

God remembers: God loves

Toronto United Mennonite Church

November 15, 2015

The Bible is full of stories. I grew up hearing Bible stories in Sunday School and in church – I know that's not everyone's experience. But I think we can all appreciate a good story. The story I'm going to tell you today is about a woman named Hannah. I have lots of Bible stories that I really like but few that I can really inhabit. Hannah's story I can inhabit, it reaches out across space and time, grabs me, and I enter the story.

This particular story starts out slow. Imagine Garrison Keillor saying it.

Now there was a certain man from Ramathaim-zophim from the hill country of Ephraim, and his name was Elkanah the son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite.

I've got to assume these are important details. I'm a Reesor, married into a clan of people who keep track of their relations. Son of Jeroham, don't you remember his dad Elihu used to go to school with your uncle, live out in the hill country of Ephraim, south of the town line. People still talk like this!

So you might think the story is about Elkanah, but it isn't.

He had two wives: the name of one was Hannah and the name of the other Peninnah; and Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.

Alright then – more clues. This story is set way, way back in a time when polygamy was considered okay. Two wives: one who has children and one who doesn't. Can you see the scene in your mind – one woman busy tending a noisy brood of children, the other woman sad, silent and alone?

3 Now this man would go up from his city yearly to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts in Shiloh. And the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests to the LORD there.

Going to worship in Shiloh is a hint that this is a really old story – before there was a king and a temple in Jerusalem. And the events in this story are going to influence Israel's future in some pretty significant ways. And the background music is going to change here – something dark and foreboding. Cuz Hophni and Phinehas were worthless men – that's how they are described in 2 Sam 2:12 – worthless men. Remember that phrase – it's going to come up again. Hophni &

Phinehas don't respect God and they don't respect people. They are abusing their positions of power. Still, Elkanah was a devout man and he worshiped at Shiloh every year, made sacrifices.

4 When the day came that Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife and to all her sons and her daughters; 5 but to Hannah he would give a double portion, for he loved Hannah, but the LORD had closed her womb. 6 Her rival, however, would provoke her bitterly to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. 7 It happened year after year, as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she would provoke her; so she wept and would not eat.

Elkanah loves Hannah and he gives Hannah extra portions (meat presumably) from the sacrifices he made. Still, Peninnah provokes Hannah since Peninnah had children and Hannah did not. Hannah suffers, weeps and refuses to eat. And this happened year and year.

8 Then Elkanah her husband said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep and why do you not eat and why is your heart sad? Am I not better to you than ten sons?" 9 Then Hannah rose after eating and drinking in Shiloh. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat by the doorpost of the temple of the LORD.

Eli, you remember is the father of the two worthless men, the priests who are abusing their power. So he's sitting by the door of the temple.

10 She, greatly distressed, prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. 11 She made a vow and said, "O LORD of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of Your servant and remember me, and not forget Your servant, but will give Your servant a son, then I will give him to the LORD all the days of his life, and a razor shall never come on his head." 12 Now it came about, as she continued praying before the LORD, that Eli was watching her mouth. 13 As for Hannah, she was speaking in her heart, only her lips were moving, but her voice was not heard. So Eli thought she was drunk.

Hannah must have looked a right mess, crying and praying with her lips moving but no sound coming out. She prays for a son and promises that he will be dedicated to the Lord all his days. She pours out her heart to the Lord. "only her lips were moving, but her voice was not heard."

14 Then Eli said to her, "How long will you make yourself drunk? Put away your wine from you."

15 But Hannah replied, "No, my lord, I am a woman oppressed in spirit; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have poured out my soul before the LORD. 16 "Do not consider your servant as a worthless woman, for I have spoken until now out of my great concern and provocation."

Do not consider your servant as a worthless woman. This line hits me in the gut. I read about Aurora House and I know this line hits you in the gut too. Do not consider your servant as a worthless woman. How do you think the story could go next? It seems to me entirely likely that in the next frame, Hannah gets thrown out of the temple for being drunk and disorderly, for speaking disrespectfully to the old priest. But that's not what happens.

17 Then Eli answered and said, "Go in peace; and may the God of Israel grant your petition that you have asked of Him."

Eli says – go in peace. He prays that God will answer her prayers. He doesn't even know what she is asking for – he trusts her and he trusts God without knowing the details. Go in peace; and may the God of Israel grant your petition that you have asked of Him." Wow.

18 She said, "Let your maidservant find favor in your sight." So the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad.

Hannah responds in kind and asks to find favour in Eli's sight. Then she leaves and goes to get something to eat. This is a very Mennonite way of saying – she's happy and well. She's eating. Her face is no longer sad.

So can you guess what happens next?

19 Then they arose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD, and returned again to their house in Ramah. And Elkanah had relations with Hannah his wife, and the LORD remembered her. 20 It came about in due time, after Hannah had conceived, that she gave birth to a son; and she named him Samuel, saying, "Because I have asked him of the LORD."

I think our lectionary text stops at verse 20 but I have to keep going. I first preached this text when my kids were fairly young. It is a heart-breaking story of devotion.

21 Then the man Elkanah went up with all his household to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice and pay his vow. 22 But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, "I will not go up until the child is weaned; then I will bring him, that he may appear before the LORD and stay there forever." 23 Elkanah her husband said to her, "Do what seems best to you. Remain until you have weaned him; only

may the LORD confirm His word." So the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him.

24 Now when she had weaned him, she took him up with her, with a three-year-old bull and one ephah of flour and a jug of wine, and brought him to the house of the LORD in Shiloh, although the child was young. 25 Then they slaughtered the bull, and brought the boy to Eli. 26 She said, "Oh, my lord! As your soul lives, my lord, I am the woman who stood here beside you, praying to the LORD. 27 "For this boy I prayed, and the LORD has given me my petition which I asked of Him. 28 "So I have also dedicated him to the LORD; as long as he lives he is dedicated to the LORD." And he worshiped the LORD there.

And so she drops off her toddler at the temple, knowing that she will now see him once a year when the family makes the trip to Shiloh.

Then Hannah prayed and said,

“My heart exults in the LORD;
My horn is exalted in the LORD,
My mouth speaks boldly against my enemies,
Because I rejoice in Your salvation.

²“There is no one holy like the LORD,
Indeed, there is no one besides You,
Nor is there any rock like our God.

³“Boast no more so very proudly,
Do not let arrogance come out of your mouth;
For the LORD is a God of knowledge,
And with Him actions are weighed.

⁴“The bows of the mighty are shattered,
But the feeble gird on strength.

⁵“Those who were full hire themselves out for bread,
But those who were hungry cease *to hunger*.
Even the barren gives birth to seven,
But she who has many children languishes.

⁶“The LORD kills and makes alive;
He brings down to ^[d]Sheol and raises up.

⁷“The LORD makes poor and rich;
He brings low, He also exalts.

⁸“He raises the poor from the dust,
He lifts the needy from the ash heap
To make them sit with nobles,
And inherit a seat of honor;
For the pillars of the earth are the LORD’S,
And He set the world on them.

⁹“He keeps the feet of His godly ones,
But the wicked ones are silenced in darkness;
For not by might shall a man prevail.

¹⁰“Those who contend with the LORD will be shattered;
Against them He will thunder in the heavens,
The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;
And He will give strength to His king,
And will exalt the horn of His anointed.”

1 Samuel 2:19 includes the very personal detail of Samuel ministering in the temple wearing a little robe. His mom made him a new robe each year and brought it up on their annual trip to worship. I imagine his mother sewing it, working on it for months to make it beautiful. She imagines how much he has grown as she measures out the fabric.

It’s a story of love, a story of devotion and a story of such a love that is willing to give up its own self-interest, a sacrificial love. This is the kind of love God has for us. The story tells us many truths: God listens, God loves. God remembers

Beloved: 1 Samuel 1

Hannah hopeless, tired, lost
her prayers could make no sound
She poured her soul before the LORD
her tears on sacred ground

A double portion once a year
became a cup of gall
She begged the LORD remember her
then she would give back all

Do not consider your maidservant
as a worthless woman

Her piece heard
Her peace granted
She gave up the treasure of her heart
all she had
her only begotten son

Oh Hannah
Oh Mary
Oh Almighty God

Humbled in the presence of such love
and such sacrifice
I can only pray soundlessly
my lips move and no words escape

LGR June 2011, revised March 2013