

Today is Pledge Dedication Sunday when we offer to God our pledges. We speak of making a living, making money, but the truth is all things, including we ourselves belong to God and are gifts from God, including our money. So today following the sermon, we will bring forward our pledge cards as a sacrifice, a gift to praise the Living God. We will walk toward the Cross of Christ to the table of our Lord Jesus, who once and forever has made the ultimate sacrifice. We will dedicate our pledges for sure, but more importantly dedicate ourselves, our church to God's service, trusting our lives into God's hands.

Today's scripture is about another person of faith, casting her hopes and doubts at the feet of God while praying for a future. Today we hear about Hannah who is barren, pray for a child. God blesses Hannah with a son. Not only does this child change Hannah, this child changes his nation. Samuel will be born to bring hope to his people, Israel.

1 Samuel 1:4-20

1:4 On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters;

1:5 but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb.

1:6 Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb.

1:7 So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the LORD, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat.

1:8 Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

1:9 After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the LORD. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD.

1:10 She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly.

1:11 She made this vow: "O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head."

1:12 As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth.

1:13 Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk.

1:14 So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine."

1:15 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.

1:16 Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time."

1:17 Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him."

1:18 And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.

1:19 They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her.

1:20 In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the LORD."

Proclamation of the Word

Do you know Hannah?

- She is the young couple hoping for a child whose dreams are dashed with the death of an infant child.
- She is the mother in Baghdad afraid for her children to go outside.
- She is the father in Paris trying to keep his children safe and unafraid.
- She is the Syrian refugee, the man, the woman, whose future feels so dim without a homeland.
- She is the man in Beirut overcome with the fear of violence, the young woman in Nigeria afraid for her safety, the teenager whose only available family is a gang.

Do you know Hannah? I do. I bet you do, too.

Hannah reminds us of all who are harassed, hurting, broken and unfulfilled. She is a type for her nation. She represents the experience of the nation, her people, writ large. Israel, during the period of the Judges, feels outcast, hurt, harassed by her enemies. Hannah steps forward during a time of chaos. It was a time when people were not following the Lord, God, as their anchor and guide. According to Judges 21:25, "In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." It was a time of chaos between the old order and the new. A time when the people were ruled by judges and before they were led by Kings. It was an in between time, an unsettled time, a chaotic time.

Do you know that kind of time? I bet you do.

I wrote this sermon in the wake of Friday's terror attacks in Paris, and Beirut, and Baghdad. In moments such as these, it is easy to think. "What is going on in our world? It seems that the world has gone mad." We live in a time of high anxiety, contentiousness, and conflict.

It is into this same kind of moment that Hannah comes. The old is passing away, but something new is being born. Hannah is barren, much like her people. Having had no children, she feels worthless and without purpose. Her husband has another wife who teases her because she has born many children. Hannah is aggrieved. And she does what most grieving people do. As Elizabeth Kubler-Ross helped us understand there are many emotions tied to grief. Hannah displays many of those emotions: pain,

anger, bargaining, and lashing out at those who love her most, especially Elkanah, her husband. All she can think about is wanting a child. Her pain is so deep. And she even bargains with God in her prayer saying that if she is granted a son, she will dedicate him to serve the Lord. Hannah represents not only herself, but her nation in need of hope and leadership.

Do you know Hannah? Have you been like Hannah?

How does Hannah respond to her situation and how are we called to respond? Perhaps we can learn from Hannah.

First, she casts herself solely and fully on the grace of God. She prays to God in the Sanctuary at Shiloh. She worships casting herself, her hopes on God. When we despair, hurt, or grieve, we can do the same. Her first prayer was "Lord, remember me." We can approach God the same way, "Lord, remember me, your servant."

Kathryn Samuelsⁱ writes about coming into worship this way:

And so we come to church and seek some kind of connection with God, a sense of God's presence in a way that is more intense than in our daily lives. Hannah walked in (right past the priest) a woman of faith, pressed down but trusting and ready to pour out her heart and expose her need, and she walked out a woman of faith, radiant with confident joy that what she needed would be coming her way. Eugene Peterson observes (cautions us?) that we're not changed in a place of worship, but instead, it "intensifies whatever we bring to it" (First and Second Samuel, Westminster Bible Companion Series).

We have to bring an expectant heart, a trusting heart to worship. We must expect God to show up and to change us. Samuels continuesⁱⁱ,

*I'm reminded of something the character Shug says in Alice Walker's book, *The Color Purple*: "Any God I ever felt in church I brought in with me. And I think all the other folks did too. They come to church to share God, not find God."*

Hannah brought her trust in God with her to that sanctuary and surrenders to God. Hannah even claims her worth to God when the priest Eli chides her and believes she is drunk. She asks Eli to not regard her as a worthless woman. She knows who she is and whose she is. She belongs to God. She notices God's grace.

Next week is Thanksgiving. Some of you have been posting this November on Facebook and Twitter something you have seen of God's grace in your daily lives. One of my friends, Jill, is calling it her daily "Gracebook" posts. Kelly Roman has been doing this and using #noticinggrace. One way you may want to practice noticing grace, is to write it down on paper or posting it this week and next. That is one way we might be connected to God outside of Sunday worship and encourage others.

Hannah casts herself fully on the grace of God. In fact, Hannah, the name itself, means grace. She is a servant of God's grace. But Hannah does more than pray in faith, she hopes. She places her trust and hope in the Lord. That is why she walks out beaming. She is a new person, a person who now has hope. Frederick Beuchner writes honestly about hope in his book *Secrets in the Dark*ⁱⁱⁱ. He writes about our walk of faith this way,

Ministers and congregation both, they came to church year after year, and who is to say how if at all their lives were changed as the result? If you'd stopped and asked them on any given Sunday, I suspect they would have said they weren't changed much. Yet they kept on coming anyway; and beneath all the lesser reasons they had for doing so, so far beneath that they themselves were only half aware of it, I think there was a deep reason, and if I could give only one word to characterize that reason, the word I would give is hope....

I think it is hope that lies at our hearts and hope that finally brings us all here. Hope that in spite of all the devastating evidence to the contrary, the ground we stand on is holy ground because Christ walked here and walks here still. Hope that we are known, each one of us, by name, and that out of the burning moments of our lives he will call us by our names to the lives he would have us live and the selves he would have us become. Hope that into the secret grief and pain and bewilderment of each of us and of our world he will come at last to heal and to save.

Ultimately, it is that hope in the Lord that sustains Hannah and leads her to give God the glory when things do turn out for the better. We, too, can place our hope in the Lord to lead and guide us, to supply our needs.

Hannah gives birth to Samuel, a son whom she will dedicate to the Lord as she promised. In fact, our second Scripture reading today is Hannah's song. She prays fervently again, but it is not a prayer of supplication and lament, it is her prayer of praise and thanksgiving. Both kinds of prayers are faithful. She is moved to praise. Listen to Hannah again from

1 Samuel 2:1-10

2:1 Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory.

2:2 "There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.

2:3 Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.

2:4 The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength.

2:5 Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn.

2:6 The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.

2:7 The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts.

2:8 He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with

princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set the world.

2:9 "He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail.

2:10 The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed."

Grace alone/Giving back Grace

Hannah's prayers were heard. She knows she is saved by grace alone. She knows she can hope in the Lord so she gives her child, Samuel, to the Lord even before she knows that she will have more children. She entrusts her child into the Lord's hands as she does her own life. She entrusts their future into God's hands as well. The one named grace has cast herself on the grace of God. And in turn she gives that grace back. Hannah knows that she is blessed to be a blessing.

While the scripture speaks of "praise for the Holy One," Hannah shows us that **Giving back Grace** is a spiritual practice we can do, too.

What does "giving back grace" look like in your life?

- Is it how you serve the purposes of God in your vocation, your daily work?
- Is it the things you try to teach your children when they struggle with hard things?
- Is it the time, money, and talent you give to the church?
- Is it how you work to change society around you?

Theologian John Calvin's personal emblem was a picture of a flaming heart held up in a hand with an inscription. His motto reads in English, "My heart I offer to you, O Lord, promptly and sincerely."

In the same way, Hannah opened her hand and offered her beloved child. She, in the same way, was offering her heart. Someone once told me having a baby was like having your heart ripped from your body and your heart sprouts arms and legs. Hannah gives God her heart, her Samuel. Knowing God's grace, she gives grace back to God. We are blessed to be a blessing.

You are called by name. The Lord knows your heart, your hurts, your needs. And our God is mighty to save. Cast yourself on the grace of God. Trust and believe that God will care for us. The Lord is the one in whom we can hope. He's never failed us yet!

Let us worship God through the giving back grace as we bring our pledges forward.

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ⁱ Kathryn Samuels, Sermon Seeds, http://www.ucc.org/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_november_15_2015.

ⁱⁱ IBID.

ⁱⁱⁱ Frederick Beuchner originally quoted in *Secrets in the Dark; A Life in Sermons* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006)