

**Prince of Peace Lutheran Church**  
**Message 2 July 2017**

Readings: 1 Samuel 1:1-20  
Matthew 10:40-42

“There was a man named Elkanah ...” The story of Hannah, in 1 Samuel Chapter 1, is a very old story, stemming from an oral tradition in which storytelling was the main way of communicating truths through the generations.

The account is set in the time when Israel was not yet a nation but a loose collection of tribes, some of them settled, some nomadic. Infant mortality was very high. Sons were particularly prized. Often one man would have more than one wife to ensure there were many children to guarantee the continuation of the tribe.

At that time there were no local places of worship – once a year everyone went on a pilgrimage to their closest regional temple – the one Elkanah and his family visited was in Shiloh. It was their biggest religious celebration, something like Easter for us.

The story is about one man and his family and their annual pilgrimage. It’s about Elkanah and his two wives: one with children (Peninnah), one without (Hannah). Very soon the camera zooms in on Hannah and on one particular pilgrimage to Shiloh.

The opening scene shows Hannah sitting at the family meal. Part of the worship of God at the temple involved sacrificing an animal to God. Elkanah would be the one to bring the sacrifice, and the cooked meat would then be distributed among his family. It was a noisy, happy affair – children clamouring for more, the father joyful, the children’s mother feeding the little ones, wiping faces as a mother would.

Hannah has no children. She has to bear the taunts of her rival. “Of course, if you had children you would know what it’s like, wouldn’t you...?” Peninnah’s sense of her own worth depended on her children. That would have been the case for many women of the day, and still is for many women in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Pacific.

Hannah has lost her appetite. She has lost her voice too – she chokes on her own words. Her soul is crushed, her body constricted. She is cut off from the closest community she could have – her family.

Even her husband doesn’t get it ... He loves her but feels excluded from her world. [*By the way, I noticed that the New Living Translation (NLT) interprets*

*these verses differently from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV): in V.5 the NLT says Elkanah gave Hannah a ‘half portion’ of the meat, though he loved her’ ... the NRSV says he gave her a ‘double portion ... because he loved her’. No doubt biblical scholars have sweated over this verse – it shows that in some cases, it’s impossible to translate 100% clearly, because the original may not be clear.]* Elkanah wants to comfort Hannah and in so doing be affirmed in his own importance to her. He desperately tries to fill the big hole in her life: “Am I not of more importance to you than ten sons?” He could not bear to hear her honest answer, if she were to tell him: No, in fact, you’re not.

Hannah is isolated. She feels she does not belong. As so often with people who are marginalised, personal and social exclusion lead to physical and mental isolation. Depression can result.

Hannah seeks refuge in the Temple. She goes to present her unworthy, barren self to God. Hannah pleads with God. She cries bitterly but can produce no words. She rocks back and forth. Hannah is an archetypal picture of despair and powerlessness. I cannot help but be reminded of the psalmist’s cry in Psalm 13, which Pastor David spoke about two weeks ago – in paraphrase it reads something like: Where are you, God? Why are you silent? Why do you let me suffer like this? How long will you let my enemy bully me? This cry finds its most profound expression in the cry of Jesus on the cross: My God, my God, *why* have you abandoned me? There can be no greater depth of abandonment than this.

Just when we think it could get no worse for Hannah, it does. Enter the man of God – Eli, the High Priest.

It’s a big day for Eli. He’s not only religious leader but Event Organizer – it’s his job, or he thinks it is, to make sure everything runs smoothly. He must make sure the reputation of the Temple is not tarnished – that it is seen as a holy place in the eyes of worshippers and outsiders. It’s important to keep up the image – for God’s sake, of course. After all, the high priest is the one who represents the face of God to the people.

In our churches, do we imagine ourselves to be the keepers of God’s Church and its image in the world? Do we think it is our responsibility to keep it unblemished by human failings or conflict, to present a united and harmonious picture to the world?

We need to remember that it is God who shapes the Church, incorporating Christ in and for this world – it’s not our job to polish the Church’s image. If we think it is, we can end up covering up unhealthy practices, for example, because they could damage our witness if known; or we always want to be in control, unwilling

to take risks or go new paths as the Spirit leads, for fear of things getting out of control.

If we think it's up to us to define how the world sees the Church, it can mean we tend to stick to what we know is tried and true – to 'safe' ways of doing things, working only with 'safe' groups in society, avoiding groups or individuals who are outside our comfort zone. It can lead us to suppress voices within our church or institution that question the status quo, express doubt, or simply ask 'Why?' for fear they will rock the boat; and it can mean that our decision-making is top-down, suppressing creativity to prevent things from becoming too messy. So even though we are called to act responsibly with the resources and gifts we are given, in the end it is still God's Church, not ours.

One of the things I appreciate about PoP is the fact that the leadership involves the congregation in decision-making – for example, trying to find out what we all think about having altar rails for communion – and though that can be messy and make the process very cumbersome, it means we all know we are part of this community. There are Lutheran churches – churches in other denominations too – that have opened up to different groups in society – groups of new migrants or refugees, for example, welcoming them – not knowing what that might do to the congregation's identity, their practices, their witness in the world around them. It takes courage to be led by the Spirit, to let go of control. It means taking risks. We invariably make mistakes. Yet many churches have been blessed by opening up like this, and they have become a great blessing.

Eli is focused on what people might think, on staging a successful event. He sees Hannah rocking to and fro. But he does not *see* Hannah. He sees an embarrassment, a disturbance, the possibility that he could lose face if he doesn't act.

So this is the mediator between God and God's people? Where's his vision gone? Eli's priorities have become muddled and muddied. He no longer sees people through the lens of God's mercy but judges them according to whether they will enhance the image of 'his' institution. If they don't, they are in the way. So Eli feels he has to get rid of Hannah – for God's sake, of course. Eli victimizes the victim. He bullies her. Eli, the very one who is supposed to intercede with God on behalf of the people.

This High Priest has lost his vision of who he was called to be. Hannah has lost her vision of her worth in God's eyes, lost her appetite, her voice, her community, her ability to give life. Hannah is put down by her rival, misunderstood by her husband – and humiliated by the High Priest. The silence is deafening.

What would you expect Hannah to do? What do you think you would do, in a similar situation?

Many years ago I was backpacking around Europe, and in the cities I used to like to go into churches (bless the Catholics – theirs are usually open) to pray or just sit there for a while. Imagine walking into an open church in a place you are visiting; at the time, something is burdening you, and you sit down in a pew, or kneel at an altar, praying fervently. You sense someone next to you, open your eyes, look up, and see someone who, judging by the way they are dressed, is a minister/priest. He is frowning. He is standing too close. In an aggressive whisper he asks you to leave, calling you a drunkard. If it were me, I think I'd be shocked, shaken; I would struggle to make sense of what is happening. I would feel embarrassed, intimidated. What would you do? I think I would feel I must have done something terribly wrong – must be trespassing, must be dressed wrongly for this holy place, or perhaps it's reserved for men only, or I was making a fool of myself by the way I was praying ... It can be an instinctive reaction to take on the shame, the blame, especially if, as in Hannah's case, your self-esteem and self-confidence are at rock bottom. After all, the man of God – the High Priest – can't be wrong! I think I would instinctively say 'Sorry' and want to leave as quickly as I could. The experience would be extremely unpleasant, and the trauma of it would be hard to shake off.

So is this what Hannah does? Does Hannah mumble an embarrassed apology to the High Priest and slink away in embarrassment? Not Hannah. This anxious, lonely woman, devoid of self-esteem, shunned by society, stands tall, and suddenly her silence is broken. Hannah says 'no' to the High Priest. This is not an arrogant "no", not a sign of disrespect. It is the 'no' of faith. For despite what the High Priest has done to her, she sees in him the potential to be the man of God he was called to be. And she sees herself, at last, as God sees her: 'Do not call me a wicked [worthless - NRSV] woman ... see me as a child of God crying out for help.'

And what happens? At this point the man of God regains his vision. He, too, suddenly sees Hannah as God sees her.

How do we know that Eli regains his vision? He blesses her: 'Go in peace! May the God of Israel grant the request you have asked of him.' There is no indication that Eli knows what Hannah has been asking God for – he sees that it is of God nevertheless.

So when Hannah is empowered to see past Eli's bullying and perceive him as the high priest, as the man of God he was called to be, the high priest is empowered to see Hannah for who she is, a beloved child of God.

This, to me, is the real miracle: in prayer Hannah experiences the affirmation of her deep humanity, as a child of God, before God. She regains her voice and her self-worth, and as a result, the High Priest regains his vision.

This is a very subversive story. This is renewal from the bottom up.

*A couple of years ago I had the privilege of speaking to an elderly ecumenical leader in the Pacific, Rev. Leslie Boseto from Solomon Islands, who had been a very influential church figure locally, regionally and with the World Council of Churches in the 1980s and 1990s – and he said (of ecumenical leadership, but it could apply to any church leadership): ‘You have to lead from the bottom up. Listen to the people, to their pain and issues – they’ll teach you theology. So as leaders we learn from them, and they learn from their leaders, and it’s both ways.’ That made a deep impression on me.*

The story of Hannah is the story of renewal ‘from the bottom up’. The renewal of someone who was completely powerless leads to the renewal of vision for the religious leader.

How was Hannah renewed? Somehow in that prayer in the temple, God helped her to see through all the threats that paralysed her: her rival’s obsession with power and superiority, her husband’s need of acknowledgement, the high priest’s fear of losing face. And when she lost her fear of all these threats, she learned to let go. The strange vow Hannah makes – the vow to give her son, should God give her a son, back to God – is the expression of her letting go. *God, if you choose to give me what I want, a son, I will not hang on to him, possess him, but give him back to you. My worth does not hinge on whether or not I can parade my son before my enemies.* God broke the silence Hannah was trapped in. God released Hannah from the tyranny of hankering after a child for the sake of her own worth.

So what happens next?

Hannah goes back to her husband, eats and drinks with him – and smiles. She is no longer sad, we are told. Peninnah does not feature in this part of the story – she is no longer a threat to Hannah. When they go home, Hannah’s physical relationship to her husband is restored – and she has a child, a son.

All this is a result of the quiet little miracle that took place when Hannah was praying in the temple, and in the brief exchange between Hannah and the high priest. There may be no public sensation accompanying this miracle, but it has historic consequences. The child Hannah ultimately bears is named Samuel. Samuel – meaning ‘God has heard’ – is the last of the judges of Israel and the prophet who anoints David. He occupies a pivotal place in the story of Israel as told in the Hebrew scriptures, our Old Testament, leading right up to the coming of Jesus.

By the way, Hannah’s name is the feminine form of the Hebrew word for ‘grace’.

So from this story we learn two things:

First of all, we learn that when we are in an utterly desolate place, when God seems to have abandoned us completely and our only prayer is a bitter cry, God can be moving in us to shape a future of promise for us. It's hard to recognise that at the time – hard to envisage the resurrection in the agony of dying – but sometimes, looking back, don't we know this has been the case?

Secondly, we learn from this story that it is God, not we ourselves, who looks after the future of the Church, just as it is God who looks after our individual futures – and that frees us from the need to be always in control. Thank God for that. **'God's life-saving love is the shape of our future'**. That's a quote from Prof. Cynthia Moe-Lobeda of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), who was in Brisbane this week.

**'God's life-saving love is the shape of our future'**.

Amen.

(Glenine Hamlyn)