

Sermon Archive 222

Sunday 18 November, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lesson: 1 Samuel 1;1 - 2:10

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



There are four sections to this sermon.

1. Hannah at Home.
2. Hannah seeking God space.
3. Hannah being misunderstood.
4. Hannah's new prayer.

-ooOoo-

Hannah at home:

Hannah's being female was no accident of birth. It's not an accident when someone is female. It's beautiful and good. But in her case, it's also a bit of a complication in that in her polygamous society, provision is made for one man to have many wives. So in her adult experience, with respect to commitment, and sense of intimate significance, Hannah's always going to feel a bit like she's standing in a queue. Perhaps I'm just struggling a bit, from my culture's tendency towards monogamy and all the singularity of commitment that it implies, to judge polygamy accurately; but I can't help but feel that Hannah's vulnerable to fear, to insecurity, to wondering about her worth.

It's just as well, then, that the husband to whom she is committed is a good and loving person. Elkanah may have double commitments, but you can tell he loves her. He finds ways of expressing it. He gives her gifts. He keeps a watch over her heart, and when he feels the heart is a wee bit sad, he tries to reassure it. He notices when she cries, and when she does he reaffirms his love. Humanity is watching humanity with care and kindness. Humanity, though with divided responsibility within a structure that lends itself to insecurity and fear, nevertheless tries to love and keep.

Once again, it's just as well, because also at home is Peninnah. Peninnah, the other wife has no love for Hannah. Perhaps, within this culture of the multiple sharing of intimacy, she's also insecure. We don't know. Maybe she's not insecure. Maybe she's just a vicious and hateful person. Certainly she gives huge amounts of energy to making Hannah suffer. Described in the narrative as a "rival", she finds out where Hannah is vulnerable, and she focusses right in on that. Humanity as a kind of heat seeking weapon. Humanity as a resenter of competition, an exposor of the Achilles

heel, a tireless campaigner of trolling.

That about which Hannah is vulnerable, is that she's not producing children. These days she could perhaps instead go off and become the First Lady of the United States, and speak later about the IVF experience. These days she could, albeit on a pay platform 9.2% lower than men, make corporate progress in the job market. None of this is an option for Hannah. Her world doesn't work that way. There are intransigent assumptions about what it means to be productive, what her particular social-human responsibilities are. So we have a picture of humanity not just being loved and supported, not just being attacked and taunted, but holding this all together while dealing with a deep sadness about what hasn't come to be. The what if. The I wonder. The I wish. Juggling, carrying, cradling the disappointment. Hannah at home.

-ooOoo-

Hannah seeking God-space:

You **can** choose to be alone in your grief. You can gradually isolate yourself. You can go to that point where it's just you and your thoughts, gradually becoming darker and more overwhelming. But most societies, most cultures provide some kind of therapeutic practice as an alternative. There is provision of a different kind of lens through which to see, provision of a belief system, community of others who might understand, space for reflection - God-space, as it were. Human beings sometimes go there.

In these spaces, they tell stories, you know. There are characters like Sarah. Like Hannah. Like Elizabeth. Like Mary - a cast of closed door women surprised by the birth of children. Heroines of the God-story who finally did find what they were looking for. There are other characters like the woman at the well, the woman at whom no man felt free to throw a stone, Mary - the first person to receive an Easter greeting and to spread the good news. In the God-space a cast of many have their stories told - enter the ears and imagination of those seeking refuge.

In the God-space you can wonder. You can hope. You can mourn what has not come to be. You can find strength to deal with the cruelty of Peninnah. Where disappointment meets whatever provision has been made for faith, you can find yourself no longer alone with the disappointments. It's a house of reflection. As it seeks distance from the home within which it is battered, humanity finds another kind of home. Hannah seeking God-space.

-ooOoo-

Hannah being misunderstood:

It's all well and good to talk about the provision of God-space for the human being in need. It's a nice idea.

Hannah goes to the temple. We're told (in one of those curious, easy to miss, surely irrelevant narrative details) that Eli, the temple priest, is sitting on the seat beside the doorpost. He's sitting near the doorway. Surely he's not one of those people we call gate-keepers. Those concerned to control who comes in, and who doesn't. Places of faith surely have no need for such a ministry. And surely no religious institution would actually provide permanent furniture for such a function - comfort for the gate keeper.

Having got into the temple, Hannah begins, privately (although some tears flow into the public space) to express her distress. She offers it to the God whose nature the temple seeks to express. How is God present here? Who is the God? Is the God listening. Don't know, but the tears flow fully. She's making all those usual bargaining promises in her head - the kind of promises that constitute one of the stages of grief. If you help me, God, I'll help you; I'll give you a gift; I'll make you a sacrifice - as if this God, whoever God is, is motivated by bargaining. But this is OK. It's a woman and her grief - it doesn't need to be theologically sophisticated. The provision of this kind of space, the provision of safety for even the only momentary passing over of the disappointment, is a mercy.

From his gate-keeping seat, Eli the priest sees none of that. He sees someone who, to him anyway, appears to be drunk. So he tells her so, accuses her of making a spectacle, and asks her to leave.

When African American citizens of Mississippi were suffering segregation in the 1960s, and looking for help, while some of the local churches helped them, the Ku Klux Klansmen said Jesus saves and asked them to leave. They fire-bombed the open-door church, and made intimidating phone calls at night. Suffering, frustrated black people were not to be let in. Please leave!

When our city shook and fell, Brian Tamaki reminded us that we were sinners, getting only exactly what we deserved. Please leave!

When various vulnerable children were sent to Christian orphanages for mercy and nurturing, they received something completely else. (I don't believe it, we'd better have an enquiry.)

In a world when Peninnah is cruel and powerful, and when Eli is on the door and quick to judge, we have a picture of humanity not finding God-space, not finding whatever it was the Jesus wanted, when he said "upon this I will build my church".

The institutions might well take a good look at the quickness with which they judge. They might well take a good look at how grace and love mark the significant turning points in the holy narrative they tell within their walls. They might well take a good look at what happens next for Hannah.

That was Hannah being misunderstood.

-ooOoo-

Hannah's new prayer:

My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides me enemies, because I rejoice in my victory.

As a kind of early form of the prayer that Mary will say when surprised by life, this is a prayer to the lifter up of the humble and meek. Despite the ham-fistedness of the institution representing God, God sides with those who are vulnerable, those who cry, those who have faced hunger. And the claim is that, in God's story, needful things that change things are given. Sometimes even given in ways that are consistent with our naïve hopes. Sometimes given such that the place of misunderstanding becomes a place of thanksgiving prayer to the table-turner.

It could have been, couldn't it, that Hannah didn't conceive, continued to not have children. It could have been. It might have been that she did end up, though, hearing more fully, knowing more deeply that she was loved by Elkanah - hearing more openly the words of love spoken into her life. Or it could have been that her words to Eli the priest "No, my Lord, I have been pouring out my soul", stuck in his conscience and began a new era of compassionate ministry at the temple. As it happens, she provides the child, Samuel, who will guide and stretch much of the next chapter of Israel's faith and development. I don't imagine she imagined that when she just poured out her tears.

Whatever the details of the story are, whether the naïve hopes are closely met, this is the story of a table-turning God working within the troubles, to move from misunderstanding and cruelty, to gratitude and joy.

-ooOoo-

Peninnah is cruel. Hannah is disappointed. Eli is wrong. Elkanah loves. God transforms; a new prayer is said. A four-sectioned sermon ends, and we keep a moment of quiet.

The Knox Church website is at: <http://www.knoxchurch.co.nz.html> . Sermons are to be found under News / Sermons.