

Sermon – “Pouring Out My Soul”

Scripture: 1 Samuel 1:4-18, 1 Samuel 2:1-10

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Our first Scripture reading, 1 Samuel chapter 1 verses 4-18, tells the story of Hannah, the mother of the prophet Samuel, and our ancestor in faith. Hear now God’s holy Word.

4 On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; **5** but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb. **6** Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. **7** So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. **8** Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" **9** After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. **10** She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. **11** She made this vow: "O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head." **12** As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. **13** Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. **14** So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." **15** But Hannah answered, "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. **16** Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." **17** Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." **18** And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer. Amen.

Our second reading, also from 1 Samuel, chapter 2 verses 1-10, continues the story of Hannah. After her time in the temple, Hannah becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son. This son, named Samuel, will grow up to be the first prophet of Israel, and will anoint David as king. Yet for now he is an infant, and after he is weaned, Hannah takes him to the priest Eli to dedicate him to God and leave him to be raised in the temple. Upon delivering him to Eli, Hannah sings a song of praise to God. Hear what the Spirit is saying to God’s people.

1 Hannah prayed and said, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory. **2** "There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God. **3** Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the Lord is a God of knowledge, and by God actions are weighed. **4** The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. **5** Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn. **6** The Lord kills and brings to life; God brings down to Sheol and raises up. **7** The Lord makes poor and makes rich; God brings low, God also exalts. **8** The Lord raises up the poor from the dust; God lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them God has set the world. **9** "The Lord will guard the feet of God's faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail. **10** The Lord! God's adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; God will give strength to God's king, and exalt the power of the Lord's anointed."

This is the Word of the Lord.

The title of the sermon: Pouring Out My Soul

The text: *"...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."*
1 Samuel 1:15b-16

Let us pray: God our Rock, you hear the cries of your people. Grant us the boldness of Hannah that we may persist in prayer, confident in your steadfast love. And may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in your sight. Amen.

I never liked Hannah's story. I wanted to, desperately—as a child I loved that my name was in the Bible, loved knowing its Hebrew meaning, loved that I could find myself in our faith. But I was always so disappointed with Hannah. The dutiful daughter of California hippies, I was uncomfortable with Hannah's primary identity as mother. I wanted someone cool, someone exciting, someone courageous—someone like Ruth or Esther. I wanted a woman to look up to, and frankly, I couldn't figure out why Hannah was a role model. You see, my pastor parents and my Sunday school teachers had patiently and consistently drilled into my head that God doesn't make bargains, and so a life of faith means we shouldn't try to make bargains with God. Yet here was Hannah, lauded, as far as my elementary school self could tell, for successfully bargaining with God. What did that mean for how I was supposed to live my faith?

This confusion only deepened as I grew up some, and as I watched family members deal with disability, disease, and death. Now it went beyond not understanding Hannah. Even when the cancer in her brain continued unchecked and I watched my mother die a little more each day, I knew it was "wrong" to make deals with God, and I was so angry at Hannah's successful deal. So I had a falling out with my biblical namesake.

But while in divinity school, I met Hannah again, and she hasn't left me alone since. She is distraught and inconsolable at her inability to have children—a distress that brings her to the temple and to the bargaining I'd always been so troubled by. Yet the story doesn't go the way I always thought it did. She weeps and cries out to God, promising to give her child to the temple should God answer her prayers. She returns home, eats and drinks, and is sad no longer—but all long before she becomes pregnant. It isn't the fulfillment of her deal with God that brings her joy—it's something else.

Hannah is in the midst of a breaking heart. Her husband's other wife constantly harasses her for being barren. Her husband is insistent that he loves her regardless, but Hannah is feeling worthless. Her value, society has taught her, lies in her ability to have children, and she has no children. So she goes to the temple to pour out her soul before God—to be vexed and anxious and to try to convince God to give her what she wants. And then, to top it all off, the priest calls her a drunk. This priest is Eli, father of priests. His accusation is particularly bitter, for several chapters later we learn that Eli's sons are horribly corrupt, and that Eli has done little to correct or condemn them. Yet here he is, sitting at the door to the temple, scolding a woman deep in prayer for inappropriate behavior. And who knows. Maybe it's been a long week. Maybe this has been a recurring problem in the temple. Maybe someone recently got drunk and violent, and turned the safe space of the sanctuary into one of danger and fear.

For whatever reason, Eli gives Hannah no leeway. He judges her instantly, without thinking, for acting in a way he does not approve of or understand. "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine!" And Hannah, distressed, tired of the harassment and the

expectations of her society, cracks. I can hear her speaking through gritted teeth: “No, my lord. I am a woman deeply troubled. I have been pouring out my soul before God.”

This story isn't focused on Hannah's vow to God. Her attempted deal is a part of her deep distress—a part of her bitter weeping and great anxiety. Hannah isn't to be lauded for her deal-making. Instead, Hannah is a woman who turns to God in her anger and frustration and sadness—a woman who rages and cries and begs and tries to make bargains whatever her Sunday school teachers diligently told her—a woman who pours out her soul before God—because she knows God is there, and because she knows God is listening, and because she knows that, no matter what, God will never abandon her. And THIS is what brings her home to eat and drink and be sad no longer.

But this can be so hard to hold onto—especially when our prayers—for children, for healing, for safety—aren't answered—when wombs aren't opened, or cancers don't disappear, or when a carefree night at a market and mosque and restaurant and concert turns into a nightmare. How can we hold onto our assurance in God's faithfulness when the streets of Baghdad and Beirut and Paris run with blood in the space of two days? When terror breeds terror, and an entire religion is held liable for the actions of a fanatical few, or those who flee terror in their own countries are seen with suspicion? How do we proclaim God's new mercies each morning in light of death and destruction and so much fear? And I wish, more than anything, that ordination gave us the answers, and the right words. All I have is my own story to offer you.

In the days of early high school, in that time of surgeries, chemo, radiation, and the gradual loss of the woman who had named me and raised me, when things became too much, when the house was too full of sadness and illness, I would climb out my bedroom window and run down the hill to church. I'd swing myself into the tree on the church lawn and hook myself into the branches. And then I'd scream. Or I'd sing, or cry. I'd wrap my arms tight around a solid and unmoving branch and whisper how angry I was at a mother who was no longer a mother, words I could say nowhere else. I probably seemed drunk. But I was deeply troubled, and so I poured out my soul before God. In the midst of tragedy too great to understand, in the middle of a breaking heart, only God could hold my bitter weeping and despair.

And today, here we are, joining people all over the world in response to this weekend's tragedy and in response to the countless tragedies that never make it to the front page, speaking out of our anxiety and distress and bitter weeping. And we each will turn to God in our own ways, for we all respond differently when our hearts break. There will be despair, and doubt. There will be anger and bargaining, insistence that God not allow anything like this ever again—demands to keep such violence out of our nation. There will be grief, and sorrow, and mourning. There may even be fourteen year olds screaming in tree tops.

In all this, in the great tragedies of the world and in the private tragedies of our own lives, we are here together pouring out our souls before God. “There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.” Hannah's prayer of thanksgiving to our ever-listening, ever-present, ever-faithful God rings in my ears.

In her ancient song of praise, Hannah becomes the first person in the Bible to declare God's compassion and mercy for the humble and hurting and broken. The patriarchs before her spoke of God's might and power—Hannah sings of God's faithfulness to the downtrodden and despairing. Even when her prayers had been answered and her time of distress is finished, Hannah remembers what it was to be unfairly judged, to be harassed, to be in the midst of tragedy. The breaking of her heart cracked open her heart to all who despair, and so she pours out her soul before God again: “My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God...God raises up the poor from the dust;

God lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.” Hannah boldly, bravely, beautifully declares the great faithfulness of God for everyone hurting and heart-broken.

Next month, during Advent, we will hear the echo of Hannah’s hymn, from another woman who proclaimed the faithfulness of God. In a month, we will hear Mary repurpose Hannah’s ancient song as she joyfully pours out her soul before God upon realizing the vastness of God’s faithful promise: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my savior, for God has looked with favor on the lowliness of the Lord’s servant... and Holy is God’s name.” We may still be hurting too much to sing with Hannah. Our grief—for our own sorrows, for Baghdad, Beirut, and Paris, for our broken and fearful world—may still be too much.

But she sings for us, inviting us to pour out our souls before God and speak out of our great distress and anxiety, without thought for how we might be judged. She reminds us to allow the breaking of our hearts to open our hearts to compassion, rather than hate, so that we can be the true body of Christ and reach out in love without question or judgment to all those in despair, no matter how different from us they may be. She proclaims the greatness of God’s faithfulness—that love is Lord of heaven and earth. And so, in every storm, in every sorrow, in every doubt and question and broken heart, we remember the promises of our baptism: that death and destruction are not the final word; that God our Rock will never abandon us.

God is always present. God is always listening. God will always invite us to pour out our souls, and God’s everlasting arms will hold us, strong and steady, like the solid branches of a tree, through every heartbreak.

Thanks be to God.