admit that we were in distress, in despair, and in misery. Or some of you may be feeling the same as Hannah-- praying for your brighter future.

What can we learn from Hannah? I listed five points I thought we can learn from Hannah.

1. She took herself before the Lord in her trouble. Nobody would understand the humiliation she was going through, even her spouse. Nobody knew the trouble she was in; but she knew where to go—the place where she didn't need to pretend that everything was ok and that she was under control - the safe place—she knew; and she went there --to cry and to get help.

2. She knew that God would hear her prayer. Although her status in the society was low—woman and childless, she knew that God would not turn her away -- God would hear her prayer. Do we always believe as Hannah believed - God hears our prayer? Or do we feel sometimes that God ignores our prayer, laughs at our prayer or think our prayer is not important before God Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth? Or do we wonder sometimes if your prayer or my prayer is not as important to God as someone else's prayer?

When or if we feel that way, let's remember Hannah, one of the lowest in the society, cried out to God...and God heard her cry, anguish and sorrow. We don't need to be strong before God.

3. She refused to accept her plight -being childless, being mistreated and humiliated by Peninnah -- and stood up for her future. She made a vow before the Lord that she would dedicate her son to the Lord if the Lord granted her a son. Let's note here that she didn't take the attitude that she

wouldn't worship God because God didn't give her a son. Regardless of her present status, she knew there was God and made a vow before the Lord in prayer. She let God be God. She didn't vow that unless God gave her a son she would not worship God. That's coercing God, or manipulating God, isn't it, as if God were our robot?

Hannah simply prayed that she would give the boy to the Lord if the Lord granted a son to her; and she left the result in God's hand. After receiving Eli's blessings, she left the place and ate some food; and her sadness was lifted up.

4. When God granted her a son, she kept her promise. She brought Samuel to Eli, the priest, as he reached the age when he could leave his mother and serve Eli in the house of the Lord.

Have you made a promise before God? "Oh, God, if you do this, I will"

I made a promise before God in my life. I have been keeping it, but from time to time, I forget it and find myself sliding to an easier way. Hanna reminds me of keeping my promise before God.

5. She believed in a God of Justice, who desires justice to those who are mistreated and are placed in the second class in the society. She believed in a God, who brings vindication in the end. Hannah said the following prayer when she dedicated Samuel to Eli.

"My heart rejoices in the Lord; in the Lord my horn is lifted high. My mouth boasts over my enemies, for I delight in your deliverance. (v.1) Do not keep talking so proudly or let your mouth speak such arrogance, for the Lord is a God who knows, and by him deeds are weighed. (v.3) He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor." (v.8)

What can you learn from Hannah? I listed those five.

1. She took herself before the Lord in her trouble.
2. She knew that God would hear her prayer.
3. She refused to accept her plight...and stood up for her future.
4. When God granted her a son, she kept her promise.
5. She believed in a God of Justice.

I'm sure there is more we can learn from Hannah. She was a woman who refused to give up her hope in God. I know we have many Hannahs in our congregation, male and female.

May Hannah and Hannahs continue to inspire us as we take our faith journey.