

**November 15, 2015**  
**25th Sunday after Pentecost / Proper 28 (Yr. B)**  
**I Samuel 1:4-20; 2:1-10**  
**The Rev. Carenda Baker**

He knew he was a good husband, but he just didn't understand it. He loved Hannah not one bit less because she was unable to bear children. He actually loved her more because of it. He was attentive, and constantly reassured her of his love. He provided well for her. But, he knew she was never content, never at peace. Hers was a constantly restless heart. It was not enough – who he was, what he provided, their love for each other – it was never enough. For years she had yearned for something more, something that seemed impossible to him now – she wanted a child. There was no convincing her that their life together was abundantly full, and they had so much for which to thank God. Why couldn't she let it go, and just be content? *HE* had made peace with the fact that they would never have children together. But Hannah? Hannah remained a mystery to him – a precious, tormented mystery.

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In the world of my Hebrew people, a woman had no way to support herself without a husband. So a woman's most important role in life was to become a mother, to bear her husband's children and give him heirs.

Have you any idea what humiliation I lived with – day in and day out, month after month, year after year? Knowing people were whispering among themselves, asking questions. "What do you think is wrong with Hannah? Why can't she become pregnant? Do you think she and Elkanah will ever have children? What is God punishing her for?" Do you know what it's like to be weighed down with shame, feeling defective, less than a whole person, not good enough – not ever enough?

Oh, Elkanah, my husband said he understood – but how could he, really? He had another wife, another wife who gave him children. Peninnah was her name, and she flaunted the fact that she was the fertile one, the fruitful one, the honorable one. SHE was the mother of Elkanah's children, his heirs. She taunted me cruelly, constantly reminding me that I was childless. "Damaged goods". 2<sup>nd</sup> rate. Not worth much to Elkanah.

No amount of cooking and cleaning, no amount of pleasant time spent with friends and family could take away that ache in my soul. Do you know anything about trying to live with a deep down yearning that continues to be unfulfilled? It brings a pain that takes on a life of its own. Elkanah tried to console me, wondered why I couldn't just settle for what he provided, the life we had together. But Elkanah is not a Hebrew woman. He could not understand why I felt like my life had no purpose, little meaning. I could not give my husband children. Of what value was I, then?

I had prayed. God knows I had prayed. And prayed. And prayed even more - for years, unceasingly. I wondered if I might wear God out with my crying and praying. But where else could I turn to plead for my heart's one deepest desire to be met? Where else was I to go with my burden and be able to lay it down, for even a little while? How else could I give voice to the pain that felt like it would crush my heart? The only thing I could do was go and tell it to God.

We had made our annual pilgrimage to Shiloh, where Elkanah would offer sacrifices for us as part of our worship at the temple. The taunting from Peninnah on this trip had become more than I could bear. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. I wept openly and could not be consoled by anyone. I had nothing to lose by going into the temple to pour out my heart to God. Maybe the Lord would be more inclined to hear me there. I could think of no other way to get as close to God as I could, than to go to the temple, God's dwelling place. Perhaps here God could more easily see my faithfulness. So I went.

Inside the temple, as I knelt to pray, tears flowed in little streams down my cheeks. My body shook with great sobs. Moans from deep in my broken heart poured out.

"O Holy One, hear me; please listen to me. Do not be far from me. This one thing, O Lord, is all I want, all that I ask. Give me a son for Elkanah. Give me this one precious gift of a son, and I promise to give him back to you, so he can honor and serve you for all his days, until he dies. He will be ours for a short time, but yours for all time. He will be a sign of your grace, and I promise I will give him back to you."

I don't remember if I was praying aloud, but the words came easily, freely from my soul to my lips. I lay on the floor and stretched out, body and soul bowed down low. I didn't care who saw me. This was between God and me.

I heard steps coming up behind me, and the voice of Eli the priest said sternly, "Get up from there woman! You are making a drunken spectacle of yourself. How can you do such a thing in God's temple?"

"No, my lord! I am NOT drunk. Don't think me irreverent. I have been pouring out my heart to God. I am a barren, broken-hearted woman, pleading with God to hear me and deal kindly with me."

After a moment, now more calmly, quietly Eli said: "Go in peace then. And may God give you the desire of your heart."

I walked away from the temple a short time later, utterly spent, but a bit lighter. For at least the time being, I felt some peace. I believe God heard my prayer and that God loves me. I believe I was as faithful as I knew how to be.

So – can you even begin to understand that canticle you read moments ago, my hymn of praise, Hannah's song? It tells of God's power to set things right. God WILL guide the faithful. God gave me and Elkanah a son. We named him Samuel. And I kept my promise and gave him back to honor and serve God.

So, dear faithful ones gathered here today:

+When did you last talk to God about *your* heart's deepest desire?

+Where is your place of barrenness, of emptiness, of lifelessness?

+What heavy burden are you weary from carrying?

+How has your heart been broken?

Name those things here, and lay them down. Lay all of it down at the altar, the place of God's sure, unfailing, unceasing love. God is faithful and will hear you. God will bless you as you lay it all down, because God loves you, has always loved you, from time before time.

God will not turn away from your broken heart. God will come to you to comfort, mend, and heal your broken heart. God will meet you in your wilderness place, and will refresh and sustain you day by day. God is ready to lift from your shoulders the burden that exhausts you and weighs you down, so you think you can't go on.

Dare to name your heart's deepest desire, for God meets you here, and wants to give you your own song of joy and praise. May it be so. May you know the presence and love of God for you, with you. May you leave this holy place, blessed with your own song of faith to share. May part of your song's refrain be – *"It is well with my soul."* All is well. And all manner of things shall be well.

AMEN.



