

Hannah

First in the Advent Annunciations Series

by

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I Samuel 1:19-20, 25b-2:10

¹⁹They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her. ²⁰In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, “I have asked him of the LORD.” After the child grew and was weaned: ²⁵They brought the child to the priest Eli. ²⁶And she said, “Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. ²⁷For this child I prayed; and the LORD has granted me the petition that I made to him. ²⁸Therefore I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD.”

¹She left him there for the LORD. Hannah prayed and said, “My heart exults in the LORD; my strength is exalted in my God. My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory.

²“There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.

³Talk no more so very proudly, let not arrogance come from your mouth; for the LORD is a God of knowledge, and by him actions are weighed.

⁴The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength.

⁵Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.

The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn.

⁶The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.

⁷The LORD makes poor and makes rich; he brings low, he also exalts.

⁸He raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.

For the pillars of the earth are the Lord’s, and on them he has set the world.

⁹“He will guard the feet of his faithful ones, but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness; for not by might does one prevail.

¹⁰The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven.

The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed.”

One of the unexpected blessings of the pandemic is that virtual gatherings have allowed us greater access to some events that would have required considerable travel otherwise. I know families who ate their Thanksgiving dinner in great number together not in the same room, but virtually on Zoom. People have tuned in to watch weddings take place at a distance, and our church has many friends who have moved out of town, but are worshiping with us again, and reconnecting to our community. It is no substitute for the warmth of being in the same space, but this season of virtual connection has also allowed for creative forms of community.

Personally, I have been grateful for having been able to attend a couple of Memorial Services for dear old friends that I could not have attended in person. One of those was for a beloved professor, Pat Miller. I was in his last class at Union seminary before Pat Miller continued his distinguished career at Princeton seminary. Pat was a brilliant Old Testament scholar, a deeply devoted Christian, and longtime choir member at Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton. He had retired to western North Carolina, and his Memorial service was a beauty to behold. While a choir sang John Rutter's "For the Beauty of the earth," a camera panned those Blue Ridge Mountain peaks he so loved, in glorious splendor. Friends and colleagues helped lead the service from around the county, and there was more than one reference to something I remembered he taught me over thirty years ago, that Pat became famous for saying. From an academic life entrenched in the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament, Pat was fond of reminding his students, "You know, there is nothing *new* in the New Testament." There *is* nothing *new* in the New Testament.

What he meant by that, of course, is that the God who hovered over creation at the beginning is the same God who overshadows the Virgin Mary. The God who called Abraham and Sarah to get up and go to begin a family that will be a blessing for all the earth, is the same God who called over his shoulder to disciples saying, "Follow me." To be sure there are some new revelations, and unforeseen characters who

populate the Gospels and the Epistles, but as Pat Miller reminded generations of students much of what we find in the New Testament has deep roots in the Old.

Hannah's story is case in point. Hannah is in that a long line of biblical women who were barren. Her situation points back to Sarah and Rachel, and she foreshadows Mary's cousin Elizabeth, each of whom depended on God's intervention to become great with child. Now, remember, in each of these biblical stories, pregnancy itself was not just about having a baby; it was about the people of God having a future.

Hannah's story also points to the future of Mary, the mother of Jesus; Mary's Magnificat is simply a new variation of Hannah's old song. Both Hannah and Mary become pregnant through divine intervention; both of them are miraculously given a child; which they, in turn, will give back to God to fulfill divine purposes for all of humankind.

Here is the context of Hannah's story.

By this point in the narrative, at the end of the Book of Judges, the ancient Israelites had hit bottom. The rule of the judges had failed; the political and religious leaders were corrupt. The covenant people of God's calling were in constant conflict with other nations and in turmoil among themselves. Into this chaotic social and political upheaval, God did what God often does – and chose one family to help change direction for the whole family of God. Hannah's husband, Elkanah, had another wife named Peninniah who had child after child, and who was unkind to Hannah, flaunting her own ability to bear children; Elkanah was kind to Hannah and assured her of his deep love.¹ But Hannah was long-suffering, persistent, courageous and brave, and kept going into worship

¹ Lynn Japinga, *Preaching the Women of the Old Testament: Who They Were and Why They Matter*, p. 110 ff.

where she prayed and she grieved, she wept bitterly and prayed some more, never giving up on the hope that God would give her a child, a future. Ultimately, she struck a deal with God and promised that if God gave her a child, she would give the child back to God.

That is precisely what happened. Hannah gave birth to Samuel and when he was just old enough to be weaned she dedicated him to the Lord. She turned him over to the care of the priest Eli and let him be raised in service of the Lord. She got exactly what she had prayed for; she recognized the giver was God; and she did as she promised – she sacrificed her own desires to mother her child by preparing him for a much bigger role for the people of God. And then she sings her powerful song about how God has turned the world up-side-down. God has brought down the proud, the arrogant, brought low the rich and the mighty, and God has raised up the lowly, fed the hungry and lifted up the poor. Hannah gave voice to the suffering of others and glorified God for bringing justice. Hannah was long-suffering, persistent, courageous and brave. Granted what she prayed for, she sacrificed her own desires for God's good future, for the welfare of the whole human family.

Recently, I was introduced to an amazing piece of artwork and I can hardly wait to see it in person on a post-pandemic trip. It is the figure of a long-suffering, persistent, courageous and brave woman who reminds me of Hannah. On 122nd Street in Harlem, in a triangle of busy streets, stands the statue of a powerful woman. Her figure is as large and resolute as the bronze and granite of which she is made. She is Harriet Tubman, her face set and her stride determined.



Erected in 2008, the first African American woman to be depicted in public sculpture in New York City, Harriet Tubman was fearless as an abolitionist and conductor of the Underground Railroad. Fueled by religious visions of God’s good future, she led scores of slaves to freedom, so that in her time she was known as “Moses.” After the Civil War, with her persistent, courageous brave and sacrificial work, she dedicated herself to Women’s Suffrage. Tubman strides resolutely forward as behind her, connected to her skirt, the “roots of slavery” are being pulled up from the earth. Portraits inspired by West African passport masks honor the Underground Railroad passengers Tubman helped lead to freedom.



Designed by Alison Saar, an African American artist, Saar said she wanted to depict Tubman “not so much as a conductor of the Underground Railroad, but as a train itself, an unstoppable locomotive that worked toward improving the lives of slaves,” and women, the oppressed and the poor for most of her long life.... “I wanted not merely to speak of her courage or illustrate her commitment, but to honor her compassion.”²

You can see in the sculpture that her petticoat is like the guard irons on the front of a train, as Harriet Tubman leans forward, walking into a more humane future, pulling up the roots of evil and generating the brighter tomorrow for the whole human family.

² Indebted to my friend Kim Clayton who told me about this statue. Details found in Lucie Levine’s “The Story behind Harlem’s Trailblazing Harriet Tubman Sculpture,” on *Flickr*.

Hannah also leaned forward, doing everything she could to generate a more equitable future for the people of God. She is a model of how personal suffering can be the entry point to understanding the pain of all who suffer. She made a promise to God and she kept it. When she handed her young child over to be raised in the temple of the Lord, she counted God's gain as greater than her loss. Hannah's courageous prayer for a child did help bring unity and order to the entire nation.

In due time, that child Samuel would become an important prophet, the priest who anointed kings. He would anoint the great King David, who would, of course, become the great-great-many times over great grandfather of Jesus, born in Bethlehem, the city of David. Exactly what was said of Samuel, will one day be said of Jesus: he grew in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people.³

Friends, let us remember Hannah as we enter this year's unusually challenging season of Advent. As in her story, we live in a time of chaotic uncertainty about the future. In her isolation she prayed, and was unafraid to be persistent and make big demands on the God she had grown to trust. She was also willing to sacrifice. To give away the great gift she was given for the welfare of other people, God's people. And she was willing to sing boldly her heartfelt song of liberation into the unknown future declaring the purposes of God to bring justice to the people of the earth, to make life more equitable and fair, to tear up from the ground the roots of evil and to journey forward with resolute determination to join God's vision of blessing for the earth.

She reminds us all we serve a God who attends to the weak and the vulnerable and who remembers the forgotten, the bullied, the ignored. She reminds us there is nothing new in the New Testament... We serve a God who invites us to sacrifice some of what we have been given in order to bring about blessing, justice and peace throughout the earth.

AMEN.

³ 1 Samuel 2:26.