

Rev. Liz Hulme Adam
Tabor Presbyterian Church
November 14, 2021

Psalm 16
1 Samuel 1:4-20

Hannah

This *isn't* one of my favorites. I think it is because I never grew up as a girl pining to be a mother. And, I know so many people who wanted kids and couldn't have them. Or, *didn't* want to become a mother. The implication of this story is that a woman is defined, her sense of self determined, by whether or not she bears a child. But in revisiting my own reactions to this story, I remembered another story, and in so doing, came to a new understanding of this biblical woman named Hannah. Let us pray:

Over twenty years ago I was at Princeton Seminary, finishing my last year, and obligated to fulfill certain non-academic requirements for graduation. A couple days a week I drove from Princeton to Trenton, where I trudged with much reluctance and angst to a chaplain internship at the hospital there. I considered myself unprepared and ill-equipped, for the work of ministering to people in the hospital, and I couldn't wait for those nine months to be over.

I was a newlywed at this time, and we had planned to go out on a certain night after one of my shifts. I remember putting my coat on after a long shift, clocking out, then hearing over the intercom the need for a chaplain in the ER. I could have left, but my conscience wouldn't allow it, so I took my coat off and reluctantly made my way to the nurses' station.

The patient, they said, was a "frequent flier," meaning they had seen her there before, many times. She comes here because she's lonely, one of the nurses said. Seems like she has no one. Filled with anxiety, the frequent flier was giving them trouble, so staff thought a chaplain might help.

She must have had enough going on that she qualified for admission because I asked if she would like company as someone wheeled her out of the ER, bound for a hospital room. She said that she would like that and we made our way upstairs by way of the elevator.

Once in the room it was light conversation at first, as we got to know each other. She would say intermittently, "*Oh, you have to go by now, don't*

you?” To which I replied, “No, I don’t have to go.” Eventually we got to the heart of the matter. She said she didn’t want to die without telling what happened.

I invited her to tell me what she meant. The story went on for over an hour, as she recounted her escape as a child from Nazis, a circuitous route, through mountains with inadequate shoes - I distinctly remember that part of the story - and the grayness of the sky, and her disclosure that most of her family died in concentration camps. Eventually she made it to the United States. And here she was, a lifetime later, an older woman now, alone without children, seemingly without anyone in the world.

I thanked her for telling me her story, and said I would never forget it, and never forget her. I don’t know whether I asked for it or she gave it to me, but I ended up with an index-sized card with her name on it, something you discard once you get your hospital bracelet. I drove home that night thinking, if I ever had a daughter, I will name her Hannah, after this woman.

I did forget about her for a time. A few years went by. Then I contracted pregnancy, and sometime during those nine months found that index-card tucked in my day-timer; and I remembered. And we named our first-born daughter Hannah.

As this is a biblical name, and I was a pastor, it made sense to others that I chose this name, after the Hannah from the Bible, but I did not name my daughter after the biblical Hannah who eventually gave birth to Samuel.

I waited to tell Hannah about her name. During her childhood I didn’t want her to know the cruelty of what happened with anti-semitism and large scale extermination; how does one tell a child about the Holocaust? How, now, in Charlottesville, does a Jewish parent tell his young son about August 11th and 12th, 2017?

When the time seemed right, I told Hannah this story — why she was given the name *Hannah* — that she is named after a Holocaust survivor, so that we will never forget what happened, and so that the Hannah I met at Mercer Medical Center¹ will have someone to continue her story. I said to

¹ Mercer Medical Center in Trenton NJ was built in 1895 and closed in 2011. (Now, it sits as an abandoned building.)

our daughter Hannah, *“If you have children, I want you to tell them the story of your name, and for them to tell their children.”*

In revisiting the biblical Hannah this week I saw her as if for the first time. It has been a while since I've thought about her story. This would not be a Scriptural story I would be drawn to — I'm sensitive about the subject of women not having children, women for whom prayers have *not* been answered. I'm also mindful that women have children they have to give up and this story is also about the giving up of Samuel - there is something agonizing and terrifying about letting go of what is most precious to us.

But this week I saw two Hannahs, the ancient one, and the Holocaust survivor: one had a child and one did not, but they both knew what it was to cry with such heaving that people think - *you are out of your mind.*

The Hannahs give us permission to cry out - to express our bitterness and agony to someone willing to listen. The Hannahs show us our need to be heard.

We can see in our ancient texts our own need, and how the divine meets those needs. In due time. Male or female, parent or not, the divine gives birth to something precious through us, even if, in the moment, we can't see beyond what we lack. In Hannah's case, she lacked a child, but for both Hannahs, they lacked, for a time, someone to hear their anguish. They both demonstrate our universal need to be truly heard; for our stories to matter to someone. That we aren't, in fact, “worthless,” to use Hannah's word.

I knew by the hospital bed in Trenton, NJ I was on holy ground. Like now we are on holy ground. Notice how the biblical Hannah, in her agony, chooses to go to *the Temple.*

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.”*

This is happening in their place of worship. Here, we are, at our place of worship. Hannah is modeling for us a way to be with each other before the Lord. To be authentic. We are here to hear, and to be heard. We can't do this work of being the church if we don't share who we really are. We are not a civic organization or a sports team or a group of likeminded people who pool our resources. We are more than that, not because we have our act together but because we know we don't.

Jesus said, let those who have ears to hear, hear. Like he did. Even if we don't like what we hear. Even if it we get uncomfortable, or we don't have answers. Simply in the act of listening - to the divine voice and to each other, simply in the act of listening we find out who we are and what we are to do with who we are.

Hannah mother of Samuel and Hannah survivor of the Holocaust knew vexation and anxiety. Both shared it. Both identified their need to be heard. This does not make them worthless, this makes them real, and authentic and in need of someone who hears. Church is not a place to come when you've got it all figured out. It is the sacred place to hear and be heard, to be for and with each other in our joy *and* our agony.

Maybe my own Hannah won't have a child, to tell about the New Jersey Hannah. Maybe she'll give birth in other ways. But the lesson remains the same, the lesson Jesus taught us, of giving voice to the voiceless, of paying close attention to those on the margins, those left out, the lonely, the scared, the ones meant to be shut out. It will be in our connections, our encounters with each other, and with those not like us, that we will live out the call of Matthew 25.

Amen.