
Hannah and the Headline News

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A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam Candler

Proper 28B

1 Samuel 1:4-20

This week, newspaper headlines are moving away from the coverage of a general's extramarital affair, and moving towards the escalation of violence in Israel-Palestine. Both the stories are sad, and even tragic.

"How the mighty have fallen!" I might say. How the mighty have fallen. Like a lot of our ordinary wisdom, and ordinary common sense, this phrase is actually from the Bible. No matter how devastating or surprising or tragic is the news from our own day and time, our stories do not top the wisdom of the stories of the Bible. No matter what the incident, the Bible has seen it before!

"How the mighty have fallen" (2 Samuel 1:19). It was King David who first uttered those words, the same King David to whom another David has been compared this past week. Generation after generation, we watch people who are high and lifted up, but who nevertheless succumb, almost inevitably, to some weakness. The Greeks called it *hubris*, an overbearing pride that can lead to tragedy. It is part of being human, and we all share that tendency, in some measure. All of us do—men and women alike.

And nations do, too. In a very real way, the same sort of danger now threatens the very land and people of Israel-Palestine. The more powerful a country is, the more risk it has of being brought low—if not literally, then certainly spiritually.

All these headline news stories point me to two truths. The first is that, ultimately, each of us needs mercy. No matter who we are, we need mercy. The second truth is this: it is only God who can restore mercy, and purpose, to our lives.

Today, we have another story. Today's story from the Bible is one that we have not heard about in a while, the story of Hannah, the mother of Samuel. Samuel has been described as priest and prophet and judge and seer—almost everything. But his story is for another day. It is the story of Hannah that inspires us today. Her story, too, has all the elements of headline news: resentment and envy, deep prayer and restoration (which some might call karma), and even a sense of justice and balance.

Her story, and her song, "The Song of Hannah" ring throughout both human history and divine history. It starts with emptiness and sorrow. She cannot bear children, even though her husband, Elkanah, loves her very much. Elkanah actually had another wife, which, of course, was common in early Hebrew history. Some have said that the only reason Elkanah took another wife was so that he could have children and continue his heritage. Even though he had another wife bearing him children, Elkanah loved Hannah deeply, and gave her a double portion of all that he sacrificed.

The other wife, Peninnah, did not like this. In fact, she was resentful and downright mean about it. The Bible calls her a rival, saying that Peninnah "provoked and irritated Hannah, because the Lord had closed her womb" (1 Samuel 1:6). One can imagine the sort of taunting and wicked talk that resentment might entail. If anonymous e-mails had existed in that

time, Peninnah would have used them! The word for "irritate," used here, can also mean "thunder," or "thunder against." Peninnah thundered against the barren Hannah.

But Hannah did not give up. Though she wept bitterly and would not eat, Hannah did pray. In fact, here is a curious thing: She prayed so earnestly and deeply that she did not use words. Well, she did have words, but they did not cross her lips. In those days, silent prayer was a bit uncommon, just as silent reading was.

In our day and time, we tend to take "reading to ourselves" for granted, and most of us here today know how to read silently. But in the history of civilization, that is a newer phenomenon. For instance, at the time of Augustine in the fifth century AD, most people read by saying the words aloud. Reading silently was unknown.

Apparently, the practice of prayer was similar. One prayed by saying something aloud. To pray without making a sound was something different. The priest, Eli, "observed [Hannah's] mouth praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard" (1 Samuel 1:12-13). Therefore, the priest, Eli, thought she was drunk.

When Hannah replied that she was not drunk, but, instead, deeply troubled and vexed, then Eli somehow knew the deep sincerity of Hannah's prayer. And Eli blessed Hannah: "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him" (1 Samuel 1:17).

I believe that the prayer of Hannah is remarkable for being a new kind of prayer in civilization, a prayer so sincere and deep that it was deeper than sound. It was silent and penetrating. God heard her prayer.

Hannah went back to her husband, and she ate and drank with her husband. (A great lesson: Never ignore the power of prayer and eating and drinking with your husband! Or your wife!) "In due time, Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel," (1 Samuel 1:20).

It is a beautiful story. But the story continues after the text assigned to us today. Hannah gives up her son, Samuel, when he is three years old, to minister with Eli in Shiloh. She gives him up! (though she later has three sons and two daughters). And then she sings a song. Her song, the Song of Hannah, is what rings through human history and divine history. It is a song of how the humble overcome the powerful, and how the poor become rich. Listen to it:

*My heart exults in the LORD;
my strength is exalted in my God.*

*, 3 Talk no more so very proudly,
let not arrogance come from your mouth;
for the LORD is a God of knowledge,
and by him actions are weighed.
4 The bows of the mighty are broken,
but the feeble gird on strength.
5 Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.
The barren has borne seven,
but she who has many children is forlorn.
6 The LORD kills and brings to life;
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.
7 The LORD makes poor and makes rich;
he brings low, he also exalts.
8 He raises up the poor from the dust;
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,
to make them sit with princes
and inherit a seat of honor.*

, 10 The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered;

the Most High will thunder in heaven. (1 Samuel 2: 1-10)

"The Most High will thunder in heaven," Hannah said. I like that phrase "thunder," because it is the same word that was used to describe how Peninnah irritated, or thundered against, Hannah! In the divine reversal of Godly justice, Peninnah's thunderings are turned against her. That is the lesson of the Song of Hannah. God reverses the plight of the humble and the poor so that they are lifted up and become rich.

That is the original Song of Hannah, the one sung by Hannah herself. But it only started there. It continued! It got repeated in Psalm 113:

*5 Who is like the LORD our God,
who is seated on high,
6 who looks far down
on the heavens and the earth?
7 He raises the poor from the dust,
and lifts the needy from the ash heap,
8 to make them sit with princes,
with the princes of his people.
9 He gives the barren woman a home,
making her the joyous mother of children.
Praise the LORD! (Psalm 113: 5-9)*

Now, it is commonly thought that King David himself wrote Psalm 113, and he certainly knew about divine reversal. He certainly knew both sides: how the Lord lifts up the lowly, but also how the Lord brings down the haughty. After Saul had died, and after his best friend, Jonathan had died, it was David who lamented, "How the mighty have fallen." In fact, he seems to lament the actual weapons of war. "How the mighty have fallen, and the weapons of war perished" (2 Samuel 1:27).

King David lived longer. It is King David's final speech, when he was about to die, that might provide for us the summary stanza of this process of divine reversal. His last words are known as "The Song of David," and they are an answer to the age-old question: How does one say what the will of the Lord is, amidst a world of jealousy and envy, violence and power?

So David sings, to God:

*26 With the loyal you show yourself loyal;
with the blameless you show yourself blameless;
27 with the pure you show yourself pure,
and with the crooked you show yourself perverse.
28 You deliver a humble people,
but your eyes are upon the haughty to bring them down.* (2 Samuel 22:26-28)

"With the loyal, God shows himself loyal." Those are beautiful words.

Almost a thousand years after King David, a legendary book was written, one which tried to describe where Mary, the mother of Jesus came from. It is called the *Protoevangelium of James*, from the second century A.D. See if it sounds familiar. It says that Mary's elderly parents prayed for a child, saying that such a child would then be "a gift to the Lord my God." Miraculously, Mary is born, as a response to faithful prayer. Then Mary, at the age of three, is presented to the priests in the temple of Jerusalem. Just like Samuel was born and at the age of three was delivered to the priest!

And who was Mary's mother, according to this story? The mother of Mary was Anna, which is the same word as Hannah. The word, "Hannah" means "grace." The Song of Hannah, then, means, always, The Song of Grace.

The mother of Mary was named Anna, or Hannah, or Grace. This is why, later, when she learned she would conceive miraculously, Mary would sing her own song, which would be still another stanza of Song of Hannah, a song of grace:

Mary said,

*My soul magnifies the Lord,
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty. (Luke 1:46-53)*

We know that song as the *Magnificat* today, and we sing it every Sunday at Evensong in this Cathedral. We will sing it during this upcoming season of Advent; it will be our version of the headline news. And from it, a Savior will be born.

What will be your song during this next season? What will be your Song of Hannah, Song of David, Song of Mary, *Magnificat*, Song of Grace?

Where does your life need reversal? Where does your life need to be lifted up? And, conversely, where might you need to learn humility?

The song of grace is the same, and it has been throughout divine history:

"God delivers a humble people." (2 Samuel 22:28)

*"The Lord makes poor and makes rich,
He brings low, he also exults." (1 Samuel 2:7)*

AMEN.

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