

## **Hearing Hannah**

First Samuel 1:4-20

Proper 28/ Year B

November 15, 2009

**O Lord, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, Amen.**

Have you every stopped to think about the wondrousness of creation, of life? Of how the winds can whisper among the peaks of mountains for whom time might as well not exist. How grains of sand can be given wings by a stiff breeze and careen across the desert scouring the ground as they go. How tiny bird sopranos and the bass profundo of the whale can create a mighty chorus which stretches to the sky. How life and death are forever engaged in a strange dance like a spider upon the luminous web of creation. And in the middle of this web, we live our lives. Lives not always in touch with the fragile strands which surround them. Lives not in touch with life's sacredness, its giftedness, its promise and possibility. Sometimes it takes a moment of despair, of deep yearning for us to sit up and take notice. Or a moment of blessedness, of epiphany, a moment in which pain and struggle can lead to joy, like the pangs of a new birth.

In our reading today from the Book of First Samuel, we are permitted to overhear the prayers of a troubled woman. Her name is Hannah and her story is a heartrending one. Hers is a deeply human story of great personal pain and equally persistent hope. Once a year, just before the cock trumpets the dawn. Hannah and her family set out, serenaded by the silent music of the morning stars, in the direction of the holy shrine at Shiloh. They leave the daily hum-drum of the village of Ramah behind them.

Elkanah, Hannah's husband, as head of their household, is required by religious law and custom to make a yearly sacrifice at the Lord's altar. A sacrifice which could only be performed at Shiloh. At this point, in the national history of Israel, Jerusalem has not yet risen to prominence. While her husband offered the necessary sacrifices before the Lord's altar. Hannah and Peninah, Elkanah's other wife mind the children. Hannah loves spending her time with Peninah's children- seeing them play, laughing with glee. They, unfortunately, are not only a source of delight for Hannah but they are also a source of her heartache. In their smiles, she glimpses the child that she does not have, nor can conceive, no matter how hard she tries. Hannah is barren. She has consulted the experts, quizzed local midwives, she has undoubtedly rounded up what passed for physicians. There is nothing, however, that can be done. There is no solution. In a culture, where children are seen as the future of the family, of the nation, of the people, as life itself, she has none. No children! No future! To add insult to her injury, her husband, Elkanah, is a man of impressive lineage and a proud past. He has already had sons and daughters by Peninah. A fact Peninah will never let Hannah forget. The cruelty of the situation is made that much worse when we realize the reason for Hannah's barrenness. "The Lord had closed her womb". For any woman who has longed for a child, who has suffered in silence through the yearly pain of Mother's Day, these words are far from satisfying. However, even in their bluntness, they do contain an odd grace. A grace certainly not lost on Hannah. Hannah's inability to have children is not her fault. And with the specter of the God who

can part the waters of the sea looming in the background, hope remains that something can be done with the waters of her womb. While Hannah's womb is not pregnant with child. Her heart is pregnant with possibility. And it is that possibility which sustains her even through her most bitter tears and through Peninah's taunts.

Elkanah's response to his wife's torment is aggravating. We want to shake him. "Hannah," he says as she cries yet again, "why are you weeping? Why are you not eating? Why is your heart so sad. Aren't I enough for you to love." We are tempted to look upon Elkanah's response as self-centered or at best indifferent. Could it be though that he just simply doesn't understand. Perhaps, in one of those "Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus" moments, he is trying to supportive. He does love her. The scripture says so. Strangely, it does not say that he loves Peninah. He gives Hannah a double portion of the sacrifices which he offers as a sign of his favor and devotion. Something which he again does not give Peninah. Which gives us pause to wonder if Peninah's nastiness is not misunderstood as well. If her provoking of Hannah doesn't hide some deep pain of her own. Perhaps Elkanah's inability to "get it" extends to his other relationships. Human relationships are terribly complex and thwart with joy and pain.

Pain is a universal. We all experience it in one way, shape, or form. Whether it be physical pain, or emotional pain. Pain born of broken relationship, of family dysfunction. Pain born of feelings of being unloved as perhaps Peninah's were. Or the terror of Hannah, the terror that what she so desperately desires, what she in a way already loves-will forever be denied. As difficult as it is to grasp someone else's pain, it is rather easy for us to cast judgments

It seems that Eli the priest, the religious authority at Shiloh is whiling away the afternoon by the Temple door. As he peers down the street, he notices a young woman strolling toward the Temple. He had seen her someplace before. Ah, it had been just that morning when her husband Elkanah, a man from Ramah had sacrificed within the holy sanctuary. He doesn't give her a second thought until she walks right past him into the Temple. Now that startles him, strikes him mute in fact. Women are not to enter the sanctuary of the Lord, that is a place for men, especially priests. He can't believe that this woman has the gall to walk right into the holy of holies. As Eli watches her, he notices that her lips are moving but that no sound issues from her mouth. She can't possibly be praying. Something is wrong here. She has to be mad or drunk. "That must be it" he thinks. Well it is bad enough that there is a woman in the sanctuary, but a drunkard. This can not be tolerated. So, old Eli puffs himself up and walks rather officiously over to Hannah. "How long, my dear, will you make a spectacle of yourself. Put away your wine" In other words "Get lost". Hannah does not seem the least bit surprised by Eli's reaction but rather calmly explains to the irate if somewhat addled priest "No, my Lord, I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I am not drunk or mad. I just came to pour out my soul to God in prayer. "Don't judge me too harshly" she asks.

The facing off of Eli and Hannah in the sanctuary at Shiloh is one of most wondrous stories of the Old Testament. Here we find a very ordinary woman, a woman immersed to her head in pain and longing, a woman praying from the very depths of her heart. She

follows no convention, she does not offer a sacrifice or rend her garments. She stands in the sanctuary and prays. She uses her own words and her own voice. By all accounts, she is the first woman in the Bible, the first ordinary person in holy scripture to pray in any sanctuary. She prays for a child, she prays for her deepest longing. She has been made to feel an outsider- Peninah's cruelty, her husband's difficulty in understanding. Her society's demand of motherhood.

Within her voice are the voices of countless others who have been marginalized. The former crack addict who wants a new start. The person with AIDS who simply wants someone to hold their hand. The mercilessly harassed high school student who simply wants to know that life is worth living. The abused child who simply wants to be seen. The old person forgotten and tossed aside who still has a story to tell. They are all there. Their eyes are Hannah's eyes. And those eyes stare back at Eli. Their prayers are Hannah's prayer, the prayer to be remembered. "Remember us" they seem to yell. And as Eli stares back at Hannah, we must wonder if his glance did not look beyond her, if he did not look in the direction of the one person who has not spoken in today's reading. We wonder if his eyes, furtively and with not a little concern, looked at the curtain which surrounded the holy of holies, the place where God was said to reside. And we wonder if God didn't just stare right back. Eli's initial rebuke of Hannah is, alas, the predictable part of the story, the disturbingly ordinary part. But it is in this exchanging of glances, that some extraordinary happens. Eli, the priest of God, the pillar of the religious establishment, changes his tune. "Go in peace, may the God of Israel hear your prayer and grant it."

And so Hannah does. With great faithfulness and courage, she leaves the Temple. She goes in peace. She has been heard. She has been seen. By God and (not without a little bumbling) by Eli. The Lord never says a word in the entire story. He doesn't have to. His answer, his attention, is demonstrated in his remembrance of Hannah. The Lord remembers her. Her belly swells. Her feet retain water as her stomach fails to retain food. Her back aches. And finally, we see her birth pangs begin. But you know, I believe we are wondrously wrong about even that. You see, her birth pangs begin long before this moment. They begin before she even walks through the Temple door at Shiloh. They began when she conceived in her heart that she could have a child, that with the Lord it was possible. If the Lord remembered her, her world could be different. And the Lord did remember her and he remembers all of those whom we don't want to remember. All those who stare forth from behind Hannah's eyes. The Lord remembering is a frightening thing. After all, look what happens. God changes Hannah's world, grants her the birth of a new one. God will change our world too with or without our blessing. The kingdom will come, and it will require the pangs of birth- the casting down of the mighty and the raising of the lowly, the hearing of those whose speech, like Hannah's prayer, is inaudible at least to those of us who are accustomed to hearing our own voices echoing loudly in the sanctuaries and meeting places. My friends, we don't always have to get it right the first time. Eli sure didn't. But we must listen. For like Eli, we will find somewhere in Hannah's gently chiding voice, in her pleading look, in the listening and the intensely watchful silence of the Holy of Holies, a glimpse of new birth, a glimpse of the God who looks upon the outcast and the persecuted with favor. A glimpse of a God who is in control and will answer, of a God who is willing tear temples down even our own and eclipse our

all too human presumptions and sinfulness.