

“Waiting (and Praying) Is the Hardest Part”

May 28, 2017

Faith of Our Mothers series – 7th Sunday of Easter – Memorial Day Sunday

SING v. 3-4 of *Hail Hannah, Full of Patience* by Edith Sinclair Downing:

*Then God remembered Hannah.
Her prayer was not ignored.
She bore the son long hoped for,
and pledged him to the Lord.
She brought him to the temple
with proper sacrifice,
offering to God her first born,
a gift beyond all price.*

*Sing praise for her son, Samuel,
a prophet who did seek
to mediate God's power
when Israel's time was bleak.
Sing praise for mother Hannah,
whom we can honor now
by having faith and courage
as we fulfill our vow.*

This is a chaotic time in Israel’s history. The rule of the judges like Deborah and Samson has ended. There’s a desire among the people to be ruled by a king. In the midst of this, we hear about Hannah and her family. She isn’t the first woman to struggle with being childless in a society where children were a deep desire and priority of any marriage, especially a male child who would grow up to continue the family line.

Hannah’s story is one of faith and trust in God, but it hits hard. She is deeply distressed. She is sad. She is struggling. The journeys she made with her family were extremely difficult. Every time they went to Shiloh, probably three times each year, Hannah would see families together.

And this particular time, it was probably the Feast of Tabernacles when they’d give thanks for God’s care for their ancestors as they wandered in the desert and also ask a blessing on their crops. Everything was centered around growth and blessing, and the pain of no child probably intensified.

I don't speak from personal experience, but I know that many women and men continue to struggle with infertility and conceiving a child. The pain of it is very real and even being around others who are celebrating new babies - whether family or friends - can be gut-wrenching.

After the birth of her first child, a dear friend shared with me that she couldn't come to a yearly gathering that we hosted because it was too painful to see couples with children when she was struggling to get pregnant. It's not jealousy. It's deep pain, and it hurts.

It's out of this deep pain that Hannah prays. And I know it turns out well for her. She prays. She conceives and bears a son. But there's a lot more here. Hannah's pain is deep, but so is her faith. And even as she prays, she teaches us about the power of prayer and the power of grace.

Hannah expresses her need before God. Her prayer is raw and honest. She doesn't hold back with any kind of uncertainty, but is clear about her pain and her desire. We tend sometimes to overlook our struggles, anxieties, and pain. We may even try to hide it from God (as if we could) or cover it up and attempt to come across as faithful and without struggle.

Maybe we're afraid of God's judgment or caught up in trying to impress God. Maybe we have this notion that God will write us off if our prayer doesn't measure up, or maybe we want God to know how faithful we are. Either way, we struggle to come to God honestly and truly believe that God receives us just as we are.

It made me think of the phrase: *If you pray, don't worry, and if you worry, don't pray.* Easier said than done, I know, but there's some deep truth there that Hannah exemplifies. We can get so caught up in saying the right thing or doing it the right way that we forget the first rule: this is about a relationship with God who desires that we pray honestly - putting it all on the table.

Hannah wanted a son, but the larger issue was about trusting her life to God. She was willing to come to God just as she was. And notice that she didn't go to Eli first to ask for his help. She went straight to God in her own words. And it's almost funny when Eli accuses her of being drunk because he can't hear her prayer.

It made me think of a story Jim Grace shared as a devotional at a meeting. It was a relative of his who was praying and when someone else said they couldn't hear what he was saying, the reply was, "Well, I'm not talking to you." Powerful words, and a good reminder of how we come to God.

Hannah is quick to reply to Eli, a priest whose authority is clear. She's not drunk, but she's troubled and praying to God. Eli's accusation doesn't stop her from coming to God, but seems to encourage her even more. Eli hears her and offers a blessing.

Hannah's prayer is real and authentic - from the heart. She brings it all to God. And the same thing happens in her response to Samuel's birth and God's grace. She is just as ready to express thanksgiving to God as she is to express the struggles. She didn't end her life of prayer after Samuel was born, but followed through on the response.

So the challenge for us is to live our faith completely - not just receiving grace, but responding to grace as well. How quick are we to give thanks to God for the moments of grace, strength, and hope that we experience? Sure, we come to God with the struggles, and we should. But how often do we come back and tell God how thankful we are?

When we make that commitment, then it's not about trying to keep score of who's received grace or how much, but more about how we're responding to the grace we've received.

Are we more loving? Are we more generous? Are we committed to justice and peace? Are we more aware of how we're praying and what we're praying?

Hannah sings a song that reflects what she believes to be true. It begins with a very personal witness of who God is and how God has worked in her life. She goes on to say that God is concerned about those who struggle, those who feel alone and isolated, those who are written off by others.

When we read it, we can see some similarities with Mary's song in Luke after she's given the news that she'll bear the Christ-child. This is a song about how God changes the game and about how power looks different from God's view. The weak are made stronger. The lowly are lifted up. Those who are hungry are filled up.

God can and does transform the world - and even transforms us! God chooses to bring new life where there seems to be nothing but death and hopelessness. God chooses to work in and through us to bring hope.

We put a lot of stock into personal power and personal gain - into what we can do and what we can accomplish. Hannah reminds us that ultimately there are things we don't control and can't control. Everything we can get and gain will never be the complete answer. Power, popularity, and prestige aren't going to satisfy our deeper need for a relationship with our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer - God who is the Rock.

Hannah didn't shy away from asking God to remember her, which is a great show of her faith. It's not a self-righteous thing to believe that God cares for us. It's not a bad thing to trust that God is listening. Sometimes we forget that God's grace is for us - not a right that we claim, but a gift we receive.

Do you have the audacity to believe that God's grace is for you? For me? For all? And when we do believe that, how do our prayers change? And when our prayers change, do we see God's new possibilities more clearly?

Being persistent in prayer shows our faith. The God you call upon will finally come, promises Frederick Buechner, "and even if he does not bring you the answer you want, he will bring you himself. And maybe at the secret heart of all our prayers, that is what we are really praying for."

Prayer is not about getting what we want; it's about our intense desire for God's presence, God's power and God's peace. And just as we are persistent and confident in God, the One we love, the One we worship, the God we love and who loves is eternal, everlasting, the Rock of Ages, a Mighty Fortress, the source of steadfast love and grace.

So again God works in a way that we might not expect - beginning with the family drama and a woman who is waiting and praying for a son. Hannah is Samuel's mother – Samuel who will bring hope for the people of Israel who are waiting for a king. He's not the king, but he's the one to anoint King Saul and King David. His role as a priest, prophet, and judge brings hope to the people.

This is a story of God's power to save - to bring new life from barrenness, hope from hopelessness, thanksgiving and praise from despair. Where will God bring life and hope in ways we don't expect? Are we watching? Are we waiting? Are we praying? Even when it's so hard?

Take it from Hannah. God is listening.

Thanks be to God! AMEN.