

The Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B, RCL

1 Samuel 1:4-20

1 Samuel 2:1-10

Hebrews 10:11-25

Mark 13:1-8

The Song of Hannah  
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St. Barnabas Church, Greenwich  
The Twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost  
November 15, 2015

Hannah prayed and said, “My heart exults in you, O God; my triumph song is lifted in you.” Thus begins the powerful “Song of Hannah” in the second chapter of the First Book of Samuel. What a truly remarkable pair of readings or, I should say, a reading and a Canticle that we have here this morning. See how we heard an Old Testament passage from the first Book of Samuel that describes in fairly thorough detail the situation that Hannah, the second wife of Elkanah, finds herself in at the time of the annual sacrifice at the temple in Shiloh. Ordinarily we would expect the Old Testament reading to be followed by an appointed Psalm. Look how our response is the Song of Hannah as a Canticle. What a special arrangement from Holy Scripture we are given today. Not the lectionary approach to which we are accustomed. Perhaps the folks who organized the lectionary wanted to place these two passages in conversation with one another. So let’s try to do just that as even our collect for this twenty-fifth Sunday after Pentecost puts a wonderful emphasis on how all holy Scriptures were written for our learning.

Our social sensitivities may be a bit unsettled at the beginning of the reading from the first chapter of the First Book of Samuel. We hear how Elkanah gave portions of food to his one wife Peninnah and her many children. Then Elkanah gives a double portion of food to his other wife Hannah “because he loved her.” Peninnah is the wife who produces children for Elkanah yet it is his second wife Hannah whom Elkanah loves. Look at the loving questions that Elkanah poses to Hannah. Why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?

Quite a set of questions that do indicate his care and concern for Hannah yet I think his last question speaks up in an especially loud way. Am I not worth more to you than ten sons? Oh. I see. It's all about you Elkanah. You need to put yourself in Hannah's place. As much as it was quite acceptable in Judaism to have more than one wife and indeed there are examples of wives who served largely to produce children, an incredibly valuable commodity in that society, the spotlight here is very much on the important Bible figure Hannah. Elkanah uses a comparison that he felt Hannah might understand. Is not her loving husband as valuable to her as ten sons that she has not born?

This is what makes Hannah such a remarkable woman in the Bible. We can see that the child producing wife, Peninnah, has not been satisfied to play her role but she has then provoked Hannah, severely for years, about the fact that "the Lord had closed her womb." Peninnah has done this on purpose to irritate Hannah. A rather cruel act I daresay. If Elkanah could grasp this psychological struggle between his two wives, he may have posed his questions to his beloved Hannah in a different manner. Hannah is a woman of great purpose and commitment in the Bible.

By virtue of the faithful annual visits to the temple in Shiloh, she has developed a pastoral relationship with the priest Eli. She goes into the temple to pray to God. Eli watches. Hannah begins her prayers asking the Lord to see her misery, which has been compounded by the provocations of Peninnah, and to give her a male child. Now the nosy priest Eli could see Hannah's lips move but he could not hear any words come out of Hannah's mouth. He accuses Hannah of being drunk. I will largely withhold comments about conduct that becomes a priest but listening in on prayers and accusing the person who is praying of being drunk was probably not a very good example of appropriate pastoral care.

Hannah promptly reiterates her deeply troubled condition and states that she had not been drinking either wine or strong drink but that she has been pouring out her very soul before the Lord. She emphasizes her strained emotional condition of great anxiety and vexation. To my fascination, Eli actually offers quite assuring words to Hannah as she departs from the temple. "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." Indeed it is reassuring to me to see that Hannah catches up with Elkanah after her prayer session and that she is sad no longer. The passage ends

with worship being completed, a return home and the Lord heard Hannah as she bore a son and named him Samuel. One Hebrew meaning of the name Samuel announced in the final verse is “I have asked him of the Lord.” My personal preference of the Hebrew meaning of the name Samuel is that “God has heard Hannah’s prayers;” and given her a son.

Thus we might anticipate the opening verse of the Song of Hannah.

“My heart exults in you, O God; my triumph song is lifted in you.”

Yet as we have offered this beautiful prayer that is the Song of Hannah, we might ask some questions about it. Where are the specific connections to the details of the story we have just heard? I suppose that Hannah’s sheer jubilation about the divinely initiated change of events in her life might have prompted her to sing out this glorious prayer. Yet it is most likely an established prayer of thanksgiving used by others. Possibly not even the devout Israelites. This is a song of thanksgiving for success in battle. Witness “the bows of the mighty are broken.”

There is no doubt that Hannah would be drawn to the verse about “The childless woman finds her life fruitful, and the mother of many sits forlorn.” We can certainly understand Hannah’s jubilation and her desire to deride those who made fun of her. The Song of Hannah does include wonderful images of God’s justice in action. “God gives wealth or takes it away, humbles and dignifies. God raises the poor from the dust; and lifts the needy from the ash heap to make them sit with rulers and inherit a place of honor.”

It is actually hard to place these two wonderful Bible passages in direct conversation with one another. Rather we may appreciate comparing different literary styles used in our Holy Scripture. The detailed narrative about Hannah’s trials and tribulations followed by her prayers to God being answered is a compelling story about an important woman in the Bible ushering in a significant era of Israel’s history. Then the Song of Hannah provides insights about the importance of institutional prayer for a range of devout peoples. And Hannah still receives credit for singing it!

As I felt thoroughly compelled to focus on this unique pair of readings from the First Book of Samuel today, I do need to put it into some context on several fronts that relate to our congregation of devout folks. As we savor the richness of the Song of Hannah we are at a place where our stewardship effort for 2016 invites people to prayerfully consider how they may support the glorious venture that is our St. Barnabas Church community. Pledge cards have been flowing into the parish office and the Finance Committee will meet today as well to finalize the 2016 budget. The committee will do so in a most accountable and responsible way. As a timely coincidence, I have just been at the annual convention of the Episcopal Church in CT. As many of you know, we make a meaningful financial pledge to the diocese. I would like to go on record to say that, over the past four years, I have witnessed Bishop Ian Douglas' steadfast efforts to organize numerous financial and administrative aspects of the common life that we all share together. He has hit some speed bumps and has had to re-start a few times. I feel as confident as I have felt in this my fourth year as your Rector that the diocese is in a solid place as exciting new mission opportunities lie ahead for our parish and all the others in our diocese.

As we seek to ground so much of our parish life together in Holy Scripture and prayer so too the convention proceedings, even with their procedural necessities, were grounded in Holy Scripture and prayer. We might all want to adapt the Song of Hannah at this time to give our collective thanksgiving proclaiming that "There is none holy like you, nor any rock to be compared with you, our God."

Uncertainty and challengers certainly lie ahead but we may have great hope if we continue to put faith in the Lord our Savior and allow the Holy Spirit to lead us forward. God will answer our prayers as he did for Hannah.

Amen.