

S.21121421, 1 Samuel 1:4-20 "My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God."
First Presbyterian Church, Cuba Sunday November 14, 2021

1 Samuel 1:4-20 (NRSV)

⁴On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; ⁵but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. ⁶Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. ⁷So 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. ⁸Her 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?"

⁹After 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. ¹⁰She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. ¹¹She 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."

¹²As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. ¹³Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. ¹⁴So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." ¹⁵But 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. ¹⁶Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." ¹⁷Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." ¹⁸And 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.

¹⁹They 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. ²⁰In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the LORD."

Have you ever seen a Matryoshka doll? They are sometimes called nesting dolls. The largest wooden doll opens and another smaller one exists inside it. When you open the second one, another one is inside it, and so on. I found mine the other day in a packed away place. My aunt gave it to me from her trip to the Soviet Union when it was the Soviet Union. Hannah's story is like a set of nesting dolls. It is layered with meaning. Unpacking one part only leaves more to unpack.

On the outer layer, Hannah's story is a family drama about a childless woman who is deeply loved by her husband but who experiences the jealousy and bullying of her husband's other, very productive and fertile wife Peninnah. Hannah, whose despair is exacerbated by Peninnah's behavior, is deeply distressed by what she doesn't have, a baby, a son, an heir. Hannah has a dream that has been dashed and even ridiculed. She has an identity that cannot come into being. She desires a life she has never been able to live. Despite all the love she does have from Elkanah, she is a woman who is unable to rest easy. She has no peace.

This family drama story is archetypal. It is a story about us. This is perhaps another layer. We can all understand what it means to be unproductive or unable to access our creativity or life-force in us. We may not know what it is like not to have children but I imagine we can grasp what it is like to have nothing to produce, nothing to give, nothing to create, nothing to take us to the next dream. I could project an image of a field that is cracked and dry and brown and you might say that field was barren. I could project an image of a person sitting at a desk in a stack of papers, brow sweating and looking at a computer screen with a graph that has a flat line and you might say that they have had an unproductive season. Have you been unable to dream? Have you been unable to reach the goal? Have you been taunted despite your efforts or maybe because of them? We may not know what it is like not to have children, or maybe we do, but I imagine we can grasp what it is like to have nothing to produce, nothing to take us to our next dream.

Back to the family drama - And so Hannah goes with her husband to the temple and prays, without words, one of those “I don’t care who’s watching” prayers, one of those “I will give my child to you, God, if you answer my request” prayers. She makes a vow as she prays. Eugene Peterson in *The Message* translates her vow this way,

Oh, GOD-of-the-Angel-Armies,
 If you’ll take a good, hard look at my pain,
 If you’ll quit neglecting me and go into action for me
 By giving me a son,
 I’ll give him completely, unreservedly to you.
 I’ll set him apart for a life of holy discipline. (1 Sam 1:11, MSG)

Eli the priest thinks she is drunk but she’s not. All he sees is her praying with her mouth moving with no sounds coming out. When he discovers that she really is just praying and has made a vow to God. Eli blesses her without even hearing what she has prayed for. Eli’s blessing puts her at ease. "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." ¹⁸And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." She finds peace. And, she and her husband have a really nice night. They go home. And, in due time she has a son, named Samuel, who will become a really important person later on in the bigger story. Right now, God is the biggest character. And Hannah rejoices, a beautiful song of thanksgiving.

Listen to her song in 1 Samuel 2 (MSG), again in Eugene Peterson’s translation,

I’m bursting with GOD-news!
 I’m walking on air.
 I’m laughing at my rivals.
 I’m dancing my salvation...(and it ends)
 GOD will set things right all over the earth,
 he’ll give strength to his king,
 he’ll set his anointed on top of the world!

Here’s another layer. Hannah’s story is not just a family drama, it is a national drama. Because of where it is at the beginning of the books of Samuel, is a “guide story” for the want-a-be nation of Israel who does not yet have a king and which consists of a nomadic people still making decisions around a campfire. Israel feels less than the other nations which have armies

and a king. They feel barren, ridiculed by other nations, despite being God's chosen nation, God's beloved people. All the other nations surrounding Israel are squeezing out this tiny people from its sense of credibility and productivity. For Israel it is not enough to be God's chosen nation; Israel's dream is to have national legitimacy. Israel like Hannah is unable to rest easy.

Hannah's story is about the birth of a nation. Hannah's child will become the prophet Samuel who will lead the people into a new way of living. Samuel helps God choose a king for Israel, King Saul. At the very heart of this story, though, is not the son or the king, that Hannah, and therefore Israel, sings about in chapter 2; it is God's transforming power. As a thanks for this amazing grace, Hannah vows and does give the life God gave her back to God. Samuel at the proper age is dedicated to temple life. This is the guide message; this is what Israel should do: now that it is blessed by God, given a king, granted a birth, it should give its life back to God. Will Israel be able to give the kind of thanks to God that Hannah has? That is the question the book of Samuel addresses.

This is an archetypal story, representing the human drama at its very core. It is a salvation story. Samuel's birth and Israel's birth is like another birth that will issue in a new age, the birth of John the Baptist born to the barren Elizabeth, a servant of the Lord, born to prepare the way of the new King, Jesus Christ.

There is one more layer. The archetypal story connects us to a very present story and a very real story in our lives, which is why I chose to preach on this story for Cuba Sunday. Cuba's name could be Hannah.

Oh I know, you might not look at Cuba and say it is barren. What a beautiful country! The warmth and water produce the most fertile crops of sugar cane, pineapples and coconuts. There is so much artistic creativity, incredible talent and ingenuity. But, Cuba like Hannah has a complicated family drama which has, at times and especially now, positioned her in a place of

barrenness. She has had the nations deride her for years. Spanish, Dutch English, America, Soviet and Chinese.

Two years and 8 months ago I was in Cuba with our Cuba study group. We were excited for the possibilities ahead of us to renew programs and to strengthen relationships. The country was opening up. We were planning programs to partner with the Luyano congregation. We dreamed about retreats and trips and collaborations. We looked forward to learning about how they are involving their young people in the church. We looked forward to our sewing groups sharing creations. We were excited about the love that was being strengthened, our hermanamiento.

Then, a year later as we were planning for the next trip, our government returned to the old embargos and travel restrictions. Then there was Covid. Our trip was cancelled. Then there was the collapse of the double currency system that they had. For a while we knew no news. Then we knew they were getting sick. We had friends die like Sylvia who had been the cook for the Luyano food ministry for many, many years. We were hearing through What's App and other social media as well as emails from family members here in the US that Cuba had less and less food and longer and longer wait lines. Last Spring even though we collected money to send beans and rice and other basic necessities in a transport ship to be shared with the churches for their food ministries, the shipment was unable to go.

On the one hand, I felt that because of the many nations actions toward Cuba, I myself was a contributor to her barrenness like Peninnah. I am the bully to this small country. Because of my actions, ships are not able to transport basic needs. Families are not able to visit family members. People are starving and sick. Churches are not able to visit other church members. Presbyterians are, after all; a connectional church. Things had been looking up and then they were looking very, very down.

Like Hannah, I hoped God would hear our prayers for a life and a future, our prayer for Cuba's life and future. I also felt like I was Hannah's husband Elkanah. I love our friends in Cuba. I love the humanity that we share. I share God's love for Luyano. I pray for them and with them. When they hurt, I hurt. Like Elkanah walked to the Temple with Hannah to pray for God to have mercy, I pray that our country and all the other powerful nations that look on this island as a commodity or a strategic national position will change in the way they are treating Cuba. I want to see Cuba's creativity and its life flourish again.

In the story, Hannah goes to the temple and finds peace before she is ever assured that she will have a child. What the priest blesses is her faith; he does not make blind promises to her. He matches her prayer, God grant you what you request. Hannah gives it over then and trusts that God will find a way to bring her an heir, a life, a future in the child she so desires. There is no doubt who is in charge of the future of God's beloved. God is. Hannah lets go of the despair and the real barrenness is gone. And, the Hebrew scriptures bears out God's relationship with Israel. Whenever Israel trusts God, their oppression leaves and they receive God's mercy.

I have been strengthened by Cuba's tenacity and faith in these days. With Cuba we have prayed. And we will continue to pray. Despite what I imagine could be despair, they have not let their trust in God waiver. That cannot go unnoticed by our God. Indeed, it has not. And, we celebrate those little movements of life that have occurred recently like Pastor Daniel Izquierdo successfully completing his Doctorate defense yesterday and like the cargo shipment which finally made it from New Orleans to Havana after 5 months and is now being distributed to the other churches. "My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God." "I am bursting with God-news, I'm walking on air!"

Jack Kern from Covenant Pres. in Austin wrote on Facebook early this week, "Container contents are being distributed to churches. Praise God for the hard work and dedication of the Synod and Presbyteries! Distribution of container content to churches is under way. Praise God for the hard work and dedication of the synod and presbyteries!"

Pastor Daniel Izquierdo from Luyano said on (November 7 in translation) Yesterday the load for the churches of the capital arrived in Luyanó. From here we distribute it to our four churches. Thanks to all the people who cooperated.“

Other comments read, “Thank God for so many hearts full of love, God bless you all! Gracias a Dios! Gracias a Dios!”

It sounds like Hannah is singing. Cuba is singing.

Let’s give thanks to God as we watch these slides from the container ship being unloaded. I will be reading Hannah’s song in Eugene Peterson’s translation.

(Show silent slides of the container ship being unloaded while reading the Message version of 1 Samuel 2)

I’m bursting with GOD-news!

I’m walking on air.

I’m laughing at my rivals.

I’m dancing my salvation.

²⁻⁵ Nothing and no one is holy like GOD,

no rock mountain like our God.

Don’t dare talk pretentiously—

not a word of boasting, ever!

For GOD knows what’s going on.

He takes the measure of everything that happens.

The weapons of the strong are smashed to pieces,

while the weak are infused with fresh strength.

The well-fed are out begging in the streets for crusts,

while the hungry are getting second helpings.
The barren woman has a houseful of children,
while the mother of many is bereft.
⁶⁻¹⁰ GOD brings death and GOD brings life,
brings down to the grave and raises up.
GOD brings poverty and GOD brings wealth;
he lowers, he also lifts up.
He puts poor people on their feet again;
he rekindles burned-out lives with fresh hope,
Restoring dignity and respect to their lives—
a place in the sun!
For the very structures of earth are GOD's;
he has laid out his operations on a firm foundation.
He protectively cares for his faithful friends, step by step,
but leaves the wicked to stumble in the dark.
No one makes it in this life by sheer muscle!
GOD's enemies will be blasted out of the sky,
crashed in a heap and burned.
GOD will set things right all over the earth,
he'll give strength to his king,
he'll set his anointed on top of the world!

Let us give thanks to God!

Resource for Biblical information: New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, I and II Samuel.