“Pouring Out Your Heart Before God”

I Samuel 1:4-20; Hebrews 10:11–14; 19–25; Mark 13:1-8

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November 14, 2020
A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, November 14, 2021, 23rd Sunday of Ordinary Time, Proper 28, Harvest Sunday, dedicated to John David “Jack” Schwartz on his baptismal day, to the birth of Adrian David Blanks, born 11/8/21, and to the memory of Rev. Earl Fritz and Ms. Donice Wooster who entered eternal life on 11/7/21 and 11/12/21 respectively and always to the glory of God!

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Samuel, the son of Elkanah and Hannah, is born into this world as one dedicated to God. His arrival is an answer to his mother’s deepest prayer. Hannah has struggled through barrenness to birth Samuel and you might call him an “extra special change agent” of God. Samuel becomes a light to the nation Israel between the long journey of exodus and exile to monarchy and the rule of King David. Samuel is the pivotal person in Hebrew scriptures whom God chooses to carry God’s nation through chaos to clarity. But it is the faithful prayers of
Samuel’s mother, Hannah, that touch the heart of God – that bring about Samuel’s conception and birth.

Elkanah is a man with two wives, Penninah and Hannah. Although he loves Hannah deeply, at times he is indifferent to her pain and the painful condition of not being able to carry and bear a child. She struggles deeply with infertility and he doesn’t seem to get it or care. While Hannah is barren, Penninah has sons and daughters. Year in and year out, Penninah verbally abuses Hannah for her barrenness. She openly humiliates her, especially when they go to Shiloh to bring blessings and offerings to the Lord.

We meet Hannah in this moment and she weeps in sadness as she is unable to conceive and birth a child. But in her absolute faithfulness, she knows she is not alone. She appeals to God to grant her a blessing – to give her a baby. Out of her intense pain, she prays intently.

As Hannah prays, we meet our fourth person in this story, Eli the priest. He is the aging. He is increasingly feeble. As he presides over the temple in Shiloh, it’s pretty clear he has lost his edge. As he sees Hannah’s lips move with no words coming out, he supposes her to be drunk. Apparently, intense pain can present itself as drunkenness. So, he chastises her for being drunk.

But Hannah leans in. She says “Oh no, sir, please! I’m a brokenhearted. I haven’t been drinking. Not a drop of wine. No beer. The only thing I’ve been pouring out is my heart. I have been pouring out my heart to GOD… It’s because I’m so desperately unhappy and in such pain that I’ve stayed here so long to pray” (paraphrased from I Samuel 1:15-18, The Message).
When Eli hears her cries, he changes. He softens. He says, “My dear, Go in peace. And may the God of Israel give you what you have asked of him” (paraphrased from I Samuel 1:19, The Message).

The God of Israel – our God - delivers. God delivers an answer to prayer. God delivers Hannah’s son, Samuel - our fifth character and the central figure of the unfolding saga. This saga has shown us a lot of things in just a short amount of time – just few verses of holy scripture. It has shown us hostility from one woman. It has shown us indifference from a husband. It has shown us brokenheartedness, and faithfulness and prayerfulness from one woman. And it has shown us that an aging and changing religious leader can still keep changing. And finally, it shows us the newborn light to the nation – Samuel.

I want to say – at some point in this story we can relate to one and maybe all of these characters. I hate to admit it but there’s a part of me as we are on the edge of Thanksgiving, I am thinking about the Thanksgiving table where we will have an “uncle” who will be making comments and say things that will throw us off. In that regard, it is easy to think about others. But in this story, I want us to think about ourselves. I want us to think about the places we go to in the darkness of our soul to see each of these characters as they relate to each one of us.

We learn what it looks like to pour out your heart before God. Have you ever done this? Have YOU ever poured out your heart before God? Have you gone so far into that place in your heart and your soul where you have lost all hope and the only one you have left to talk to is God – and you start talking, and you start crying and you find yourself weeping before God wondering where you will find the strength for this moment and the next moment? Have you ever gone there? I have.
I have been so low at times that I have found myself crying out to God as my very last resort. And I want to tell you - it’s not long ago – way back then. It comes close to home now. While it should have been my first choice, I found myself so brokenhearted that all I had left in my bag of resources was a broken heart crying a tearful appeal, something that came from another place within me.

Entering into “the Dark Night of the Soul” can be frightening. Ask Juan de la Cruz, (St. John of the Cross), author of *The Dark Night of the Soul*.

He writes: “No matter how much individuals do through their own efforts; they cannot actively purify themselves enough to be disposed in the least degree for the divine union of the perfection of love. God must take over and purge them in that fire that is dark for them…”

That is what Hannah discovers. She finds that in the darkest nights – when she engages the depth of her soul the hiddenness of God and God’s love is revealed to her. Hannah’s prayer is that God would grant her a child. Her promise to God is that she will grant God this child back to God. There is no part where God is absent in this story. God is hidden and then revealed. It is God’s love emerging from the shadows that changes our hearts.

Psychologist Carl Jung writes in *Symbols of Transformation*: “No one should deny the danger of the descent, but it can be risked. No one need risk it, but it is certain that someone will. And let those who go down the sunset way do so with open eyes, for it is a sacrifice which daunts even God. Yet every descent is followed by an ascent; the vanishing shapes are shaped anew, and a truth is valid in the end only if it suffers change and bears new witness in new images, in new tongues, like a new wine that is put into new bottles.”
Throughout the Biblical narrative, we discover God arriving in the darkness of night, in the darkness of the soul – in the times that seem like nothing is right. God appears to the humble, to the barren, to the distressed, to the distraught. Like the desert, the land that appears seems to be lifeless and dry, God arrives like the green oasis appearing out of nowhere. God makes a way in the wilderness. God truly makes a way where there is no way.

The person on the streets, the person in our home, the person in the mirror, the person in neighborhood, who is whispering to themselves and – like Eli – we hear and we say, “they must be crazy, they must be drunk, they must need help…” maybe they are in such grief, so bereft, so brokenhearted, they are so broken in two, that crying to God, talking to God and whispering to God is all they have left. They might be – like Hannah – pouring their hearts out to God.

I hope and pray that you hope and pray. Because when we pour our hearts out to God, we receive grace and peace.

Yesterday, as we mourned and remembered Rev. Earl Fritz, his son John told the story of Earl climbing a 14,000+ summit at 75 years old. Carl Jung’s words were playing in my mind as I heard John speak. Those words became real – in a new way. Every descent is followed by an ascent. From our highest days, our glorious peak-climbing experiences, we eventually come down to earth. And we may find ourselves on the earth in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Likewise, when we sink down into the depths of despair, down into the dark night of the soul, we know that we will ascend. We can climb out of the hole. We can emerge out of the muck and rise from the puddle formed under our eyes while we were pouring our hearts out to God.
With her prayer of the heart, Hannah goes right to the heart of the matter.

Her name means “grace” in Hebrew. And there can be no mistaking her prayer is a prayer of pure grace.

In this prayer from “Grace,” we hear that Grace will return grace when grace is received. What a powerful image for prayer! How often in our prayers, do we want something to happen for us? In our darkest nights, we want God’s delivery service to arrive with a neatly-packaged answer. But, how often do we return thanksgiving to God? When we “get” something do we “give” something back?

In Hannah’s prayer there is a trustful innocence. She doesn’t adjust her prayer by asking God just to take away her sadness and her pain. She doesn’t demand that God give her what she wants “or else.” She simply offers love to God and love is returned.

At the center of Hannah’s life is prayer. At the center of her prayer is trust in God. At the center of God is love and grace. Hannah enters the fullness of love and grace and returns to God what has come from God.

Hannah gives her son Samuel back to God. The gift she has waited for her whole life she gives back to God. She actually gives her son to Eli so that he may be in the Temple at Shiloh and learn to do what Eli has done. She gives her son to God and with this gracious gift of life, returned in thanksgiving to God, there is a seismic shift that happens in the nation of Israel. King David emerges from that seismic shift. And in time, Jesus is born from David’s lineage – and Jesus changes everything.
Today, as Cori and Ben’s answer to pray – John David Schwartz – has been baptized into our faith in Christ. I pray that we pray like Hannah.

I pray for you that your prayer goes to the heart of the matter you are facing. Don’t get stuck on the edges of your prayers. Don’t worry about your lack of decorum – focus on your dedication to God. Give God thanks for all your blessings. Don’t worry about how you look or how you sound when you are in your heartbroken state. God doesn’t care about that. God only cares about you. That’s all.

So just pray. Go ahead and pour out your heart before God. God is waiting to hear from you.