

Defining/Defiant Prayers
25th Sunday After Pentecost
November 18, 2012
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Texts: 1 Samuel 1.4-20
1 Samuel 2.1-10
Hebrews 10.11-14, 19-25
Mark 13.1-8

As one who loves theology, in the early days of preaching I was often drawn to the epistles and to the theology of Paul. The more circular the logic—the more satisfying the effort! I still love theology but I am noticing as the years go by that when given a chance I choose story (often from the Old Testament) as the place to center my reflections in preaching. And so today the story of Hannah has been calling to me in the same way that the story of Ruth did last week.

They are similar stories. Each of them focuses on the story of a single family. Each of them begins with the suffering and struggle of a woman in that household. In the case of Ruth her struggle was for survival. In the case of Hannah her suffering was more soulful: a struggle for fulfillment and dignity and self-worth. They are similar stories in the way that they function in scripture as well. They provide a window into a critical moment in the life of Israel. In this case both stories shine light on Israel's move from a scattered collection of tribes ruled by judges to a nation ruled by kings.

Some scholars read the story of Hannah as a parable for Israel. The people are anxious for a king in the same way that Hannah is anxious for a son. The people are taunted by the Philistines in the same what the Hannah is taunted by Pininnah. Hannah is given a son as the people of Israel are given a king. I was reading one article where the author made the claim that she reads Hannah as going further than metaphor. She does more than simply point toward some truth about God. She becomes an icon. In her own person we see a picture of what the author calls an “iconic spiritual sensitivity to the ways that God is involved in and concerned about her life.”¹ It is her “iconic spiritual sensitivity” that I want to explore with you today: not just because it reveals some significant piece of Israel's origins as

¹ Marcia Mount Shoop, *Feasting on the Word*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 290.

a nation but because of the way it reveals such a significant alternative to the way that so many of us have been formed to pray.

As last Sunday's gospel reminded us, the way that we pray says a lot about the state of our heart and the way we approach our relationship with God. As we heard Jesus put quite bluntly last Sunday in Mark chapter 12, the long prayers spoken loudly for the sake of appearance by the scribes in Jesus' day were really nothing more than a very thin veneer of devotion stretched over hearts that were power hungry, status driven, with very little regard for the things of God. Hannah's prayer reveals a radically different posture.

At outset, I want to say something about prayer that I hope you will hear and take to heart: prayer can be expressed in radically different ways. I don't want any of us to have a narrow vision of prayer as we look at this text today. Yes some people close their eyes, and bow their heads, and address God with words that comprise a prayer. For others prayer occurs while jogging in the morning and might not look particularly distinct from simple thinking except that it is done with awareness that God accompanies those thoughts and includes an openness to God's Spirit as their body moves and their spirit comes alive to God's presence all around. Some gather in circles for prayer and share liturgies hundreds of years old. Still others pray in complete and utter silence while still others find music as the place from communion with God.

So when I say that the way we pray says a lot about the state of our heart and the way we approach our relationship with God, I am not referring to the form or style of our prayer. I'm referring to the assumptions we bring, to the attitude we hold, to the kind of prayers we offer and then the ones we withhold. So many of us have been formed to restrict our prayers to a few general categories. Prayer is certainly a place to express our gratitude. If all you offer is "Thank you," you have prayed well for that day. If you come to worship on Wednesday night for the Thanksgiving Eve service you will be invited into a very creative opportunity to share those prayers of thanks together. Another way we often think of prayer is as a place to remember people who are hurting. This is where we name the suffering of others and hold their need for healing before God.

What about prayer as a place to protest injustice? Or a place to cry out in grief? Or a place to name the deep aching loneliness and suffering of our souls? Many of us are far too inhibited to utter such prayers. Certainly not in public. But many of us don't even go near that place alone.

Hannah did not feel such inhibition. In her world, women go to God through the head of their household. The head of the household might go to God through the rituals of the temple or the intercession of a priest. Hannah was not to be restrained by propriety or by tradition. She knew that she belonged to God. She knew that the covenant God had with her people meant that there was a covenant that God had with her. That's what we affirm in the sacrament of baptism: it marks us as ones who belong to God. In the words of Ephesians, we are not strangers or aliens. We are not guests in God's home who should feel timid about asking for what we need. In our baptism we are marked as ones who belong to the household.

When we stand with parents who bring their children for baptism, when we baptize an adult or hear a profession of faith, one of the questions that we ask is "Do you promise to pray for yourself and for others?" I wonder how many people making this promise or those who hear it skip right on over that first part and latch on only to the second. To *pray for ourselves* is not just a right but a responsibility we take on as we live into the covenant God has made with us through our baptism. I don't mean the perfunctory prayers of grace at meals. I mean prayers like Hannah's: ones that open our souls before God.

I'm aware that one of the inhibitions that might hold us back from prayers like these is theological. After all, we don't need to beg in order to get God's attention. It's not as if God is the master puppeteer pulling strings to control our every move. I know that, for me, when I finally got clear about that in college I wasn't sure what to make of intercessory prayer. If I don't need to beg God to give me what I need then what is the point of such prayers? And then I saw the movie *Shadowlands*. Do you remember that movie about C.S. Lewis? C.S. Lewis is known by many for his children's books *The Chronicles of Narnia*. But he was also a serious theologian who wrestled with intellectual questions of faith. He married fairly late in his life to a woman named Joy. She contracted cancer fairly early in their marriage. In the movie Anthony Hopkins plays CS Lewis. In one scene he is praying from deep in his heart and soul when a well-meaning priest makes some comment to him about prayer. He says something like, "I hope that God will hear your prayer and heal your wife." CS Lewis says to him indignantly: "I do not pray to change God... I pray to change me."

You can see this prayer-as-inner-transformation happening inside of Hannah. You can see the way that prayer is about remembering who we are and affirming that even when our hearts are breaking that we are

beloved of God. For Hannah, that time in the temple was a defining prayer for her. She would not be defined by the torment of her rival. She would be defined by the promise of God.

Ernest Hemingway once wrote “The world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.”² If you read CS Lewis’ book, *A Grief Observed*, you can watch the way that God makes him strong in that broken place of his grief. I suspect that Hannah’s prayer that day in the temple was in large part an act of defiance. This broken heart of hers would not break her spirit. Her society may say that a woman without a child is cursed by God. Her husband’s wife may taunt her at every turn. This world may try to break her. But she will not let it! In her prayer she reconnects with the truth that she belongs to God and as such she will not be a victim of circumstance. She walks out of the temple no longer sad and beaten down. And this is before she has any clue whether her life will bring the desire of her heart.

My hope for us today is that we could come to see prayer as a place of protest and defiance—where we find the strength to resist the oppressive and demeaning forces when they come—a place of inner transformation where we recover the defining truth of our lives: that the God whom we serve keeps covenant. Yes, sooner or later the world breaks everyone of us but afterward—after we wrestle with God in prayer and find our God faithful—afterward, we can be strong at the broken places.

And so, as we come into this week of Thanksgiving, no matter what our life may hold, we can give thanks.

As we close, I share this prayer of blessing written by Rev. Andrea La Sonde Anastos.

Let us pray:

“Holy One, friend and lover,
companion on the way,
welcome threshold at the end of every path,
provoke us to attentiveness,
encourage us to notice grace and joy,
let us not neglect to offer gratitude,
to embrace hope, to love beyond despair.

² I heard this quote many years ago and do not recall its origin.

Help us release anxiety, resist alarm,
and welcome the pangs that
herald new birth.
May it be so."

Amen.