

Holding Fast To Promises

Psalm 113

Hebrews 10:11-25

Mark 13:1-8

Lesson: I Samuel 1:4-20 (Text courtesy Vanderbilt Divinity Library)

1:4 On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters;

1:5 but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb.

1:6 Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb.

1:7 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.

1:8 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?"

1:9 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.

1:10 She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly.

1:11 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."

1:12 As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth.

1:13 Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk.

1:14 So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine."

1:15 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.

1:16 Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time."

1:17 Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him."

1:18 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.

1:19 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.

1:20 In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the LORD."

Hannah begins this story as a troubled woman. She is much loved by her husband, but the home life is troubled. Her husband's other wife has many children - a sign to most that a woman is of value and blessed by God. Her husband wanted to help as much as he could. He offered her two portions of the blessings of the sacrifice, he tried to console her and assure her, and yet she would not be consoled or satisfied with her lot. She knew it was unfair that blessing be withheld from her and she went straight to God to petition.

Eventually she was blessed with a pregnancy, which seemed to open up her womb, because later it is reported that she had numerous more. She, as she had promised, gives her son back to God after he had been weaned, and it is this child, born as the result of a woman striving for justice, out of a troubled home life, dedicated to God, it is this child who brings about the transition of the Israelites from tribal existence to the Monarchy. It is through

the authority that God set in Samuel that Saul and David are placed in their positions as Kings which helped to unify and strengthen the faith. It is interesting symbolically that just as the Elkanah and Hannah had been struggling with divisions and strife - so had been the Israelites, and it is their child that helped unify and strengthen the family and the Israelites.

In our sermon scriptures these past months we discovered that in Esther and in Ruth, there was no record of those women petitioning and talking directly with God. And even here, when Hannah does it, she is at first suspected of being drunk. But here we have a record of a woman, a faith-heroine petitioning directly to God. She is credited as being the first to call Yahweh, Zebaoth, and furthermore, she speaks directly to the high priest, for her burning cause - and it is acknowledged.

In Jewish tradition Hannah is considered to be a prophetess and Samuel was said to be born on Rosh Hashanah. Her silent prayer was seen as an example for all to pray. Promising her son to be a Nazarite meant that her hopes for her son were that he would be actively working for the community meeting spiritual needs, not separated from the community as many high Priests were. Members of this religious order lived and worked as spiritual servants for the community and were forbidden 3 things - they were to never cut their hair, drink wine or come in contact with a corpse.

Hannah's spiritually and Samuel's calling and serving God are shown in sharp contrast to Eli and his sons. Eli was so far gone spiritually that he did not recognize sincere prayer when he witnessed it. Eli's sons were corrupt and even though they had been born from the high priest - that did not guarantee that they would take up their callings as servants of God, as Samuel did.

Hannah knew somewhere in her heart that she was called to more in her life than merely being the companion of Elkanah. It wasn't just the taunting of Peninnah that took her to the temple and inspired her prayer. She had stirrings in her heart that were not to be denied and she was doing everything she could to fulfill them. Could they be stirrings that God put there?

"O Lord of Hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me . . . Do not disregard your servant as worthless . . ." Who has never in their lives prayed that prayer?

Eli comforted her with the hope that God would grant her petition, she went home, was no longer sad, she conceived and her life changed. She held on to the promise of Eli to her, and she fulfilled her promise to God. And Samuel was brought up with the high priest, his life dedicated to God. Promises have been kept.

It is actually pretty amazing and shows extraordinary character on all parts. Regardless of the circumstances of the birth of our children, don't most faithful parents hope and pray that their children will discover the life of faith as personally as intensely as Samuel? And not only did Eli, God and Hannah follow through on their promises, but Samuel seemed to do a pretty good job himself on accepting his calling.

Following through on promises is not always an easy thing to do, and sometimes, I fear, it is not, in general, something that is often done. That is why we are frequently warned in the scriptures not to swear to do anything, and why it seems like such an extraordinary accomplishment when promises are consistently followed through, as we witness in this scripture.

The commitments we make sometimes butt headlong into human weaknesses and suffering. Promises to keep to a diet, quit smoking, be punctual, keep the Commandments, and marriage vows - when we make those - and fail - we can see how complex human spiritual life truly is.

I wish *I* could say *with certainly* what Eli seemed to be certain of on that day. I wish *I* could tell people who petition God that their prayers will come true. But I hesitate. Why? I know in my own life that when I had certain stirrings of awareness and prayed long and hard, my prayers were answered, and it felt like a miracle.

When I joined Seminary I had read that Paul had advised followers to stay in the same marital state that they were in when they were called. So I resigned myself to being single for the rest of my life, and felt good about it. But somewhere into my 3rd year I found stirrings of a desire to know another's life to experience love on the intense intimate prolonged level of a marriage. I began praying about it. And not very long thereafter Steve moved in across the hall from me. And our courtship was an amazing miracle to me.

Years later I began to panic that we hadn't conceived yet. My prayers were so similar to Hannah's, and at the age of 38 I conceived, 39 gave birth and it all seemed like a miracle to me.

So often my experience has been that God *does* answer prayers, yet rarely in the time frame that we would wish. Often it seems like there is a delicate spiritual balance between hopes and an attempt at contentedness and trying not to be too greedy. I can't explain the when and why, but that is the delicate dance we dance with God and our spiritual lives.

Sometimes I truly know that if we only claim our hope - and continue to believe and listen to those stirrings in our souls, they won't leave us. There are times where we are called to contend with God for those desires and they will be solved. When we've done everything we could, they will be more neatly dealt with than anything we could imagine. I hang on to words like those found in our Epistle, "Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful."

Hannah took her concerns directly to God. She was bold enough to take action as best she knew. She spoke in response to the high Priest when he falsely accused her, and she took confidence in her actions that they would have the expected response when she left the temple. "Her countenance was sad no longer." We often have little wishes that we petition God for, but it is rare that we are so burdened and consistently aware of a concern, that the only help is from God to rest our troubled soul, as Hannah was in this text.

As one who feels called by God to share God's desires for our lives, there is nothing I want more than to encourage all of us to believe in God, and trust that God will help you when your souls are burdened and teetering on giving up.

If it sticks in your soul, don't give it up. If it goes away eventually, maybe it was one of those wishes not for the greater good - part of God's plan - but I believe God wants us to fight for what is right. I believe that at times it is God who puts those stirrings in our hearts in the first place, so we would do the foundational work. As in our Epistle "Let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds." Seems that even God needs some provoking at times . . . ask Hannah.

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