

Only Everything

Sermon by Jan Wiersma

Community Presbyterian Church - Rochester, Minnesota

25th Sunday after Pentecost - November 14, 2021

Texts: 1 Samuel 1:9-20, 1 Samuel 2:1-10, Mark 13:1-8

1 Samuel 1:9-20

In the days before a king ruled in Israel, a man named Elkanah had two wives. One had children but Hannah, the second wife, had none. Peninnah, her co-wife, taunted her for her childless state. Although her husband loved her, she felt her barrenness keenly, and when the family made their annual pilgrimage, she prayed and was promised a child. That child would become the prophet Samuel.

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. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord, and wept bitterly. 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." As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." 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. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." 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. They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the Lord."

RESPONSIVE READING 1 Samuel 2:1-10

Hannah's song foreshadows the Magnificat, the song of Mary, as she rejoices in the downfall of the powerful and the elevation of the weak.

My heart magnifies the Beloved; my strength is exalted in my God.

There is no Holy One like our God, there is no other Rock.

Talk no more so very proudly, nor speak in arrogance;

for our God is a God of knowledge, who weighs the actions of all.

The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength.

Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,

but those who were hungry are filled with good things.

The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn.

My God destroys and brings to life, abasing the rich and exalting the poor,

raising up the have-nots from the dust, lifting the needy from the ash heap,

to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.

Those who oppose God's mercy shall be shattered;
the Most High will thunder in heaven.

**The Almighty will judge the ends of the earth,
giving strength to the chosen one, exalting the power of the anointed.**

Mark 13:1-8

In this chapter, a vision of the end times, Jesus echoes prophets like Hannah who envision the birth of a new world order based on justice and equity.

As he came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, "Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!" Then Jesus asked him, "Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down." When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?" Then Jesus began to say to them, "Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, 'I am he!' and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs."

Hannah is one of the little-known but pivotal people of the Old Testament. We do know her name, we know her situation: she is a beloved but barren wife, tormented by her co-wife for her childless state. We also know that Hannah was a woman of faith and prayer.

Some things change more than others. Hannah prayed alone, and *silently*, and the priest Eli thought she must be drunk. If we see someone alone, talking *out loud*, we think they must be drunk--or crazy, and possibly dangerous. At least until we figure out they're just talking on their bluetooth. Some things change a lot! Some things never change. When Hannah grieves for the child she doesn't have, Elkanah says to her, "Aren't I more to you than ten sons?" Uhhhm. No? Add to her sorrow the social insecurity she would have as a childless widow in those days, if her wealthy husband should die. "The double-edged poignancy of these words is that they at once express Elkanah's deep and solicitous love for Hannah and his inability to understand how inconsolable she feels."¹ A person can totally love their spouse and never really understand them.

But Hannah prayed. She prayed for more than she wanted, and she got more than she expected: she wanted a child, but she prayed for a son to give to God and God's service. What she wanted more than anything else, she would relinquish. Let go of. Give away. She wasn't giving up much. Only everything.

Does this seem as extraordinary to you as it seems to me? "God, I want this so much that if I get it, I'm not going to keep it. Give this to me and I swear I will give it back."

Her prayer was heard by God, if not at first by Eli, and we can still overhear it today. The answer to Hannah's prayer was a child named Samuel, meaning, "Asked of God." And Hannah did give him up utterly to the service of God. God made Samuel the prophet and midwife who brought the nation of

¹ Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary. Volume 2: Prophets.* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), p. 178.

Israel to birth. Samuel anointed the first king, Saul, to make a kingdom of a group of loosely affiliated and contentious tribes. And he anointed the second, David, who made the kingdom great; and David would be known as the ancestor of Jesus. But God also made Hannah a prophet in her own right, far more than she expected: We overhear her song of triumph in the responsive reading. Thanks to Hannah's silent prayer, God changed the world for good--so much the better for the poor, the weak, the humble, the hungry; and so much the worse for the rich, the greedy, the grasping, the proud.

This says something about prayer. Christian poet and essayist Kathleen Norris wrote: "Prayer is not asking for what you think you want but asking to be changed in ways you can't imagine."²

A thousand years later, in the Gospel of Mark: The disciples and Jesus have been hanging out at the temple, watching people dedicate their stewardship pledges. Lots of rich people are donating huge sums, but Jesus draws their attention to the poor widow who puts in a penny, which was not much even then; only everything she had to live on.

As they leave the temple, the disciples marvel at its magnificence. The temple was the central symbol of Israel's identity, the physical proof of their faithfulness to God. The temple was prayer expressed in stone. Jews prayed for the Messiah to come, they prayed for the kingdom of David to rise up in power, they prayed for God to dwell again in the temple, and anoint a king to drive out the foreign overlords. The disciples' prayer is awe: "Look at our temple," they say, "Big! Big stones! Big buildings!" Jesus answers, "Oh, they'll all be gone soon." Like the offerings, it's not necessarily size that counts.

Jesus goes on to describe the dreadful events that are coming: wars and rumors of wars. Earthquakes. Famine. Not much will be lost; only everything. People will be led astray. Jesus' followers can't begin to imagine how they themselves will be changed. They'll get so much more than God living in the temple, more than tame God-in-a-big-stone-box-store. They'll get the real deal, the Savior. The king who disdains power and glory. He won't lose much; only everything, even his life. And the stones of the temple will tumble, as the power and prestige of Greece crumbled, and the power of Rome, and the power of every human nation since.

But the point, Jesus insists, is not the destruction. That comes around regardless, over and over again, despite humanity's ineffectual efforts to stop it. But that need not be the case forever. A new world is coming to birth, and the disciples will be the midwives. They will disperse throughout the earth, bringing new hope, new life, new joy: the powerful are toppled, the feeble grow strong. The hungry feast; the rich hire themselves out for bread. It's Hannah's song, Mary's song, the song of all who pray to be changed in ways they can't imagine. Not much is lost; only everything. And everything is restored, in God's new-born kingdom - when the true connection of all living beings, the beloved community, the built-in kinship of all beings is realized.

What do you pray for? What do you think you want? And what is your true heart's desire? If the world doesn't look exactly as we want it to, maybe it's not because we ask too much, but because we ask too little. We ask for a little healing here, a little comfort there: good things, of course.

² Kathleen Norris, *Amazing Grace*; quoted in "Friends of Silence," November, 2021.

Worthwhile things. Outcomes we dearly desire for those we love, for those given to us to care for especially. Prayer is good; any prayer at all can open the door into deeper prayer. Any prayer can lead us even into the prayer to be changed in ways we can't imagine. The astonishing miracle in prayer is that the more completely we offer ourselves to God, the more completely God gives us back to ourselves: only remade, reborn.

When I worked as a chaplain in a nursing home, I would always leave the people I visited with a prayer, according to their wishes. As people got older, their prayers seemed to grow deeper and wider, less focused on self, more thoughtful. Helen was a quiet and dignified elder who mostly kept to herself. When she did accept a visit, I would ask, "What can I pray for, Helen?" She would smile her gentle smile and answer, "Peace in the world." Not much. Only everything.

Listen to the news, and your ears will be filled with wars and rumors of wars, crisis after humanitarian crisis. Listen to your friends, your family, and you will hear cry after cry for a better life, less pain and struggle, more joy. All these things are part of human life. But the course of history has been changed by little, ordinary people no more smart or important than you or me: by praying Hannah, by the generous widow, by the muddled but sincere disciples. By those right next to us who see the good all around and are grateful, and by all who rejoice in opportunities that open like a miracle if we are willing to be changed in ways we can't imagine.

Prayers

~In this season of thanksgiving, we offer our gratitude to you, our God, giver of all good gifts. Teach us to ask for more than we think we want; change us in ways we can't now imagine, as we offer our lives, our gifts, ourselves, to you.

~We give thanks for the turn of the seasons, the approaching holidays, the chance this year to spend time with loved ones. May we do so safely, protecting the well-being of all.

~Eternal one, we know that wars will persist, and that in their wake will come suffering to the innocent, loss of prosperity, and people fleeing their beloved homes. We pray especially for the Afghan families being relocated here in our city: may we welcome them with understanding and may we work toward the birth of the new world where peace reigns.

~We pray for those dear to us who are perplexed, sick, or lonely; and for all who have lost loved ones. May they find peace in the promise of restored health and eternal life in you. We ask this in the name of Jesus, who taught us to pray, Our Father and Mother in heaven...

One hundred three years and three days ago, the Armistice of 1918 ended the horrendous slaughter of World War I, called THE WAR TO END ALL WARS. When the Armistice was signed, exuberant joy erupted around the world, with bells ringing then and for many years at the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month. That practice slowly faded, especially in the United States. Now, Veterans For Peace (VFP) are reviving the practice in communities of faith, on the Sunday closest to Nov. 11.

Following worship today, we invited our veterans, and their widows or children, to stand and share their branch of service. We observed a moment of silence to remember the soldiers and civilians killed in warfare in every country. And finally, one of our veterans rang a deep-voice handbell 11 times as we confirm our commitment to honor veterans by working and praying for peace until this assault on the will of the Creator for all of us is finally ended.