

# “So, What Then?”

I Samuel 1:4-20

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From the Pulpit

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*Let us Pray: Open our hearts and minds, O God, by the power of your Holy Spirit and may your word proclaimed fall fresh on all of our ears and into our souls this day. Amen.*

The worst turmoil of all often takes place in one's own soul. This happens when you can't seem to live with yourself, when your own pain, anxiety, depression and regret eat you up, leaving you with an unsettled ache.<sup>1</sup> Maybe Hannah wrote those words.

Hannah had a desire to be a mother. She lived in a time and place when women were valued primarily for their capacity to bear children. Hannah's desire to have a child wasn't forced on her by the larger society. That deep longing belonged to her. When our story opens from 1 Samuel, her longing has not been fulfilled.

Hannah feels the burden of her situation. She has a husband who desperately loves her but who doesn't know how to help. Reading this story, you feel her desperation. You see darkness and sadness and depression spiraling. Hannah lives with an unsettled ache.

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<sup>1</sup> Alphonetta Wines, [www.Workingpreacher.org](http://www.Workingpreacher.org), 2015

In a world where barrenness was considered a curse, only the birth of a child could complete Hannah. Day after day, year after year, she had to live with the pain in her heart that would not go away.

When it is time to load up the family van and go back to the Temple at Shiloh every year, Hannah packs up too. As often as she makes the trip, she endures the constant irritation from her sister-wife, Penninah. Penninah is the one who takes one too **many family “selfies” and then posts them all on Facebook.** She announces every pregnancy on social media and to share with the world. (I am convinced that in some way, unintentionally perhaps, Facebook is the modern day Penninah. Every birth announcement, every sonogram, every month by month photo update of a growing child is a painful reminder for women like Hannah.) For some reason, Penninah enjoyed taunting Hannah for her barrenness. That only served to deepen **Hannah’s misery.**

The text says “she wept and would not eat.” There didn’t seem to be much hope for Hannah. The exhausting dysfunctional family trip is too much. The deep longing of her heart goes unfulfilled yet again. Her unsettled ache is more than she can hold for one more minute.

So, what then? What is Hannah to do then?

Hannah rose.<sup>2</sup> That's what the text says. Word for word. It's the turning point in the text. It's verse nine... "After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh...Hannah rose." In the face of all that was barren and broken, isolating and suffocating, she gets up. There are so many other options. She can give up. Give in. Crawl under the covers (once and for all). She can turn bitter. Get angry. Lash out. But instead, Hannah rose. She acts. There is something in Hannah that makes her get up that day and go to the Temple.

It's to a place she had been before. It is familiar, yet this time was different for Hannah. She goes in. She is there to pray. At that time, the temple was a place of public ritual, not private prayer. This is the first record we have in the Bible of an ordinary person, let alone a woman, praying in a place of worship.

She prays. I mean, there she really prays. There is prayer and then there is prayer. We pray every week, daily prayer, the prayers of the people, the petitions we say together. These are prayers articulated to get us closer to God. The kind of prayer

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<sup>2</sup> Attributed to Jim Forbes, the former pastor at New York City's Riverside Church. He has said that if he ever had had a say about the names for his future granddaughters, his suggestion would be Hannah Rose, for what Hannah did in her hour of distress.

that is passionate and needy---a prayer that is repeated over and over again. The prayer that comes from the very depth of your soul. It's a prayer that is uttered with such pain or fear or need.

Author Anne Lamott would call that prayer, "Help. Help. Help."<sup>3</sup> Or even, "Please, Lord. Please. Please. Please."

Can you see her? She rocks back and forth, tears streaming down her face and her lips moving. None of this is normal. She **didn't look well.**

Eli, the priest of Shiloh, sees Hannah rocking without a chair and assumes she's drunk or mad or both. Women just didn't come into the Temple and do that. She didn't observe the order of worship, she didn't ask for clergy assistance with prayer, or burn incense or an animal sacrifice. She was there---a woman, mouthing her distress to God. She poured out her heart to God. Eli tries to dismiss her and she speaks. She articulates the burden she carries and pleads with Eli to at least hear why she entered the Temple the way she did. "Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Anne Lamott, *Traveling Mercies*.

<sup>4</sup> Eugene Peterson. *Westminster Bible Companion*, WJK Press.

I imagine many of us have had an ache like Hannah. Moments in our life like Hannah. Moments of darkness. Of longing and pain. Dashed hopes. I imagine if we are honest with ourselves, we say prayers just the way Hannah did. Honest. Unapologetic. Pleading. I suspect that we live much of our life waiting with Hannah—in a place of longing and need, praying and hoping, waiting for new life to emerge. We have all ached for something or someone. We have all longed for a reassuring touch, for fulfillment in our work lives. We ache for a spouse who has died, for the feel of a baby in our arms. An unsettled ache lingers no matter what one does.

You can't miss her unprecedented daring. She's real, she's tough, she's emotional, and she's faithful. She's courageous, bold, unapologetic, and empowered by the Spirit. To act. To pray. She goes to chart a new course, trusting the very God who had closed her womb could give her what she wanted.

Hannah believes that God could take away her barrenness. She bargains. "Lord, look on the misery of your servant and remember me" (v 11). The text makes another claim about God's power. The text claims that God was the source of her barrenness. *The Lord had closed her womb.* The text says it twice to clear up any confusion. *The Lord closed her womb.* This would be an easier story if the text didn't say that! I wish the

text didn't say that. The Bible is clear and unambiguous in attributing Hannah's infertility to God. I don't buy that. I hear myself saying, "None of that makes any sense." That's bad theology. So many times I have said to myself and to others: God doesn't make bad things happen. God doesn't go around putting cancer into people, causing mass shootings in the streets of Paris or Beirut, causing accidents, triggering infertility.

The text says something different: God caused Hannah's barrenness. And God had the power to take it away. While I can't endorse the theology of this story, there is something in that I am drawn to. It's the assumption that God has the power to transform every corner of our lives.

According to this story, God takes an active interest in everything. To that end God is at work. God was with Hannah in her tears and in her darkness. It is to this God Hannah asks for that which she most dearly wanted.

Do we do that? Do any of us ask God for that which we really want?

Barbara Brown Taylor tells the story of her granddaughter Madeline's 7<sup>th</sup> birthday party. "Dressed in her favorite blue bell-bottoms, Madeline watched the candles on her cake burn down while we sang to her. Then she leaned over to blow them out without making a wish. "Aren't you going to make a wish? ...You have to make a wish," her grandfather said. "I don't know why I keep doing this...wishing thing," she said, looking at the empty chair at the table. "Last year I wished my best friend wouldn't move away but she did. This year I want to wish that my mommy and daddy would get back together...." "That's not going to happen," her mother said, "So don't waste your wish on that." "I know it's not going to happen," Madeline said, "so why do I keep doing this?" No one answered her. Why do any of us keep wishing for things we know won't happen?"<sup>5</sup>

Who prays for something that can never happen?

Hannah did.

When the evidence points to the fact that she would never have a child, Hannah takes that unsettled ache and gets up. She rises as an empowered Spirit and she prays for a child. Night after night she prayed, "remember me and do not forget your

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<sup>5</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, *Home By Another Way*, p. 200-201.

servant.” It’s a prayer that Moses said, and Samson, and Job and Jeremiah. It’s a prayer the repentant thief said to Jesus: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.”

The text says the Lord remembered Hannah. God respond in the most direct manner possible. She conceives a child who grew up to be Samuel, a great spiritual and political leader. He played a pivotal role in Israel’s history. This long awaited birth not only represents a new beginning for Hannah—it is a new beginning for an entire nation.

I want to suggest that we not move too quickly to God’s answer to Hannah’s prayer. Why don’t we wait with her in her longing and her need? It takes eighteen verses to describe Hannah’s yearning and only two verses to detail the fulfillment. When we acknowledge and honor the pain within ourselves and each other we get a glimpse of all that God is holding for us. We see the enormity and depth of the pain in this world, of our families, (today, the people of Paris and Beirut), and hear the prayers from the deepest part of our hearts.

This is the place to do it. In church, (right here, right now). Like Hannah, this may be the only place where we don't have to pretend. This is a place where we can cry out and say aloud what is going on in our lives and in our world. It's a place to be truthful with one another about the ways our lives are imperfect and broken. A place where the answer to "How are you?" can really be something deeper than "Just Fine."

Thanks be to God that that is not all we do here. Hannah rose and so shall we. We rise to worship and to pray with the sick and dying. We rise to march for justice in our community and to work towards peace.

Today we sing songs of grateful praise. We sing of thanksgiving and gratitude and offering our very lives back to God for all that God has given to us. And we are reminded that God responds with far more grace than we dare to expect or hope.

We rise because Hannah rose. (Read on to 1 Samuel Chapter 2). Hannah returns Samuel to God, as a testament of her faith and devotion and her gratitude for God remembering her. **Hannah sings and testifies to God's transforming love on behalf of the powerless.** She sings of a God who is heavily

invested in the welfare of the weak, the poor, the hungry, and the barren.<sup>6</sup>

We rise because another woman came along many centuries later. She, too, will sing with gratitude for God's transforming love. It's Mary of Nazareth (another childless woman) who bore a son. Mary will sing of the new life given that would transform not only a nation but the world. A Son who comforts those who are childless and those who weep. A Son who embraces the broken hearted and brings hope and new life to all creation.

There's a sense in which we are all Hannah. And Hannah rose and so do we. So do we!<sup>7</sup>  
Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Bruce Birch, 1 and 2 Samuel, (NISB Commentary, 1998), 983.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful for friends and colleagues who have walked with me this week. I am indebted to Amy Miracle for her sermon *Hannah Rose*, preached in 2012. This sermon helped shape my message today.