

The Song That Never Ends
Twenty-Fifth Sunday After Pentecost
November 15, 2015
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Text: Song of Hannah—I Samuel 2:1-10

Last Sunday we heard the story of Ruth – of Ruth and Naomi and Boaz – as Dr. Bechtel led us through the twists and turns of those lives with some ‘divine coincidence’ woven through. Carol pointed out to us at the end of the story the connection to the lineage of King David – but it wasn’t the link to greatness that she used to draw us to the story - much more of what I heard was about how ordinary the lives of Ruth and Naomi and Boaz were - and yet a story of Ruth from long ago and far away tells of life in a way that pulls us very close - and opens up our lives to God as it does.

I think much the same happens with the story of Hannah today. Who is she that we should listen to her story? Well, there is the link to greatness there too, since the child we hear of in this story is Samuel – THE Samuel of 1st and 2nd Samuel - who will lead the tribes of Israel to become a nation as eventually a king is enthroned under Samuel’s watch – and in fact Ruth’s descendant David is anointed by Hannah’s Samuel to be king. But, just now, this story is not about Samuel! – it is about Hannah! – and like Ruth it is told as the story of some ordinary people:

“There was a certain man of Ramathaim whose name was Elkanah. ²He had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.”

Some different circumstances than today, but really just a story of what people face in their lives. And it’s that ordinary piece, more than the road to greatness with Samuel, that I want to focus on in this story. And to do that, I want to focus beyond the story, to the song – the Song of Hannah. After all the events of this story unfold with the previously barren Hannah conceiving a son, Samuel, and dedicating him to serve the LORD – at the end of it all comes a song from Hannah – and then we never hear from her again – so it’s already her swan song! – so we better pay attention.

Now it does NOT say at the start of Chapter 2: ‘Hannah began to sing’ – it says “Hannah prayed, and said”...and what follows is a prayer, a poem, a psalm, a song; this has always been received as a song – poetry that became a part of the worship life of God’s people. And a song is really meant to be sung – not to be dissected by a sermon...but...I want to try something with this song – I’d like you to listen and try this song on, and see how it goes - and just to allay any fears, I am not going to sing! But here’s Hannah’s song – it goes something like this:

“My heart exults in the LORD, my strength is exalted in my God” (isn’t that lovely?! – beautiful)

“My mouth derides my enemies – I rejoice in my victory!” (oh – hmm?)

“God is holy – God is our Rock” (I like that part)

“stop talking, you proud, arrogant people !” (well, that’s...direct!)

“the mighty are broken and the feeble are strong; the hungry have bread and the full are hungry; the barren have children and those with children are weeping; the LORD lifts up and brings down.

The LORD guards the faithful and cuts off the wicked and shatters his adversaries!

but not by might does one prevail!... the LORD will judge the ends of the earth.

And – God bless the king!”

Well that is quite a song! If there would be any cultural stereotypes that because this song is from a woman that then it will be sweet and tender; that since this song is about the birth of a child, that it will then be nurturing and gentle...then this song defies any such stereotypes. Which I think frees us to hear in this song what rings deep and true to us; and also to hear all of the chords in it that may sound dissonant too. This isn’t just a pretty song – it’s a song of Hannah in her circumstances – circumstances with plenty of challenges for her, and for us as we listen: she is 1 of 2 wives; she is valued primarily for if she has children or not; the other wife torments Hannah for her being barren; Hannah particularly wants a MALE child; we’re told God grants Hannah’s prayers when she dedicates the child to God’s service. In such circumstances, we should expect that Hannah’s song will have some challenges in how to hear it and what to make of it. So, I wrote a little poem/song, about listening to Hannah’s poem/song – here’s how my poem/song goes:

‘Listen to Hannah, as she sings her song; it’s a powerful chorus, but she got some things wrong;

listen to Hannah, as you think of your song; you'll have to decide how you sing along..."

How do you like it? – catchy?! 😊

Well, here's what I'm after by putting that little song of mine along with Hannah's song... on Wednesday evenings in October, we had a great book study group – about 30 folks; we'll do another book sometime – come and join us. The Book was "The Bible Tells Me So: Why Defending Scripture Has Made Us Unable To Read It" by Peter Enns. I thought it was a really good book, but today all I am going to say about it is this: the book helped me to not be so afraid of disagreeing with Scripture! - any alarm bells going off for anyone?! I don't mean that in any sort of smug or dismissive way towards the Bible – what I mean is that when we read the Bible there are always and inevitably things that people say and do that express an enduring way of faith, as well as things that do NOT stand the test of time and circumstance – and the thing is, what is enduring and what is not are almost always mixed in together. And that's what I see in Hannah's song too:

- she sees God as caring particularly about the circumstance of the marginalized and powerless; she also takes some joy in revenge on and suffering for the powerful;
- she sees God as one who overturns the power structures of the world; but also dismisses others as enemies;
- she recognizes God's presence in weakness rather than might; AND she exalts God's power given to the King (I'm really pretty sure some later editors tacked that part on!)

Now there was a time I would have been nervous about seeing things I would question in Hannah's song. I would gloss over the "bad" parts or try to explain them away- something like: "perhaps Hannah is focusing on larger structural issues and metaphorical 'enemies'". But what about this instead: Hannah is not exceptional or perfect, she is ordinary and faithful: she gets it right and wrong in her circumstances. And the thing about that is, it not only frees us in looking honestly about how to sing along with Hannah, it also frees us to wonder: 'I wonder what we are getting right and wrong? what am I getting right and wrong?' Or you could say:

'Listen to Gordon, as he sings his song; it's a good chorus, but he gets some things wrong;

listen to Gordon, as you make your song; but you'll have to decide how you sing along..."

I look back in my life, my faith – what I've said and believed and done – and I got a lot of things wrong. And as I've done so, I've learned, and tried to change my tune when I can – got some things right. I mean, just think: this sermon has some things wrong! – I'm not sure yet what they are, but time will tell...and a few things right too, I think.

When I speak of disagreeing with Scripture, or looking at ourselves for what we get right and wrong, it's not meant to pick apart or pick on things – it is meant to soften and free and humble and empower us as we discern how God is at work in others and in us. What Hannah's song is, what our songs are called to be, is: faithful, sincere, passionate, strong, humble – and such songs will be something substantial; not perfect or pretty or complete – but faithful, and in that, something of God's story is told. That is how God tells God's story: we need not idealize or idolize any one – but listen in ordinary lives how God is, and is not, revealed.

...which calls us to listen to the songs around us too. Lots of songs this week: I heard on the radio a little girl in Iraq sing a song about the suffering of her family and village – really, she sang a song; I heard someone speak of the voice of creation, listening for beauty; I heard the song of lament in Beirut and in Paris and in far too many places; and here in this day we have the beautiful song of new members welcomed and a precious baby baptized – so many different songs of lament and joy, of violence and power, of faith and peace, of life and seeking a way to live.

How do we listen to, sing along with such songs? The Prayer for Blessing is a song by the poet Miriam Therese Winter – it is the Song of Hannah; but you'll see that it takes some things, and leaves others behind. It listens in Hannah's song for all that we can bring to our lives of faith today, and it let's go of what we do not need. And we can do that because Hannah had the courage to sing her song – and we must have the courage to listen and take and leave and sing our own song of faith. And never really our own – but breathed by God's Spirit – the one to whom our lives and songs belong; praying in the midst of all the discordant melodies of our lives and world for the notes of true life from God to ring true in us; for God's song to create life in and through us. Or we could say:

‘You’ve been given life to sing a song;
have the courage to sing, even though some of it’s wrong;
make it part of the true life, SHALOM, that is God’s song;
seeking to be faithful as we try to sing along.’ AMEN.