

“Hannah”**Rev. Maeve Hammond****1 Samuel 1:20, 2:1-10 | Mark 13:1-8****November 17, 2024**

The lectionary reading this Sunday from 1 Samuel 1-2 drops us in the world of Hannah. Sarah, Ruth, Esther, Mary, Elisabeth—you may recognize the names of these biblical women and their stories. But, Hannah? Who is she? Hannah is the primary figure of the first chapter of 1 Samuel, a book that chronicles the lives of Samuel, Saul, and David as the Hebrew people transition into rule under a monarchy. It’s a book of battles, betrayal, deception, and big feelings—and Hannah sets this book and, in turn, the new political system for the Hebrew people into motion. But, before that, let’s start at the beginning.

Hannah is married to Elkanah, a man from the hill country of Ephraim, in the eleventh century B.C.E. Hannah is his first and most loved wife, and she is struggling to conceive her first child. If you know your Hebrew Bible, you’ll know that Hannah’s story mirrors those of Sarah, wife of Abraham, and Rebekah, wife of Isaac. The recurrence of this predicament is actually called the “barren woman motif” (Eleanor Vivian 2022)—a term, “barren,” that I don’t love, but one that the Bible uses over and over again, depending on your translation. Fertility and infertility are common motifs in many of the stories of biblical women. Why is this? In part, genealogy is extremely important to the Bible, and birth stories help explain the genealogical background of biblical figures. And—and, this is the less satisfying answer—an ancient (and not-so-ancient) woman’s worth was intrinsically linked to her ability to birth children. According to the scholar Eleanor Vivian in her 2022 article “Human Reproduction and Infertility in the Hebrew Bible,” “fruitfulness,” or the ability to have many children, was deemed as a reward to

ancient people for fulfilling their covenantal duties. In other words, if a woman could not help her husband achieve his reward and she could not prove her worth, what was she even doing? Beyond social and religious suspicion, a woman facing infertility could experience challenging and potentially life-threatening financial repercussions if she could not produce heirs. From an article by Hannah Fremont-Brown from 2024 called “1 Samuel: A Feminist Reading,”

At the boundaries of Hannah’s story, we encounter limitations which mean both her desires and agency are shaped by her need for survival. Hannah’s longing for a son is not simply borne of desire or rivalry with her husband’s second wife, Peninnah, but of necessity. Without a son, Hannah risks becoming kinless after her husband’s death, left to poverty.

It is probable that Hannah did long for a child the way a modern parent longs for one of their own. However, we would be remiss if we didn’t acknowledge the high stakes Hannah and her contemporaries—and millions of women before and after her—faced at the prospect of infertility. This isn’t just a hypothetical issue: the Bible actually writes, “and because [God] closed her womb, her rival constantly taunted her. As a result, she grew gravely depressed. This went on for years” (1 Sam 1:5-7). Now, the Bible doesn’t single out Hannah’s rival by name, but midrashic rabbis have long suspected Peninnah, Hannah’s husband’s second wife. In other words, the call is coming from inside the house! Even Hannah’s own household scorns her for her infertility.

So, what does Hannah do, having exhausted all of her options? She prays, and she prays hard. On a yearly pilgrimage to Shiloh, Hannah “presents herself to God,” as Scripture reads, and she weeps, deeply distressed, praying over and over again, muttering her words in prayerful posture. At this point, her husband actually thinks she’s drunk because she’s so lost in the moment. She tells God, “Don’t forsake me.

Remember me. If you will give me a child, a male, I will dedicate him to you. For all the days of his life, he will neither drink wine nor liquor, and no razor will ever touch its head” (1 Sam 1:11). You may remember another baby was prohibited from ever cutting his hair—Samson from the Book of Judges, a Nazarite like Samuel. And through this powerful prayer, this commitment she makes to God to bring a child into the world in full service of God, Scripture says she does, at long last, conceive. And, she gives birth to a baby boy, whom she calls Samuel, “for she had asked for him” (1 Sam 1:20).

In this time, Hannah devotes herself to being little Samuel’s caregiver. She carries him, nourishing his body with her own, births him, and cares for his little body, mind, and soul. Then comes the day to deliver him in a different way, and this is a part of Hannah’s story that we didn’t hear in the Scripture reading today. Because Hannah had dedicated Samuel’s life to God, this means she needs to hand him over to the priestly class. She moves him out of her house, at the age of three (once he is weaned), and into that of Eli, priest and judge in the city of Shiloh. For so many years, she prayed and hoped to be a mother. She was, she is, his mother, but now is the time for her to be something else—to let go after that steadfast caregiving after three years, plus a pregnancy, plus years of anticipation. She delivers him into Eli’s care saying, “Now I give him to [God], for his entire life is given to [God].” And, for the last time in all of Scripture Hannah prays:

2:1-10 Then Hannah prayed:
 My heart delights in [God],
 to [God] I lift my horn high.
 I gloat over my foes,
 I rejoice in your deliverance!
 There is no one holier than you.
 No one is holier than [God];

there is no Rock like [God]. ...and so on.

Some scholars have said that there's no way Hannah could have said this prayer herself. They say it's a little too intense, a little too war-like, a little too different from the person she portrayed herself to be in the first chapter. I don't think I fully agree. While her prayer resembles a victorious psalm, who's to say it couldn't come from the mouth of a woman, a caregiver who dedicated the last few years of her life to another? The caregiver who now faces the transition of her role from incredibly present, moment-to-moment, face-to-face with the needs of her loved one whether or not she was with him? Now, he has moved to a new stage, and she is not needed in the same way. She is always with him, he is always with her, in spirit, but they are physically separated. Doesn't, in this context, her "little too intense" response seem justified—even, relatable?

In Hannah's prayer, I hear everything she has felt as she delivers her son into the hands of God and the priestly class. *And*, I hear everything she anticipates as she watches Samuel take his first step into *his* next stage of his life. I hear her rage after years and years of infertility—the scorn and judgment she received, the hope and disappointment and desperation. I hear her relief and happiness to have this loved one in her life, in the lives of others. I hear her faith. And, I hear a woman whose center of her world is changing and moving on, and I hear grief in that. [pause]

Hannah's story is at the center of our lectionary readings this Sunday, right in the middle of National Family Caregivers Month in the US. Many of us who have been caregivers to our loved ones can perhaps relate all too well to Hannah's relationship with Samuel. I wonder how Hannah found peace in this many-year stretch of

caregiving—from the anxiety of his arrival, to the long nights and early mornings and unexpected days that come with taking care of another, to the grief at her changing role and his leaving. Did Hannah find a community of other mothers, one to give her tips and hand-me-down clothes, one that looked after Samuel as she rested, one with whom she could laugh and cry? Did Hannah continue praying, finding solace, comfort, and perseverance in God? Did she have anyone to talk to after Samuel left, perhaps other families of Nazarites and priests? Did she ever feel lonely, misunderstood, exhausted?

I ask this because I've found in my many-year role growing up as a family caregiver (from the age of seven until my late teens and again in my early twenties) and from the experiences of caregivers in my midst, including in this church community, we share different stories but the same anxieties, frustrations, joys, and grief that Hannah did. Caregiving is an ancient and sacred act. But, it does not come without its complications.

This is why First Congregational's Health Ministry has started a new initiative to provide support and companionship to caregivers of all backgrounds in our midst. In your pews, you'll find small surveys [hold up] entitled "Health Ministry's Caregiver Support Network" with four short questions and space to leave your name and contact information. Over the next few minutes during this service, we invite each of you to take a moment to reflect on and answer these questions. No matter where you are in your caregiving journey—parent to a newborn or little one or teen, relative to someone with disabilities or health challenges, or accompanying a loved one as they approach the end of their life—we know the road can look long and uncertain. That's why we feel called to be there for you. We thank you for your consideration, and we are grateful to

be in community with you. As God shows endless love and presence for us, may we, too, embody love for ourselves and for one another in the form of presence—asking for and receiving support. Amen.

As Jeffrey plays, please fill out the survey. You will have a chance to pass them back to the Deacons during offering time.