

“Her Song ~ Our Song”

I Samuel 1 & Song of Hannah
Gordon Wiersma 11/15/09

In focusing on the story of Hannah that we heard today, I want to say from the start that I am aware of the potential minefield present for me as a man to be preaching on a text about a woman who is dealing with the issues of infertility and pregnancy – that it might seem naïve at best or presumptuous at worst for me to pretend to have some keen insights into what that is like for a woman – not to mention dealing with the whole system of male hierarchy and gender roles in which this story takes place...I can't presume to understand that from Hannah's perspective as a woman in her time or in the experience women have had throughout time. So...I don't want to say I am treading anxiously, since fear does not seem a good starting point – but I do want to say I have encountered this text...respectfully - as a learner, not an expert...with Hannah as the teacher.

That seemed important to me to say – what do you think? Do you appreciate me putting that out there? You women, thinking ‘thank goodness there's some recognition of those issues – and what a good man Gordon is for saying it...’ You men, thinking, ‘that's right, it's important that we talk about these perspectives! – real men respect women!’ Or does it perhaps instead strike you as all a bit much, that I have to start with referring to women's roles and men's roles, with societal perspectives and differing vantage points? Isn't it better to downplay the differences between women and men and just say that we're all equal – can't we all just get along?...and move on!

Well – I imagine there is a spectrum among you in that regard, as to whether how I've begun opens you up or shuts you down a bit – but I'm going to push awhile on those differing perspectives of women and men and see what happens and where that leads us. Because I've been thinking how the themes of Hannah's story were already very present last week in the story of Ruth and Naomi. When you wonder about why these stories are in the Bible – of Ruth and Naomi and Hannah – you start to realize how much they have to do with women having babies and with women having a man to be with. As Jill talked last Sunday about widows, Ruth and Naomi and the unnamed widow in the temple – you realize these women are defined by being without a man – that is their identity, as widows along with orphans are put together in the pitied and desperate persons category; and then that is connected to the need for a woman to have a baby – and in particular a baby boy. In both the story of Naomi and Ruth and the story of Hannah, in each case the woman is seen as in some sense being saved by a baby boy – that is what makes them notable, secure, legitimate – a woman defined by a man. The apparent reason these women's stories are in the Bible is because of the baby boys they give birth to — and in case we haven't realized before, you start to see that it is often the case in the Scriptures that when women do get attention it has to do with having babies, or not – and baby boys in particular: that is what makes the woman significant – and once the baby boy is born, the story shifts back to the men. It is an ongoing and entrenched way that the story is told and that life is experienced, and it is very clear in these stories.

Well – so what do we make of that? – other than a pretty negative spin to put on what seem like some very lovely stories...? Naomi and Ruth, Hannah – they are told in the Bible as stories of inspiration, presented to us with tones of courage and hope; but instead we need to pick them apart as illustrations of oppressed women and male hierarchical domination? It seems sometimes that that is how the choice is presented – either to just have nice story to be inspired by and in order to do so conveniently overlook any prickly particulars that would get in the way of that; or to move past the story itself and focus just on those prickly particulars, and find inspiration instead in our commitment not to perpetuate those oppressive structures in our time.

As you might guess – I don't like that choice so much – mostly because I think it's a false choice – that's it's not an either/or, one or the other way of looking at things...that in fact the given beauty of these stories is enriched and deepened when we are also willing to explore the rough edges that we find in them. And in order to try and keep those things together, I'd like to make a shift and start talking about songs – use the image of a song; hopefully this analysis so far has been helpful, but it's probably a bit arid, so perhaps the image of a song will engage a bit more of our imagination. I've been thinking of songs because of Hannah's song that we heard today – and in order to get there it seems helpful to think first about life in general as a song.

Songs are such fascinating things, you know – our musicians and singers could tell us lots of interesting things about music, about songs, but as human beings we also have something innate within us that connects to songs – we sing...some of you don't think you can, but that's not true – or even if you won't sing, we're all drawn in some way to listen to songs. In a different way than just words, songs get inside of us, find us and express us in a particular. And it's that feeling of a song – of a melody, of a tune that settles inside you, that I'd like to try to have you imagine.

And the first song is one about the circumstances of life – the circumstances are the lyrics, and we'll need to find a tune. How about Hannah's life – what's in that song? It's all the things that seek to define her life and who she is...being one of two wives was her lot in life – loved by her husband, but in conflict with the other wife – distraught and shamed because she had no children and living with that pain for years – she prayed to God about it for years, and saw God as the one to close or open her womb. That's the storyline for her song – of the circumstances by which she has been defined – and the tune is a dismal one.

What about you – what are the lyrics of your circumstances-song? Everyone has a storyline. Perhaps there are things in Hannah's story that touch you tenderly – struggles with fertility, with children; praying and hoping and despairing; being told things about your faith and your God. Or perhaps you feel no connection to that at all; you are single or you are not having children or you are in a very different stage of life – or you do have not a wife or husband but a partner, and live in a society that sees you as different or other – or you are divorced or separated – or you want to be married – or maybe you are just a very average married person, and that counts too! - because in each case we are all people dealing with our roles in society, the things expected of us and for ourselves – structures that sometimes support us and sometimes oppress us but that certainly seek to define us. And you see, the fascinating thing is, we start with this woman, Hannah, and her own very particular story, but then we start to see it's not just about a woman and her baby and her time – what I hear is a song about circumstances, of culture and gender and race and economy...so many things – and it's not that it's necessarily always a dismal tune, but it can be a loud blaring tune that tries to overpower everything else – telling us what our story must be because that's just the way the world is – that circumstances define the core of who we are.

But there's a different song too – it's a song that Hannah catches a whisper of – perhaps senses it before she actually hears it. It's the song that the Spirit of God plays within her – and I see the lyrics and the melody of it hinted at in various ways. It is heard as Hannah finds her own voice – a voice different than her husband; a voice different than a God who is absent; a voice to respond to a priest who would judge and shame her; a voice that speaks the depth of struggle she is in; and, very interesting to me, a voice that finds some measure of contentment and transformation even before she knows she is with child.

What I think we find there is that Hannah finds, hears, something different than all the circumstances that would define her. I know that this all happens within a structure that gives us many things to question - but I also believe there is that other song here. And that is not just

Hannah's own voice she is finding, it is the Spirit of God speaking, singing, that the circumstance of this world are not the only thing to define her – the song of God is a deeper truth that calls us to live in faith and expectation of a God who sees us beyond the ways that the world defines us.

And that's what leads us to the song of Hannah – it is this merging of her voice and God's voice, the melody of her life and the song of God's Spirit together. Suddenly this woman held in the complexities of her life and circumstances of her time is expressing revolutionary ideas – the lifting up of the powerless, the poor, the hungry, the marginalized and the bringing down of the powers that be – God holding the faithful beyond an earthly power. These are not things that a woman like Hannah was taught to say! – but we find Hannah who could be only an object of the patterns of her time become a subject of substance to pay attention to – she has a song to hear, to teach – and Hannah's song becomes a truth for us, for our lives – invites us to our own song – not just the blare of our circumstances but the Spirit of God humming in us of God's ways – joining our own songs to the transforming power of God in our lives and world.

The obvious reason the story of Hannah is in the Bible is because she had a baby boy who anointed a King – it was the circumstances of the time; but the Spirit of God does more with the story than human intentions. God's song is heard in a way that breaks thru the very circumstances that the story portrays. And Hannah's song becomes our song too, held in the melody of God's uncontainable grace – in the midst of your circumstances, of the structures of our world, hear her song – your song – as a part of God's song – and the transforming power of God sung through you.

AMEN.