

Seen

Preached November 17, 2024

By Rev. Ridgley Joyner

1 Samuel 1:1-20; 2:1-10

As you may have read in the bulletin this morning, our theme for the season of Advent is “How does a weary world rejoice?” We’ll be spending 4 weeks leading up to Christmas looking at the Gospel of Luke and how these texts show us how to find rhythms for rejoicing, even in the midst of difficult circumstances. Joy is deeply relational and rooted in the fact that we belong to God. As we move through our series, we hope to create space for acknowledging the weariness of our world while celebrating God’s closeness with great joy.

The phrase “a weary world rejoices” may ring familiar to you from a holiday favorite “O Holy Night” but also from Mary’s Magnificat- a beautiful interlude of Mary’s response when the angel Gabriel visited her, sharing what would soon come to be. In the beauty of the holiday season, we quickly forget that the hope of the Christ child was one that a *weary* world yearned for.

When I pulled up the lectionary texts this week, I discovered that it was starting the holidays early too—because we’re already diving into scriptures about hope in a weary time. The birth of the Christ child isn’t the only moment in the Bible when a promised child born in desperate times was a site of expectation. However, our text this morning paints a very real experience—that of the emotional pains and grief of infertility. If you or your family are a part of the 1 in 6 who know this pain all too well, then you will find this passage all too familiar, even if you’ve never read it. Our scripture reading features Hannah, a young woman in deep need of compassion, and her faith paints for us a picture of what compassion, truly seeing someone, looks like.

The book of 1 Samuel ushers a new chapter in Israel’s history. It follows the time of the Judges, a period “marked by moral, religious, and social chaos.”¹ It is described as a time when “all the people did what was right in their own eyes” (Judges 21:25) “Within this difficult situation, the character of Samuel represents a hopeful transition.” But, this first chapter doesn’t mention Samuel at all.

The opening of 1 Samuel introduces us to Elkanah. He was a righteous Israelite, from the tribe of Levi and resided in one of the Levite cities in the hill country of Ephraim with his family: his 2 wives, Hannah, Peninah and his children. Hannah was childless.

Elkanah, a devout Jew excelled in what is now called the mitzvah of Aliyah which was the obligation for every Jew to visit the temple on certain Jewish holidays. But, before the temple

¹ Feasting on the Word Proper 28 Page 291

was built, God's dwelling place was in the tabernacle. Throughout most of the period after the Jewish people entered the land of Israel, the tabernacle was situated in Shiloh. On each of these holidays, Elkanah would lead the pilgrimage to Shiloh, bringing his entire family with him.

On one particular Jewish holiday, Elkanah and his family were on their usual pilgrimage to Shiloh to make a sacrifice to the Lord. Elkanah did what he had done year after year, when it was the day for him to sacrifice to the Lord, he would give portions of his meat to his wife Peninnah and all of her sons and daughters. But for Hannah, he would give a double portion. He loved Hannah and had pity on her because the Lord had closed her womb.

It was especially during the holidays that the pangs of grief rang louder for Hannah. Can you imagine? Everyone joyful and happy, spending time with one another, celebrating the abundance of God and breaking bread. They're all just so happy with their families, their children. Hannah wondered how she fit in all of this.

To make matters worse, this dreadful woman Peninah had the audacity to provoke her day after day, year after year with her insensitive remarks. 'Why of all days today? Doesn't she know it's already hard enough? She has had her fill of blessings and security, is it really necessary to continue to kick me while I'm down?'

Hannah was tired. Tired of holding the shame, tired of holding such anger and resentment toward Peninnah. She was so tired of it all, she couldn't even eat. Tears streamed down her cheeks, soaking the food below. Even the pangs of hunger couldn't compare to the pangs of her heartache.

Elkanah approached her—Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? He knew. He knew the answer to these questions. In those days, a childless woman meant the fear of no one to protect you when your husband was gone. This patriarchal culture, where female identity was tied to childbearing, the stigma was great for women who could not conceive. Hannah desperately wanted a child, and Hannah desperately wanted security and safety.

Elkanah continues, "Hannah, Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?" The well meaning words no barren woman wants to hear. He was hurting too, and he tried to help, he really did. But his words were misguided. It wasn't about him, it wasn't about him at all. The tears streamed faster. The heaviness in her chest didn't let up.

Once everyone had finished eating and drinking, Hannah stood up and went to pray. It was a quiet afternoon, the service in the tabernacle had already taken place. She walked into the now empty sacred space and fell prostrate on the floor. In her sadness surrounded by misguided compassion and intentional taunting, Hannah felt so misunderstood, so vulnerable, so alone. As she wept bitterly, she prayed to herself, bargaining with God in her desperation:

“Lord, if you will look on my misery and remember me, don’t forget your servant, but give me a son. Then, I will give him to you all the days of his life”

Eli, the priest, sees this woman, weeping and talking to herself. Her lips are moving, but he could only hear the sound of her sniffles and short abrupt breaths. Eli interrupts her heartfelt prayer, “How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine.” She looked up with her tear stained cheeks and new found courage to be understood.

“I am a woman deeply troubled. I have not been drinking, I was pouring out my soul to the Lord, I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief”

The priest, realizing his misguided assumptions were hurtful, changes his tone and blesses Hannah. “Go in peace,” he says “and may the God of Israel grant what you have asked of him.”

Hannah leaves the tabernacle full of strength and hope, she went back to Elkanah, ate and drank. The next morning they worshipped and then returned home. Hannah conceived, and bore a son. She named him Shaul me-El or Samuel meaning “god has heard”

Our weary story ends in joy. Yes, because Hannah had a baby. But also because the Lord *heard*. It’s easy to come to this passage and think that it is merely a passage about God answering prayers as if prayer is a way to get God to give us something we want. Perhaps Hannah named Samuel “God has heard” because God was the only one in her moments of intense sadness, weariness and exhaustion who could see her pain for what it was, who could hear her cries. Hannah gives voice to suffering. Hannah seeks out God’s presence in a state of pure anguish and dependence on God. Our text uses the phrase “year after year” which tells us this wasn’t a one time thing. Hannah was suffering for *years*. Hannah could have checked out, disassociated, distracted herself from her grief. Instead, she made the brave choice to keep moving forward—and to bring it to God.

This tragic story displays how much we truly miss it—how easy it is to miss the humanness of our neighbors. Those in our midst who are so sick to their stomach that they can’t even eat. Who hold so much anger and resentment from those who choose to taunt, ignore or use hurtful words toward those who are vulnerable and hurting. Who, in well meaning ways, say incredibly unhelpful things. Who make assumptions about one’s plight without even speaking to them.

But God hears. God sees. God welcomes our most brokenhearted prayers. God welcomes our most joyful prayers. God hears our prayers of groaning. We are loved by a God who sees us, hears us, comforts us in our darkest of days. And God brings new life out of despair.

Yes, God heard Hannah—but have we? I’ve been thinking most of the week about how to tie this sermon up on a more hopeful note, because lately, we’ve needed hope after the Fall we’ve had. No matter how you voted in the election, I think we can all agree that our nation isn’t “united” at the moment. We’re surrounded by hate, intolerance, fear, distrust. I wanted to come in this pulpit this morning and give you another word of hope.

Because the reality is that there are people in our lives, and you may be one of them, that are hurting today. From diagnoses, family conflict, bridges of trust breaking down. Some find themselves in places and situations they never thought they’d find themselves. Some are navigating chronic health issues that don’t seem to let up. Some are waiting for answers. And it just doesn’t come as easily as we ask and God gave.

The hope in our passage isn’t just that Hannah had a baby. The hope here is that *even in her suffering* God was with her, Hannah was *seen* and her pain was *understood*. God gave her the very thing she craved from her community: *empathy*. Empathy is something that I have been thinking about a lot lately. It feels scarce these days, and I’m clinging to stories that keep it alive for me. And in my search for it, I discovered the everything happens podcast. But it’s more than a podcast. It’s a force for joy in a weary world.

Last summer, a group of women from St. John’s went to the women’s conference at Montreat that featured a speaker, Kate Bowler. Kate’s story is a whole other sermon, but from her experience of deep suffering, she began to write about the beautiful and painful realities of life and went viral. Kate founded “Everything Happens” initiative at Duke University that seeks to create everyday empathy through books, storytelling and art. They seek to bear Christian witness to the fragility of life and foster community around kindness, courage and compassion.

Kate was diagnosed with stage four cancer when she was 35 and as a wife and a mom, she had a lot to lose. It was about 1 in 10 chance for her to live through the year and she was devastated. She needed so much emotionally, financially and physically from other people. But what she realized what she needed so much—was those every day acts of compassion. That was what carried her. Once she could see it in her own life, she could see it everywhere. In the grocery store in the community, at work, in the hospital. She learned that we really do need each other to face the reality of how hard life is. She found herself repeating to herself over and over again. That life is so beautiful, and life is so hard for everyone.

Every day empathy allows us to remember the things our culture forgets that individualism can never carry us, it will never allow us to build bridges that we actually need to carry our lives. Every day empathy reminds us that we belong to one another.

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We all may not know the pangs of grief that come with infertility like Hannah did. But we do know what it feels like to grieve the loss of what we thought life would be. We have all been Peninah, We have all been Elkanah. We have all been Eli. And yet, God chooses to love us regardless of that. May we, a people of God who have received such love and grace, find the courage in ourselves to demonstrate that very same love, compassion, and understanding for those in our midst who need it most.

Hannah prayed:

“My heart rejoices in the Lord;
 in the Lord my horn^[a] is lifted high.
 My mouth boasts over my enemies,
 for I delight in your deliverance.

²“There is no one holy like the Lord;
 there is no one besides you;
 there is no Rock like our God...

“The Lord brings death and makes alive;
 he brings down to the grave and raises up.

⁷The Lord sends poverty and wealth;
 he humbles and he exalts.

⁸He raises the poor from the dust
 and lifts the needy from the ash heap;
 he seats them with princes
 and has them inherit a throne of honor.

“For the foundations of the earth are the Lord’s;
 on them he has set the world.

⁹He will guard the feet of his faithful servants,
 but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness.

“It is not by strength that one prevails;
¹⁰ those who oppose the Lord will be broken.

The Most High will thunder from heaven;
 the Lord will judge the ends of the earth.

“He will give strength to his king
 and exalt the horn of his anointed.”

Benediction:

Blessed are you who let your heart break. You don’t have to. You could just have easily skirted the issue, shrugged it off as someone else’s job. *But you didn’t.* You gave the ride or set up the meal train or sat in the waiting room. You handed your precious time over to the inefficiency and exhaustion of tragedy.

Blessed are you who show up during someone’s worst day *because it is your job.* The healthcare worker, funeral director, foster parent, chaplain, social worker, pastor, lawyer, police officer, or

judge. You who have not allowed yourself to be hardened by all you've seen. You who offer the gift of steady presence amid swirling chaos.

Blessed are the communities of care that surround us when we fall apart. Knowing we can't do this alone, and trusting that even if we don't have the answers or the right words to say or know exactly what to do, we will continue to show up. Again and again and again.

Because that's what love demands: to let our hearts break, together.