

Following Hannah's Vow: A Call to a Perseverance-Filled Faith unto Glory – Mikey Ward

1 Samuel 1:4-20; 1 Samuel 2:1-10; Hebrews 10:11-25; Mark 13:1-8

In the summer of 1984 my parents were like Hannah at the beginning of our Old Testament reading, when we hear her deeply grieved and suffering. As an outsider looking in, my parents appeared to be living the American dream. My oldest sister Annie was six years old and they were in the midst of owning a gym that produced gymnasts who competed against the likes of Mary Lou Retton. Yet after four years of attempting to and failing to have a second child, they were unsure of what to do next. They could not become pregnant and they had had two attempts at adoption fall through at the last minute. They, like Hannah, were grieving. Only after sharing their grief with a friend were they told about a “miraculous Methodist pastor” who was known for praying with couples; soon after couples would be with child. As members of the Roman Catholic church, seeing a Methodist pastor surely was their last-ditch effort to become pregnant.

Nevertheless, they went and prayed with the pastor. Similar to our Old Testament reading today, six weeks later they found out that they were pregnant with my sister Kate. Soon followed the births of my sister Mackalah in 1988 and me in 1990.

In reality, I do not know what my parents and the Methodist pastor prayed that day in the summer of '84. I do not know why God answered those prayers when they had prayed so often the previous four years. Moreover, I do not know why their prayers were answered by God when so many others' desires to be parents are not. I do not know how to make sense of this rarely told, unlikely, and miraculous story of how my family came to be. And yet, throughout my preparation for today I was continually called to remember and imagine how, like Samuel, the circumstances of the birth of my sisters and I are rooted in the gracious power of God (1 Sam. 2.2) as well as the persevering faith of a parent that approaches God in prayer with confidence and hope.

Needless to say, I do not tell this story to further the sufferings of those who have not been able to have children. Rather, I do so to demonstrate that today's readings reveal that a perseverance-filled faith amidst great sufferings “do[es] not lead to despair, but to hope, to the anticipated dawn of God's new day.”¹ It is this, a perseverance-filled faith that is revealed through the actions of Hannah in 1 Samuel. It is this, a perseverance-filled faith that is revealed through the author of Hebrews' examination of a life lived under the new covenant of Christ. It is this, a perseverance-filled faith that is revealed when confronted with Jesus's foretelling of the beginning of birth pangs of the Day of Judgment. What, then does such a faith necessitate? How do we arrive at and cleave to such a faith when much in our world seems to be cause for despair? How do we persevere, in the last Sunday after Pentecost into the Season of Advent, when a great deal of our lives, communities, and world seem to be ripping at the seams?

Currently, fires rage to the west, and many this week will be returning to family situations where fires have raged for years and left heaps of ash. Mass shootings by white male terrorists continue to occur in our midst, leaving multitudes numb. The seeds of our white supremacist nation on stolen land continue to reap their poisonous fruit, while a multitude in our nation do not heed Jesus's words in today's gospel reading to not be led astray. Yet, as Jesus tells his disciples in today's gospel reading, this is to be expected. As stated before, this is but merely *the beginning of the birth pangs*. What, then are we to do? How are we to live with a perseverance-filled faith? Today's reading suggest that we are not to trust our own strength, to judge others, or to create fear-filled scenarios where we are surely saved at the end of

¹ Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, and James D. Newsome. *Texts For Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year B*. Westminster Press: (Louisville), 595.

times. Instead, we are to follow Hannah's example, and approach God with what the author of Hebrews calls a "confidence" to proclaim a vow unto God that seeks to understand that "true glory is found not in wisdom or strength or riches but by knowing that the Lord is God."² By dwelling on Hannah's example today, may we remember that we have already taken on a vow similar to Hannah's at our baptism. May we be renewed by this and hold fast to the confession of our hope prayed unto God at our baptism. Lastly, today's readings invite us to imagine how our baptismal vows call us to enact a perseverance-filled faith that is both individualistic and communal. Individually, we ought to confidently know of God's ability to alter our situation and to make an approach unto God with hope. Communally, we are called to collectively discern how our vows taken at baptism ought to—as the author of Hebrews suggests—*provoke one another to love and good deeds*. In doing so, today's readings call us to be renewed, to renew our vows taken at our baptism, and to follow Jesus Christ because a perseverance-filled faith knows "that the Lord will justify or condemn at the end" and this, "sobers the proud and gives hope to the penitent."³ Therefore, our readings today urge us to dwell on how our baptismal vows call us to enact a faith that is full of unusual and arduous perseverance.

In today's reading from 1 Samuel, we are presented with the circumstances surrounding Samuel's birth. As stated before, we ought to approach this passage as preparation for Advent and our imminent celebration of Jesus Christ's incarnate birth. Like Mary in Luke 1, God's gift of a son to Hannah in 1 Samuel was not limited to Hannah only, but for all. Specifically, in 1 Samuel 1, we see "Yahweh respond to the fervent prayer of a righteous and persecuted woman by graciously endowing her with a son."⁴ In this passage, we see the fullness of human experience on display: the rivalry between Hannah and Peninnah, the indifference of Elkanah, the unceasing devotion of Hannah, and the mental feebleness of Eli. Consequently, we see our sinfulness, our limitations, and our possibilities on display.

Key in the passage, however, is that, with year after year of dismay at the hands of Peninnah's persecution, Hannah exhibits great confidence by boldly praying directly to Yahweh at Shiloh. In fact, Eli is merely a bystander when Hannah is weeping and praying out in anguish to God. However, at work within Hannah's approach is a change of prayer. At the beginning of her prayer Hannah approaches the Lord dismayed because of her inability to have a child. As a woman within her patriarchal society, to have a child—and having a male child—equated to societal security. However, in the midst of her prayers unto the Lord she makes a vow. In his exposition *On Prayer*, Origen of Alexandria, indicates that this change is deeply significant. At first, Hannah is praying with a "bitter soul" to the point of weeping. In verse 11, however, we see her pray a prayer vowing her unborn son's life unto God. This vow is deeply significant for a multitude of reasons, but let us highlight three.

First, this vow not only speaks to the transformative power of prayer itself, but it links Hannah to a lineage of Nazarites that can be traced back to Leviticus and Numbers. In Leviticus and Numbers, we see the origins and parameters of what it means to be a Nazarite. A vow of a Nazarite is one that necessitates continual reciprocation unto God. Once given up to God, this vow is to never be broken. In fact, in Ecclesiastes, it states that, *It is better not to pray than to pray and not to pay it with one's life* (Eccles. 5.5). However, Hannah's vow unto God is not for herself, but for her unborn son. Thus, Hannah's vow within this lineage is significant for two more reasons.

² John R. Franke, ed. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel*. Intervarsity Press: (Downers Grove), 197.

³ *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, 197.

⁴ *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year B*, 587.

Second, Hannah's vow unto God is significant because she vows her unborn son's life without the assent of her husband, Elkanah. In Numbers 30 we see a multitude of rules that a woman is obliged to follow before making a vow unto God. This knowledge of Numbers 30 would surely be known by Eli when Hannah explains her prayers to him in verse 16-18. For whatever reason, Eli does not scold her for praying a vow without Elkanah's approval. Instead, Eli states, *Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him*. Now this could be because Hannah did not disclose her vow to Eli. Or it could be because she does not vow her life unto God, but Samuel's.

This, the third significant feature of Hannah's vow, is particularly noteworthy. Again, in the beginning of this passage, Hannah wanted a male child for security. By vowing her unborn son's life unto God, she not only vows to wholly give away Samuel, but also her security, her livelihood, and the possibility of grandchildren. Moreover, by vowing Samuel to be a Nazarite unto God, she prophesies what his life will entail. Can you imagine being Samuel the first time he realized how Hannah sealed his fate before he was even conceived? And to think, today, we give parents who baptize their infant children side-eye and flack for not allowing children the opportunity to accept Christ on their own. What a profound declaration of faith. Yet, as we stated previously, Hannah knows that this vow is not limited to her, but it is for all.

This is to say that Hannah's vow in 1 Samuel is a life-altering vow not only for herself or Samuel, but also for all of Israel and Yahweh. Thus, today's Old Testament passage's focus is not on human action alone, but rather also on the nature of God. In today's reading we see that we are only holy insofar as our actions are rooted in attempts to glorify our relationship with God and all of God's creation. Again, Origen provides insight on this when he states that we "cannot be holy like the Lord, because... [the Lord] is the light of sanctity, the human being the contemplator of the holy light... Because all of us, that is the whole creation, did not exist before we were created; thus, that we are, is [due to] the will of the Creator."⁵ Specifically, in 1 Samuel 1, verses 5 and 6 we are introduced to a "broader Jewish scriptures theme which consistently depicts God as the one who opens and closes the womb". In verses 19 and 20 we also see God as "the one who gives and takes life away."⁶ Therefore, when we see Hannah's devotion in 1 Samuel, may we be reminded that our baptismal vows are not for our personal salvation—they are vows obligated to glorify God and all of God's kingdom in thought, word, and deed. What a profound declaration of faith.

The theme of God as the one who gives and takes life away is furthered throughout the remainder of our readings for today, but especially in our second reading from 1 Samuel. In 1 Samuel 2 we are presented with Hannah's prayer after presenting Samuel to God at Shiloh. Nearly four years have passed since her vow in our first reading. Again, we see Hannah exemplify a perseverance-filled faith. Moreover, as stated previously, Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2 is very similar to Mary's in the gospel of Luke. Both cry out in thanksgiving to the Lord, indicate that the upside-down kingdom of God is already underway, and prophesy what is to come.

For us, however, this morning, it is significant to note that Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2 is bolstered when we are made aware of her preparation between the two readings in 1 Samuel 1 and 2. In 1 Samuel 1.21-28, we are made aware that Hannah waits to bring Samuel to Eli until he is weaned. Roughly, three years pass between Samuel's birth and Hannah's prayer in 1 Samuel 2. When she does come back to Shiloh with Samuel, however, she does so with the entire family—her rival included—as well as with a three-year-old-bull to slaughter, an ephah of flour, and a skin of wine. Thus, when she prays the prayer we read together this morning, she offers it while also offering her entire livelihood. This is an indication of

⁵ Origen. *Homilies on I Kings I.II* in *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel*, 203.

⁶ Matthew Thiessen, *Paul and the Gentile Problem*. Oxford University Press: (Oxford), 91.

her payment on her vow in chapter one. This is to say that, while much of Hannah's prayer is dedicated to juxtaposing herself and her rival, we are given very specific precepts of what it means to make a vow and then to glorify God in the Kingdom of God through perseverance and preparation.

We see in verse 3 that to make a vow unto the kingdom of God is to talk humbly—knowing that God is the true source of all wisdom. We see that the hungry are fed. The poor are made rich. The needy are raised up from the ash heaps. The faithful ones are protected. Thus, Hannah demonstrates true glory because hers “is not found in wisdom or strength or riches but by knowing that the Lord is God.” In doing so, she has demonstrated true glory because “it has been exalted by God rather than human beings.”⁷ Therefore, 1 Samuel 2 offers for us clear indication of what it means to participate in and vow our lives for the kingdom of God.

However, we are Christians reading this passage this morning; Hannah prays two very specific claims that many throughout Christendom have indicated in fact prophesy to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In verse six she states, *The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up* and in verse ten she proclaims, *The LORD will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed*. While Hannah is prophesying the coming of King David in verse ten, many within Christendom have demonstrated that Hannah is not only prophesying of King David, but more importantly of Jesus's coming fulfillment of the role of king. In fact, throughout our readings this morning we see a juxtaposition between priest, prophet, and king of the Old Testament with that of Jesus Christ.

When read in tandem, it is apparent that the author of Hebrews juxtaposes Christ's priesthood with the lackluster priesthood of Eli in 1 Samuel. At length, Hebrews reveals that only through Jesus Christ can the priesthood be strengthened. Read alongside 1 Samuel, however, we see with today's reading from Hebrews that Eli becomes a succinct embodiment of the antithesis of Jesus. While Eli acts with care and responds generously to Hannah's petition in 1 Samuel 1, he is still unable to alter Hannah's situation. Only our God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—can alter one's situation. In the gospel message, we see Jesus prophesy the coming destruction of the temple that was thought to be the fulfillment of Hannah's prophesy. Lastly, in each of the last verses of our passages from 1 Samuel 2, Hebrews 10 and Mark 13 we see a juxtaposition between the coming kingdom of David with that of the coming kingdom of our Triune God. Each indicate that the Day of Judgment is approaching. What, then, are we to do here and now?

When reading Hebrews 10 and Mark 13 we are given two very different responses to this unnerving reality. In Mark 13, the disciples do not ask what they are to do or why they are to do it, but rather ask Jesus, *Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?* These questions are surely rooted in fear—rightly so, because Jesus is prophesying not only the coming destruction of the temple in 70 AD, but also the Day of Judgment. This is noteworthy because Jesus's statement in verse two is the only explicit prediction of the Temple's destruction in the gospel of Mark. Moreover, this proclamation comes as the culmination of the temple dialogues in chapters eleven and twelve of Mark's gospel. In response, however, to the disciples' question, Jesus does not answer, but rather calls the disciples to live into a faith full of perseverance. Specifically, Jesus calls for perseverance in the face of false prophets, trials, and impatience. Needless to say, the “imminent Parousia calls for increased perseverance and enhanced powers of discernment.”⁸ This is to say that, like the disciples, we are to do the same. However, it is Hannah's example and the words of the author of

⁷ John R. Franke, ed. *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1-2 Samuel*. InterVarsity Press: (Downers Grove), 202.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly R. Gaventa, and James D. Newsome. *Texts For Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV-Year B*. Westminster Press: (Louisville), 587.

Hebrews that offer us a more holistic understanding of what is expected of us as ones who have made a vow in the birth pangs of the Day of Judgment.

As stated previously, we are to follow Hannah's example and give wholly unto God. In Hebrews, the author provides us with an outline on how to live out a perseverance-filled faith and fulfill our baptismal vows with the imminent Day of Judgment looming. They state in verses 21-25, *Let us approach with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful. And let us consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day approaching.* Here the author reminds us: we have already come and taken a vow unto God. God has remembered our vow and has provided a son—His son. Let us live in such a way that follows Hannah's example. One that remembers that it is better to not make a vow than to not live into its promise. One that remembers that such a vow is a serious and life-altering prayer for all. One that attempts to comprehend that The LORD of all creation remembers because God has heard. One that prepares with a perseverance-filled faith in hopes to glorify God and all the inhabitants of the kingdom of God.

And yet, Jesus reminds in Mark 13.8 that *nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.* By reading this today within the narrative of 1 Samuel, we find ourselves located roughly nine months after Hannah's vow. We are in the midst of birth pangs. What ought to follow is preparation similar to Hannah's. We know that such preparation is extremely difficult. And yet, let us renew and be renewed by the reality that we once approached God with "confidence" to proclaim a vow unto God that sought to understand that "true glory is found not in wisdom or strength or riches but by knowing that the Lord is God." May we, today, dwell in this reality and prepare like Hannah with a perseverance-filled faith, knowing that God hears us, remembers us, and is giving us an opportunity to participate in true glory—the coming kingdom of God. Amen.