

*A Lenten sermon delivered by the Rev. Janine Wilson, associate minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Lent IV, March 18, 2012, dedicated to God, in joyful celebration of the life of this morning's baptizand Bianca Diane Cattenacci and to her parents and their desire to teach her the love of God and family.*

## **“Hannah: In Gratitude”**

***I Samuel 2:1-10***

***Part V of VIII in sermon series  
“Great Prayers of the Bible”***

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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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Unless you are currently taking part in one of our wonderful Lenten Small Groups, it's possible that you have not been busy reading First and Second Samuel; so let me introduce you to the key characters in the beginning of Chapter Two of the first book of Samuel. Elkanah and Hannah are anxiously awaiting the birth of their first child. Elkanah and his other wife, Peninnah already have children.

Elkanah is a righteous man in the eyes of God – he follows the hopes and commands of God. We are guided to see him as a loving husband. If you were his neighbor, you would also be striving to be righteous and loving – those were qualities that kept you in good standing in the community – it's what the men were supposed to do in a patriarchal society. Having more than one wife fell into the same category in the ancient world, so chances are if you were his neighbor, some of you would probably have more than one wife. And for the women their position, their stature in the community, depended on motherhood.

Elkanah chose women with opposite characteristics. Unfortunately they are opposites in some ways that are curious. From my own perspective, he might have found different characteristics between them and had a happier life. For instance, the presence and even the meaning of Hannah's name, is 'grace', while Peninnah was the opposite – she was mean and cantankerous. Hannah was the target of Peninnah's sharp tongue. In addition, Hannah's life was also difficult because of her theology. She believed God made everything - good, bad and in-between, happen. Since her acceptance in the community was at stake, she surmised God was punishing her. She had to have wondered what on earth had she done to earn her demotion in society?

I'd like to think such patriarchal-three-tier-universe-thinking has faded over time and that blaming God for everything was just as far removed, but it isn't, is it? Have you ever wondered why God makes bad things happen to good people...does your own theology ever wander into Hannah's territory? If so, are you someone who can leave unanswerable questions at bay and focus instead on God's clear hope and joy? Either way, what began as barrenness for Hannah is transformed into grace – and that, we can probably agree, does indeed fall into the realm of God with us.

We celebrate God's power to change our life, to guide us to higher ground after hurricanes and floods both literal and figurative and to bring assistance to those in need. We are thankful when we feel God has sent caring friends, family and strangers into the midst of our own life's painful circumstances. As our life journey progresses we catch a glimpse of bright days which teach us that a significant part of what we do and what we believe as Christians is a gift of God.

While Hannah's prayer is uniquely her own, it also belongs to the whole people of God; ultimately reversing loss, deprivation and hopelessness --with hope and equality for everyone; but in between we live in a time which Walter Brueggeman describes as a time of "troubled waiting."<sup>1</sup> We know our Redeemer lives and at the same time, we wait for the coming Messiah. The challenge remains now as it was so long ago-- – how will we wait? Will we live in desperation, blame and complaining; or are we open as individuals

and as a community of believers who praise God even when the future is unknown.

Life for Hannah is uncertain. She has been at the bottom of the pecking order. Instead of complaining in her prayer – she does the opposite – she remains faithful to God. In the depths of despair she prays to the God she cannot see or understand and “she verbally pound[s] on Heaven’s door to find help from the only One who can ultimately free her from her anguish. She does not pray timidly but boldly...”<sup>ii</sup> She challenged God then and she has been challenging people ever since. She demands we listen and wonder what role faith in our lives is to be...especially when times challenge our faith. And did you notice that when she is singing God’s praise, she did not ask God for anything? When we pray our praise, we become invisible and God alone appears in the illuminated center.

From her son Samuel in this morning’s story, all the way to King David at the closing of second Samuel, the story is our story as the Christ becomes the ultimate hope. Her prayer is our prayer – filled with the “stunning juxtaposition that characterizes Israel’s faith.”<sup>iii</sup> She teaches us to notice the gapping chasms between those who have not and those who have; between the faithful and the wicked; between angry meanness and the prayers of the lowly and the new promise of a world after new life is born. Hannah prays for God’s transformation and before the story ends, we see the agents of change are humans, living into the will of God. Then finally we come to see the One who has come as our Redeemer.

*“God delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. God has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life, and precious is their blood in his sight.” (Ps 72:12-14 NRSV)*

So I began to look around and within this week. I wondered about our own prayers and the way we pray. I wondered who is making things new, improving life for others and giving the glory and praise to God. Where do we catch a glimpse of amazing grace? I thought of mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers in families and in congregations. I thought about total strangers who pass

kindness forward and for those who stepped up and continue to do so, in the name of equality, dignity and welcome for every person. My wandering led me to discover what many of you already know – during the month of March in America, we don't have to look very far to see Hannah's counterparts in culture. Every March is National Women's History Month in America.

This year's recipients are not very far removed from Hannah's faithfulness and praise. The recipients each call attention to how recently women have been welcomed into places where men have always been allowed...The honorees of 2012 are 'Recognizing the Pioneering Leadership of Women and Their Impact on the Diverse Areas of Education.' They span the years from 1787 to today, Charlotte Grimke - Freedman Bureau Educator; Annie Sullivan - Disability Education Architect; Gracia Molina De Pick – Feminist educational Reformer; Okolo Rashid – Community Development Activist and Historical Preservation Advocate; and Brenda Flyswithawks, American Indian Advocate and Educator. <sup>iv</sup> As I read their stories I heard Hannah's prayer...so much grace shines through.

Voices and minds that once were forced into submission continue to rise up in praise of the God who loves us all. And just as Reverend Ahrens and Walter Brueggemann 's writings have made so clear in recent weeks, the Great Prayers of the Old Testament are more than the formal words of prayer – they are the people themselves – those who humbly cry out to God and bless God's holy name, even in the midst of the 'not yet'. The prayers/pray-ers are often heard and seen. They are the people of then and now, there and here, who see the possibilities of the sun while the rain pours down.

While they are all amazing, I think my favorite this year is: Feminist Educational Reformer Gracia Molina de Pick. She is described as a force of nature. She is an activist, feminist, educational reformer, and philanthropist who sums up a significant part of our goal as people of faith: "individual life only has meaning if you unselfishly engage as sisters and brothers in the fight for equality, justice, and peace." I encourage you to learn more about

her and her colleagues who have and are bringing new life into the world.

This week, may our own prayers and favorite pray-ers, make a difference for those who struggle: for the hungry, homeless and haggard ones; for the have nots living among the haves; for the lost among the found; and even for each one of us as we sing a new song to God, until the day the Christ completes the holy task and makes all things new. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Brueggemann, Walter. First and Second Samuel. Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990, p11.

<sup>ii</sup> Hester, David. First and Second Samuel. Interpretation Bible Studies. Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2000, p14.

<sup>iii</sup> Bruggemann, Walter. Great Prayers of the Old Testament. p29.

<sup>iv</sup> [<http://www.nwhp.org/whm/index.php>. 2012 National Women's History Month Theme: Women's Education – Women's Empowerment] (March 13, 2012).

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