

Where are you God?
1 Samuel 1:4-17a; Mark 10:13-16

¹⁵ But Hannah answered and said, “No, my lord, I am a woman of sorrowful spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor intoxicating drink, but have poured out my soul before the LORD.” (1Sam.1)

Today I want to talk with you not merely as your pastor, but as a person among you who sometimes struggles with the questions, “Where are you God?” or “Do you hear me God?” In today’s Hebrew text we have Hannah pouring out her soul before the Lord. She has had to endure for years the taunts of Peninah who seems to merely look at Elkanah and is pregnant again. She has had to endure the taunts and stares of the women of her village when she goes for water or food and even during times of worship, all because Hannah has been unable to get pregnant. It was the deepest desire of her heart to be a mother.

Sadly instead of the women around her, who were already mothers, having sympathy and offering loving support for Hannah, they turned on her. We even have her husband trying to compensate for and to ease Hannah’s grief by giving her a healthy portion of meat. An extra helping at the dinner table is supposed to fill the emptiness that Hannah is feeling. He also believes he is enough and his provisions for her should be enough to restore Hannah’s joy, but they are not. The desire of her heart is to be a mother.

Hannah goes repeatedly to the temple year after year to make her request known to God. Her pleas turn in to bargaining with God while in Shiloh. We’ve been there haven’t we? God if you will just answer my prayer I’ll become a missionary in Africa. God if you answer my prayer I promise to sin no more. Or most ministers favorite, God if you answer my prayer I will go to church more often. Our heartfelt desire leads us to say or do almost anything to convince God to hear us and to answer our prayer. Our sorrowful spirit cries out to God like Hannah and much like the Psalmist David in the book of Psalms.

We start to feel like Hannah, bitter, lonely, isolated, and at times angry with God. Our soul hurts as hers did. We may even say to God, “I feel forgotten. You have overlooked me” or “God, why have you forsaken me?” How often are we misunderstood during these times in our lives? Those times in which our soul aches and grieves and we seek the compassion of God and the compassion of those around us. Well meaning friends and family say to us, “You just need to have faith,” or “Maybe it’s not God’s will for you.” Those words, coming from the ones we love, are stinging and at times push the dagger already in our hearts even deeper. Now we know these things are said because the people who love us don’t want to see us hurting. They want us to be happy just as Elkanah wanted for Hannah. It is difficult for them to remember the times in their own lives when they struggled in such a way and their need for someone just to say, “I don’t understand this either, but I will be in prayer with you and for you.” It is not that we need an answer from them; it is simply that we need them to be present so that we do not feel forgotten.

Now before I share with you the current desire and sorrow of my heart please appreciate that I know it is not the desire of everyone, nor should it be. Hannah’s story in many ways is my story right now. The deepest desire of my heart and greatest longing is to be a mother. A little over a week ago I saw a Specialist who said to me that the fibroid, I knew was present, has doubled in size and it is unclear as to when or how that happened. What is clear is that it must be removed because it is now of such a size that it is considered precancerous or possibly cancerous. So, on this coming Tuesday I will have an MRI to help the surgeon determine where the root of this thing is, to see if it has grown any more in size, and for him to determine the best way in which to remove the fibroid without the risk of impairing my ability to have a child or children in the future. I will then have surgery on July 21st to remove the fibroid. I am planning on only being out for a week after that, but will have a clearer picture following the surgery as to

the length of time I will need to recuperate. As you can imagine, without the loving support of friends and family close by, this has been a very difficult and painful journey for me.

I have received their love and support via Facebook, email, text messages and phone calls. I am grateful also to the Pastoral Relations Committee and others within our church family who have also provided support, prayer and encouragement during this my time of asking, “Where are you God?” I would like to share with you one of the many ways God continues to reveal Godself to me in this time of questioning. While I was seeing the Specialist he said to me “there is only one surgeon in this area that I would trust to do this surgery otherwise I recommend you go to Minneapolis to have this done. I will talk with the local surgeon first and you will get a call within the week regarding how you should proceed.” The specialist opened the door to leave and was totally taken aback as there standing outside of it was the very surgeon he spoke of who had “just dropped by” to speak with his nurse. I say to you that I believe that was God’s grace showing me that in the midst of my pain and crying out that God has heard my prayers, knows my fear and sorrow, and is reassuring me that I am just to continue to trust in our Creator. That is why my appointment to see the specialist unfolded into my being scheduled for surgery in one fell swoop. Even in the midst of my anticipatory grief, God made Godself known not only with the surgeon’s presence, but again in the loving prayers and encouraging words of friends, family, and members of our church family. I have been humbled by this experience to say the least.

Eli was humbled by Hannah’s correcting his assumption that she was intoxicated. She shared with him from her grief, her pain, and her vulnerability and it was then that Eli could hear her and see her with compassion. He proceeds to offer her a blessing, “Go in peace and may God grant what you have asked.” Eli hung around long enough to listen to Hannah, to take responsibility for his judging her falsely, and to join with her in her prayer to God.

In that one exchange they both had an opportunity to live their faith out loud. Can you recall a time in your life in which an exchange with one person changed your life and gave you a renewed sense of hope? Are we willing to journey with others and listen and try to understand the deep grief they are experiencing and/or struggle to express? Will we hear them even when we can't make out the words they are speaking? (Rev. Adelina Pecchia) Hannah could only speak briefly to the pain she was experiencing as her grief was great. Eli humbled himself and then he made the choice to care about her situation.

Now the rest of Hannah's story is that not only did God bless her with the desire of her heart in the birth of Samuel, who she gave into service to God, but she was then blessed with five more children. Hers is not only the story of overcoming grief, of overcoming bullies and taunts, and overturning those who are arrogant. Hannah's story also stands "in solidarity with the poor, with women, with all who cry out for God to hear them because they feel forgotten. Her voice is in solidarity with those of us who question why God gives to others when we try so hard to do what is right and yet can't seem to get ahead."¹ Most importantly Hannah's story reminds us that God's ways are not our ways. Now we know that God does not always answer our prayers in the way that God chose to answer Hannah and Eli's, but we do have the reassurance that we do not walk this life's journey alone. God is present and we are called as God's children to be present in the lives of one another showing compassion and extending care. Just as we do when we go to the Hope Center and share in a meal with those individuals and families who have found themselves homeless and often unemployed. We sit with them and we say to them your life and your story matters to God. In their wondering where is God in my life and my situation we are present saying, God is here providing you with a meal and shelter and God will continue to act in

¹ Rev. Adelina Pecchia. "Journey to Birthing in the Barren Place – 1 Samuel 1:4-20"; Good Preacher.com

your life and your situation as you allow God too. That is part of the reason why being a Christian is so radical! God's ways are often times mysterious to us but glorious once revealed.

We serve a God who wants us to look and listen for Divine meaning in whomever and whatever we encounter in this life.² We must be willing to reach out and up to God, and extend a hand of love and friendship to one another as an act of faith. We must be willing to live our faith out loud and that means sharing our times of questioning and doubt with one another. Living our faith out loud means standing in the gap for one another when the grief is so deep that it cannot be expressed easily. Living our faith out loud means being present in the lives of those who have been bullied, taunted, oppressed, and who find themselves outside of community for whatever reason. It also means trusting in God to meet us in our times of need knowing the journey is not an easy one, but we do not walk it alone.

When the question is asked, "Where are you God?" let us humble ourselves to be truly present with one another. Let us humble ourselves trusting in our Creator who has promised to never leave nor forsake us. Remembering that there are times when no answer is needed, but to simply be present with and for one another. We are the body of Christ, the body of God here on earth. We are the body that is called to be present for one another. Let us continue to live our faith out loud such that we have eyes, ears, and hearts of compassion for one another. Amen.

² Ibid