

Sermon: A Mother's Song

Scripture: I Samuel 2:1-10

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I hope everyone had a good Thanksgiving and that the family dynamics around the Thanksgiving table weren't too awkward or painful... cause I have to say, I would guess that for most of us, the family thanksgiving table brings pain as well as joy – whether it's someone's illness sitting beside us or someone who is not there this year for whatever reason, or tension between certain members that has always been there or newly arisen, I can't imagine many tables are purely light and joy... because families are made of humans and humans are a mixed bag of joy and sorrow, good and bad, supportive and resentful.

And so I'd say it's a good morning to consider a story from our scripture that is set around a family table and contains much of those realities. Kerri Pulaski is going to read our scripture but towards the end of my sermon instead of the beginning. She'll read from I Samuel chapter 2, a portion from the story of Hannah. I Samuel in the Old Testament records the history of Israel from the pivotal point of the Eleventh Century B.C, that's about three thousand years ago. Leading up to this time the Israelites were living as twelve tribes in Canaan – remember they had come there after wandering for 40 years in the desert. But things weren't much prettier for the Israelites in the Promised Land because they were gathered in this loose collection of tribes and clans in Canaan which left them quite vulnerable and fighting for their lives. If they weren't at war with one another, tribe against tribe, or battling with the pagan inhabitants of the land, then they were all

being steam-rolled by foreign invaders. It was very tenuous for this infant nation newly freed from slavery in Egypt.

But then, historians will tell you, something amazing happened. Over the course of seventy years in the eleventh century, Israel became a united empire, a world power located firmly beside a major trade route in the ancient world, exacting tributes from the very people who just decades before threatened their existence. Sociologists, economists, military historians, have all done their best to explain the possible causes of this massive transition of power in the ancient world. Some say that internationally, the 11th century BC revealed a power vacuum cause of the weakening of Egypt in the South; and Assyria in the North was still 100 years away from being a major power. Others say that the Philistines on the very eastern shore of the Mediterranean were a rising threat, which helped unite Israel against a clear common enemy. But what strikes them as amazing is how this unimpressive disjointed collection of clans and tribes scattered across the land of Canaan joined together in the course of seventy years to form the impressive empire of Israel under the leadership of King Saul, then Solomon and finally the golden age of King David?

Did it all begin with some backroom deals that brought the tribes together with the promise of fortune to follow? Was it a mighty military machine that was formed to subdue the Canaanites? These tribes, though they could be at each others' throats at times were bound under a common bond of belief in what they called the One True God. So did it begin with a great heavenly army of angels descending to establish the chosen people of God in their rightful place? Well, not exactly. The way the Hebrew scripture describes it in the book of I Samuel is that the united empire of Israel in the

eleventh century BC began with a family feast around a thanksgiving table and the song of a woman named Hannah.

Hannah was not really someone anyone would take much notice of, the first wife of some guy named Elkanah who was a member of the tribe of Benjamin, and to beat all, the woman was barren. For a woman to be barren was shameful in that culture since producing children, especially sons to carry on the family's name, was of the utmost importance. So Hannah was terribly distraught at her ill-fortune in not being able to conceive. And furthermore, as if that was not enough, Elkanah took a second wife named Peninnah and she of course had plenty of children for Elkanah.

The time when this was the most painful for Hannah was when Elkanah would bring his family on the annual pilgrimage to Shiloh, the central sanctuary for the tribes of Israel at that time. There Elkanah would sacrifice an animal and as was customary the meat from the animal would be distributed to everyone in the family equally. So there would be Penninah with her sons and daughters with meat piled around them, and across the table would sit Hannah by herself with her one little portion. Elkanah, who in fact loved Hannah dearly, would give her a double portion out of his love for her but his pity just grieved her even more. Of course Penninah enjoyed every second of it, or so the story says, and she goaded Hannah every chance she got.

Hannah was as low as low can get when the time came again that year to go to Shiloh with the family. It was one of those holidays that Hannah dreaded. All it did was accent her own misery, which in turn brought much joy to Penninah. So that night all of Elkanah's family gathered around the table and feasted and drank to their hearts content; except Hannah who sat there weeping and refused to eat. But as the meal came to a close and the

evening wore on, Eli, who was the priest at the sanctuary noticed Hannah standing by herself with her eyes closed, her head raised to heaven and her lips moving a mile a minute. “Oh, goodness, she’s drunk!” Eli thought and walked over to her saying “child lay off the booze a little bit.” But Hannah lowered her head and opened her eyes she turned to Eli and said quietly “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. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.” Eli must have been moved by what he saw in her eyes, for he only replied “Go in peace then; may the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.” Eli probably never would have guessed that his blessing of her would come back around full circle to him, for Hannah had been pleading with God for a son, a single son, whom she promised she would give back as a servant to the sanctuary in Shiloh to serve God’s purpose.

And God answered her prayer and Hannah bore a son and called him Samuel, which means “I have asked God.” And so as she promised, Hannah, after weaning Samuel, the greatest gift of her life, brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh and presented him to Eli saying “This is what I promised, thus as long as he lives he is given to the Lord.” She must have given him one last kiss, unable to say much else through her tears, she turned and left the sanctuary. But as she left, the awful deed done, a song filled her heart and overflowed from her lips. It was the song of a mother singing a radical, visionary song of hope, of grace, of thanksgiving; a song that spoke of great faith in a God that reaches out and loves and justifies not the most powerful of people but rather the lowly. It was a song proclaiming that true power and purpose lies with God: 1 Samuel 2:1-10.

And so in the years that followed in the eleventh century BC, Samuel grew under Eli's tutelage and in God's presence and eventually Samuel was the one who chose and anointed Saul, the first king of a united Israel. Through this lowly at one-time-barren woman's prayerful song and sacrifice, through her trust in a God of grace and purpose a whole people would be gathered together and formed into the nation of Israel. God's design was realized not through the most powerful or influential of Israelites, or even in the most dramatic of battles or changes of power but through the most lowly of God's servants, Hannah from the house of Benjamin.

Does that sound familiar to you at all? A thousand years after Hannah bore Samuel another woman of lowly estate would become pregnant and sing a song to God that would be prayed and sung for thousands of years to follow and she would bear a son called Immanuel, "God with us", who would be a savior gathering in all of God's children into a universal kingdom of peace. And a new table would be set there, where all would be invited, the full range of broken, wounded, troubled humanity gathering to receive God's love so that God's purposes might be fulfilled, world without end, amen!