

SERMON TITLE- "Meet The Relatives- Hannah"

TEXT- 1 Samuel 1

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We have all kinds of people in our family tree. Every kind of personality, every kind of social status, every kind of job, people who made their marks at every stage of life, from young children to the very oldest.

This is one of the wonderful things about the legacy we are part of- there are examples for every one of us to watch and learn from.

For the last 2 weeks we met a man called Job who lived in a real world but the nature of his story meant that he could have lived at anytime in history and the story would have been the same.

In the land of Uz there lived a man whose name was Job. Job 1:1

Yes, if Job had lived in Canada in 2007 his wealth would have been marked in a list of properties or stocks rather than sheep and camels and instead of robes he would have been wearing a suit. But aside from these sorts of trivial details nothing in the story would have changed. Job is introduced as a man who lived in a real country but there is no indication as to whether he lived 4000 years ago or 2000 years ago.

Today we meet a person whose story is contrasted to Job's in exactly this- she lived at a very specific time in history and the time she lived in and what was going on around her is woven right into her story and what it means.

I have a book written by my grandfather about their journey from Russian to Canada. Because he is my grandfather and he is writing about my family there are some details that I tend to skip over. Those details are about the political debates in Russia in the 1920s. It was during Stalin's 5 year plans and my grandfather included the political debates about these in his book. It may not interest the average reader today but for him the political world of his day was central to his story.

So too it was for a woman named, Hannah.

There was a certain man from Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham, the son of Elihu, the son of Tohu, the son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. He had two

wives; one was called Hannah and the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had none. 1 Samuel 1:1-2

Now just reading this introduction contrasts it from Job. This is the normal style of introducing people in the clans of Israel- and frankly it is the normal way of introducing anyone who is part of a clan.

And so we are introduced to our "relative of the day"- a woman called, Hannah.

If there is one word that captures the setting in which this story takes place- it is- **"complexity."**

Societal Complexity

-it was the period of the Judges in Israel. This was a period of about 400 years after the Israelites had moved from Egypt to the land of Canaan. During this time their form of government was tribal with their religious centre, their worship of God, holding things together.

But things were not holding together- the people were not keeping their faith in God. The people were drawn into the various religious practices of the people in the land as well as simple complacency.

This meant that strange combinations of faith in God were mixed with the religious practices of the native Canaanites.

And this led to-

Religious Complexity

The spiritual leadership of the people was very confusing. We are introduced to it as the story unfolds-

Year after year this man went up from his town to worship and sacrifice to the LORD Almighty at Shiloh, where Hophni and Phinehas, the two sons of Eli, were priests of the LORD. Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. 1 Samuel 1:3-4

When the Israelites first settled into the land, they took the tent of the tabernacle that they had carried with them in the desert, and set it up in central place of worship at a city called, Shiloh. After nearly 400 years the tent was no doubt worn out and some kind of other enclosure must have taken its place- but the ark was there and the high priest led the people in their worship there.

As the book of 1 Samuel continues we will see that things had fallen away from true worship here as well and the 2 sons of Eli, specifically had corrupted things.

None-the-less, the people of Israel went up to Shiloh several times a year to bring their sacrifices.

And Hannah and her family were part of the procession.

But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the LORD had closed her womb. And because the LORD had closed her womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. 1 Samuel 1:5-6

And here we see another level of complexity- perhaps the most vexing level because it was the complexity of daily life. Hannah lived with-

Personal Complexity

-she was in a complex marriage- polygamous

-she was childless in a world that measured worth in children.

In this text we are brought right into the details of Hannah's complex personal life. There was a battle of jealousy and one-up-man-ship taking place in this home. It is the type of painful conflict that families are full of but they are also the type of battles that rarely see the light of day. They take place behind closed doors where no one see- but they are extremely painful.

This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the LORD, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat. Elkanah her husband would say to her, "Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don't I mean more to you than ten sons?" 1 Samuel 1:7-8

It wasn't that Hannah didn't have good things in her life- she did. She had a husband who cared deeply for her but even this just seemed to make things more complicated.

Hannah lived in a very complicated world.

All this is the setting of the story that follows-

Once when they had finished eating and drinking in Shiloh, Hannah stood up. Now Eli the priest was sitting on a chair by the doorpost of the LORD's temple. In bitterness of soul Hannah wept much and

prayed to the LORD. And she made a vow, saying, "O LORD Almighty, if you will only look upon your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head." 1 Samuel 1:9-11

Hannah Knew She Had To Pray

In this complex world of corrupt priests and confused worship, Hannah knew one thing- she needed to come before God with the burdens of her heart and that is just what she did.

She didn't do it right either. In fact she did something that the Bible warns us about- don't try to make deals with God!

We are supposed to come with our deepest requests and most intense grief to God- but trying to make deals with the God who created the heavens and the earth- is not what prayer is all about. Prayer is about the cry of a child to a parent and as parents we know that when the deal making starts life only gets more confusing.

But as parents we also know that deal making is a basic human instinct and often that is where prayer starts. Hannah lived in a complicated, confusing world but what she did right was cry out to God when she went to worship.

This is the first lesson that Hannah and so many of our other Biblical relatives teach us by their example- they pray to God with their hearts laid bare in the only language they know.

But as often happens when we pray- Hannah's complex world became even more confusing-

As she kept on praying to the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving but her voice was not heard. Eli thought she was drunk and said to her, "How long will you keep on getting drunk? Get rid of your wine." 1 Samuel 1:12-14

Hannah, the woman crying out to God is completely misunderstood by the man commissioned to be God's agent. There is a side lesson here that I, as a pastor, feel compelled to highlight.

I am not a priest, but as a pastor I too have been commissioned to bring words of healing and comfort to people and frankly more times that I care to remember I have been

guilty of the kind of misunderstanding that Eli demonstrated. People come to the church with their deepest pains and too often they get an “Eli” response.

It is terrible and at one level there is no excuse for it. The big lesson from the Book of Job was- you don’t know what is going on behind the scenes, so don’t jump to conclusions.

Hannah had done nothing to deserve such an affront BUT that is the kind of judgments that we make and if you think you have never made an “Eli” judgment- you are either hopelessly forgetful or self-deceived.

It is truly that much worse when it comes in a pastoral context but as NT children of God being pastor is not restricted to someone who is given a role and a salary in a church- we are all to play the pastoral role. And we all do well to have Eli’s thoughtless comment burned into our memory banks.

But there is another side to this incident- Hannah’s side and in this Hannah’s gift is first revealed.

"Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the LORD. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief." Samuel 1:15-16

Hannah’s answer was simple and direct. As painful as that accusation must have felt- Hannah responded from a place that we, as her relatives must take careful note of- and hold up as an example to ourselves.

There were so many other ways Hannah could have reacted- most of them you and I can easily imagine and probably recall. She must have been deeply wounded by that statement and when we are wounded we respond by-

- sinking into despair
- bitterness
- anger

-using this as an excuse to write people off

Hannah did not go to any of these places. She simply answered to the charges with the facts of her situation. In doing so Hannah took a situation that could have been a disaster and completely neutralized it.

If we could just learn to do this one thing in our lives and immense amount of pain and suffering would be avoided.

This is not an easy thing to do and we will look at how Hannah could actually do so- but the result first.

Eli, who was ready to kick Hannah out of the temple, is completely turned from a roadblock in Hannah’s life into an ally.

Eli answered, "Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him." 1 Samuel 1:17

For those who are able to follow Hannah’s example- it does not always turn out as nicely as this- BUT you would be surprised how often it does.

I know because I have met “Hannahs.” When one is confronted, in a non-confrontational way but with a clear explanation it is incredibly disarming. No one wants to be a boorish person and the Eli comment was boorishness exemplified. And in surprisingly many occasions a person who looked like an adversary becomes an ally.

There is a Proverb that says-

A gentle answer turns away wrath Proverb 15:1

But Hannah herself gained something-

She said, "May your servant find favor in your eyes." Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast. 1 Samuel 1:18

Hannah had peace. Her prayer would eventually be answered but her peace came first.

But Hannah had something that we, her descendents need to observe carefully and emulate-

Hannah Had The Gift Of “Simplicity”

What Is Simplicity?

This is a very important definition to clarify because “simple” has several meanings- at least one of which could take us in completely the wrong direction. That is the definition of equating “simple” with lack of mental capacity and indeed the Bible uses it that way at times.

The simple inherit folly, but the prudent are crowned with knowledge. Proverbs 14:18

In this setting simplicity is equated to the word “simpleton” or in other words someone of diminished mental capacity. Simple people can only understand simple things- so no one wants to be called “simple.”

But there is another contrasting meaning for simplicity and it is this quality that Hannah demonstrates. It is the simplicity of those people whose inner core of being is the opposite of what James warns against-

If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him. But when he asks, he must believe and not doubt, because he who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind. That man should not think he will receive anything from the Lord; he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does. James 1:5-8

In this important promise James points out a characteristic that plagues us all and it is “duplicity” or double mindedness.

The simplicity Hannah demonstrates is of an uncomplicated character.

Now this trait does not come easily to humanity. We are by our very nature characterized by complexity and multiplicity. In our beings a 1000 impulses, drives, and ideas churn around. And in doing so cause us all kinds of grief- not the least of which comes when we pray. In the context of wisdom, James points out, we ask for wisdom but even in asking something duplicitous is taking place.

Now it shouldn't take too long to accept that simplicity is a good thing. Even scientists recognize that this is a prize- the mark of a good theory is its simplicity.

Probably the most famous equation of all time- the one that in many ways captures modern science has only 5 pieces and is known by children in Gr 1. It is $E=MC^2$.

It is the equation Einstein formulated to define the amount of energy that exists in matter. This is a “simple” equation because with its 5 little parts it explains so very much.

This meaning of simplicity is captured in a word that the Bible uses a lot- the word “purity.”

Jesus

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Matthew 5:8

How Do We Get Simplicity?

First, this is not a gift that comes easily. There are people like Hannah whose nature lends itself more easily to simplicity but for the rest of us it is a formidable challenge. Having said this-

it is not optional either. We can't resign ourselves to duplicity as a character flaw we just have to live with.

Second, we must set our sights on it. In fact the quest for simplicity is at the heart of worship. We double-minded people come into the presence of God and ask Him to purify us. This is a life long quest.

Third, it is not achieved by simplifying our lives. This has merit on its own and is something that we should do from time to time just as we should periodically clean our desks- but the simplicity of spirit that Hannah demonstrated came in the middle of a complex world- that became even more complex when her prayer was answered.

We will look at the 2nd part of Hannah's story next week but for now- recognizing Hannah's gift of simplicity being modeled for us is the lesson for today.