

**Sermon for FPC Gardena – Sunday November 15, 2009**

***1 Samuel 1:1-28***

**The Bible introduces Hannah to us as a woman of mixed emotions....**

**a woman with many blessings.....yet a woman of sorrows.....**

**a woman who is loved by one...yet persecuted by another...**

**a woman of deep faith....yet hurting and yearning...**

**a woman of integrity....yet misunderstood.**

**Isn't Hannah a great deal like us—men and women alike? None of us has a life that is all good or all bad. We may be content in many—even most—areas of our lives, yet still endure a situation which causes us enormous pain or worry. While our faith may be deeply rooted and bearing good fruit, we may still have limbs that weigh us down, or storms that threaten our peace.**

**Hannah has much to offer to us in ways of coping with real-life circumstances, handling the attitudes and actions of people around us, about prayer and relating to God. We are blessed to have three-dimensional people, like Hannah, to teach us the ways of living faithfully as God's people. She—along with so many other biblical men and women—is no cardboard cut-out example of a stereotypical person of faith---no, Hannah is flesh and blood and tears, she is joy and sorrow and anger, pain and hope, confidence and humility, all mixed together in one truly *human* being.**

Since the biblical story begins with Hannah's family situation, let us begin with that. Hannah was blessed with a husband who loved her deeply. Elkanah went out of his way to make sure she knew how very precious she was to him, and she loved him just as much. Surely, that knowledge, that love, gave her much strength, courage, and joy. Yet Hannah was one of two wives, and Elkanah's other wife, Penninah had borne many children, while Hannah had been unable to conceive. In those days and times, to bear children was a sign of a woman's favor in God's sight, and therefore in the eyes of society. Hannah's barrenness was a symbol of inadequacy, putting her in a lower position than women who had children. It wasn't fair, it wasn't right, but that is how it was. And Hannah suffered.

It would have been hard enough for her to desire a child that did not come, and to put up with society's put-downs. But beyond all that, Hannah had to share a household with Penninah, Elkanah's other wife, observing her pregnancies, listening to her children's laughter and tears, probably helping out with their care—a bittersweet experience for sure. Elkanah, having not experienced the heartache that a barren woman endured, innocently wondered why she wept, asking if he wasn't more to her than ten sons. He meant no harm. He wanted, more than anything, for Hannah to be happy. He needed reassurance that he was not the source of her sorrow.

He needn't have worried on that score, for the love they shared was truly a saving grace for Hannah. Her desire for a child came from a deep maternal yearning, fueled by the attitudes of a misinformed society, and the cruelty of Penninah (who, we must acknowledge, was acting out of her own pain as the wife less-loved, striking out at her situation in the only way she knew how.)

Penninah harassed Hannah. Elkanah loved her, but sometimes misunderstood the source and depth of her anguish. Not necessarily a typical family, were they, but certainly a *real* family with a tangled web of circumstances, emotions, and relationships. We can surely find parallels to our own lives.

When our troubles become too much for us to bear on our own, people of faith turn to God, and to God's presence in a place of worship. Hannah and her family were devout Jews. They made the annual pilgrimage from their home to the temple at Shiloh to worship and make sacrifices unto God. It wasn't an easy journey, as they had all of Penninah's children to look after, and rather than look at Hannah as a partner in guiding the children, Penninah used this opportunity to mock her even further for her infertility. On this particular visit, things came to a head for Hannah. She desired a child so intensely, and Penninah's cruelty dug more deeply into her spirit than it had previously. She was desperately sad.

**And so, Hannah turned to her God in prayer. Surely she had been praying to God day and night for many years now, but here, on the steps of the temple, the destination of the season's pilgrimage, this place of worship, Hannah's sorrows welled up and were poured out in hot tears and a waterfall of words offered to God in fervent supplication. It was in this prayer of tears and distress that Hannah offered her promise to God that, once she had a son, she would dedicate him to the service of the Lord as a nazirite for all time. This was quite a promise, as it meant that—should she even have a child—he would not be hers to raise, but would live at this very temple, being raised by priests.**

**And it so happened that the priest, Eli, was sitting nearby and observed Hannah's tears, and her lips moving in silent prayer. What a perfect time for Hannah to receive some priestly guidance, some godly reassurance, perhaps a word of prayer from this priest. But no....Eli the priest of the Temple at Shiloh accused Hannah of being drunk, and told her to put away her wine! This was not exactly what she needed—more judgments, more accusations, more humility. But Hannah was forgiving, speaking honestly to the priest, explaining her circumstances, her pain, and the purpose of her prayer. She described herself as having been pouring out her soul before the Lord. And then, Eli responded with a benediction for her.**

**Can we relate to this segment of Hannah's story? Have we ever gone to church to seek comfort and solace, only to feel that we have been judged or reprimanded? Have we ever gone to a pastor, a deacon, a spiritual companion and been accused of something that was a complete misunderstanding of our actual feelings or circumstances? Surely we have, as the church is full of human beings, as flawed as we are faithful. Yet Hannah's response to Eli is illuminating. For she doesn't get into an argument with him, rather she speaks the truth of the matter, offering the priest another opportunity to serve as God's representative. And Eli rises to the occasion—he listens to her, he no longer judges her, and he blesses her and prays for her.**

**This allows Hannah to go from the temple at Shiloh with her load considerably lightened—by God and by the priest. She has done her part by bringing her needs before God, by pouring out her soul, and by offering the very outcome of her prayer as a gift back to God's service.**

**We, too, can walk with a lighter step, and live with lighter hearts when we know we have honestly spoken our truths, done all that is within our abilities to alter our sorrows and our circumstances, and laid our burdens and our desires at the feet of God. Even if the actual situation does not change, we can find comfort in worship, prayer, and offering, as Hannah did.**

**The details of Hannah’s life are, of course, different than ours....but the blessings, the sorrows, the prayers have much in common with our own. For deep, deep down, all human beings hurt in the same fundamental ways, and we all have a similar need for love and comfort and hope.**

**Like Hannah did, we can rejoice in the relationships which give us strength and security. Like Hannah did, we can reach out to God in fervent prayer.**

**Like Hannah did, we can seek the guidance of a spiritual leader or guide. And, like Hannah did, once we have done all that is within our abilities, we can turn the situation over to God. This doesn’t necessarily mean that we will be suddenly freed from our anxieties or our anguish, but it will set us on a path toward hope.**

**Scriptures tell us that as Hannah and Elkanah dined together that evening, “Her countenance was sad no longer.” The morning following her prayer and her blessing from the priest, Hannah and Elkanah rose early, worshipped God, and started for home, along with their other family members. In due time, Hannah conceived and bore a son, whom she named Samuel, meaning, “I have asked him of the Lord.” We can surely relate to Hannah’s joy at this event, even as we were able to relate to her earlier sadness. God had answered the prayer of her heart.....she was now the mother of a son.**

**Her circumstances had been changed, her heart's desire had been fulfilled, and Hannah's response to these changes provides us with more examples of how to handle the changes that come to our lives—positive changes this time!**

**When Hannah gave birth to her son, she immediately attributed the glory of it all to God. She acknowledged God's presence in this miracle when naming her child. And she turned to God in prayer, saying, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God." She prayed, "There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God."**

**Hannah had turned to God in prayer when things in her life were causing her pain, and she turned to God once again in the midst of joy. Through all of life's ups and downs, the good and the bad, the sorrows and the joys, Hannah kept God at the center of her life. Hannah's faith did not protect her from the challenges and griefs that come into every life, nor did it make her immune from experiencing the depths of pain and sorrow that affect the lives of every human being at one time or another. But Hannah's faith did give her a compass for her life journey, it gave her a foundation on which to live and grow in both good times and in bad, and it gave her courage to face the future. For Hannah had made a promise to God.**

**God had not asked it of her, but she had offered in prayer that if she should conceive a son, she would express her gratitude to God by dedicating that child to the service of the Lord. Once that baby was in her arms, we must wonder if Hannah wavered in her promise, but there is no indication that she did. She nursed him, loved him, enjoyed him. And when the time came that he was weaned, she took him along on the annual pilgrimage to Shiloh and left young Samuel there with Eli the priest, who would train him in the ways of service to the Lord. Thereafter, Hannah would only see her child once a year, when they made that annual trip to Shiloh.**

**Hannah didn't waver in her promise, nor was there a waver in the compass of her faith. From the beginning, her faith was in God, her purpose to glorify God. She turned to God in times of sorrow and in times of joy. She experienced a wide range of human experiences and emotions, and she shared them all with her God in prayer. She was a woman of integrity and gratitude.**

**And God received Hannah's offering of her son with gratitude as well, making Samuel both a judge and a prophet in Israel. Samuel would have a powerful impact on Saul, on David, on Israel, and upon the future of the Jewish and Christian faiths. Hannah's act of faith resulted in expanded faith for an entire people.**

**As we encounter various people and events and challenges along the paths of our lives, we would do well to follow in the ways of Hannah: rejoicing in the love and company of those who love us; sharing our sorrows and concerns with our loved ones, our spiritual guides, and our God; worshipping and making offerings to God as a part of the rhythm of our lives; and expressing gratitude to God in prayer and in action for God's many blessings.**

**In spite of her pain and sadness, Hannah found the way to a life of joy. That path was made smoother by Elkanah's love, it was blessed by Eli's prayer, and it was a journey on which God accompanied Hannah the entire way. No wonder that Hannah devoted her life and the life of her son to God.**

**When our days become dark, when our paths become circuitous and difficult, may we be reminded by our sister Hannah that God walks with us, listening, caring, and blessing us on our ways. Amen.**

### **1 Samuel 1:1-20**

There was a certain man of Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephramite. He had two wives; the name of one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the LORD. On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. 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. 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?" 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. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD and wept bitterly. 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. As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." 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. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to God." 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. 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. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, "I have asked him of the LORD."

### **1 Samuel 1:21-28**

The man Elkanah and all his household went up to offer to the LORD the yearly sacrifice, and to pay his vow. But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, "As soon as the child is weaned, I will bring him, that he may appear in the presence of the LORD, and remain there forever; I will offer him as a nazirite for all time." Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Do what seems best to you, wait until you have weaned him; only—may the LORD establish his word." So the woman remained and nursed her son, until she weaned him. When she had weaned him, she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine. She brought him to the house of the LORD at Shiloh; and the child was young. Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to Eli. And she said, "Oh my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. For this child I prayed; and the LORD has granted me the petition that I made to God. Therefore I have lent him to the LORD: as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD." She left him there for the LORD.