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This morning we heard the beginning of the saga of ancient Israel's march toward nationhood, in First Samuel. But it starts not with a story of a throne and the birth of a king, but with a woman and the birth of a prophet. I love that the Bible sometimes surprises us like this. Hannah, the protagonist of our story has been on my mind all week, along with so many other women who show up in these narratives, and so I picked up my book, "A Year of Biblical Womanhood" by Rachel Held Evans, searching for some insight into why these stories are so important.

And as usual, Evans didn't disappoint. Her words reminded me that the biblical stories that usually capture our imagination, "are those with triumphant climaxes— battles won, giants slain, and chariots swallowed by the sea, but for all of its glory and grandeur, the Bible contains a darkness [and a sadness] you will only notice if you are paying attention, for it is hidden in the details, whispered in the stories of women." (62)

So where's the sadness and darkness in this story, you might ask? After all, the Lord answers the prayer of Hannah and she conceives and bears a son. That sounds like a happy ending. But it's not the whole story.

This is what we know as this narrative begins to unfold. Elkanah had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah did not.

So right away, we understand a couple of things. First, that Elkanah was a polygamist, which was completely legal and accepted at the time. The second thing is that because women were considered the property of their husbands and their primary responsibility was to bear and raise children, Peninnah had succeeded in this duty and Hannah had not.

But quickly we discover something else, too. Elkanah loved Hannah despite her barrenness. He loved her so much, in fact, that he gave her a double portion of the sacrifice that he made at the altar in Shiloh. To his sons and daughters and his other wife, Peninnah, he gave only a single portion. But what Elkanah may have intended as a kindness to Hannah, turns the wives into rivals.

This story is not simply an example of how the patriarchal culture was cruel in the way that it made women the property of men, but it was also cruel because it pitted woman against woman. We can name other biblical examples of this. Think of Sarah sending Hagar and her child Ishmael out into the wilderness to die for fear that they were a threat to Isaac's inheritance. Or the rivalry between the sisters Leah and Rachel vying for the love of Jacob. The imbalance between wives was such a problem that the book of Deuteronomy even has rules for the treatment of an unloved wife and her sons. (Deut 21:15-17) The lack of power for women at that time, and their total dependence upon the men who fathered or married them, meant that they were never secure, always standing upon shifting sand.

Hannah may be the wife that is loved more by Elkanah, but he seems to lack the empathy she needs in her sorrow. When she weeps and cannot even bring herself to eat after years of not being able to have a child, Elkanah says to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

And while his question may have been meant well, Elkanah's reassurance was about him, not about Hannah. He did not understand the reality of a woman's world. So the answer is no, he is not better than ten sons. Should Hanna become a widow without children, her status would be precarious. There would be no one to care for her, much like the situation of Naomi and Ruth. Without a child, she would have no protection. Especially since Peninnah, whose sons will inherit, is her rival and not her friend. There's no reason to believe that she would treat Hannah with any kindness after the death of their husband.

This is the reality with which Hannah must live. If we are paying attention, this is the darkness we catch whispered in her story. So she takes her lament, her grief, her fears to God. She prays and weeps in the Temple and makes such a scene that Eli the priest believes she is drunk. We might note that she never asks the priest to speak to God for her. She petitions God on her own behalf, asking for a son and offering God a deal. If God gives her a son, she will offer him back to God as a nazirite, one who is set apart, and when he is weaned and no longer needs his mother's milk, she will bring him to the Temple to serve the priest.

Hannah's petition to God, what we might even call a transaction, works. She conceives and bears a son, naming him Samuel, meaning "God has heard."

And perhaps this is the moment to step back and look at the dangers of this story. Too often, Hannah is held up as an example of how God rewards great faith. That if you pray hard enough, like Hannah, God will answer your prayer. But we all know women who have grieved not being mothers. And surely we do not believe in a God who ignores their desire and their despair because they did not pray enough or offer a gift in return as Hannah does when she promises her son to the Temple.

So if the fruits of great faith is not the lesson to be lifted from Hannah's story, what might be? Perhaps we need to read further. Instead of a Psalm this morning, we heard Hannah's song from the second chapter of Samuel. It begins with her sense of victory at having her petition to God answered, but it turns to a prayer for reversal—where the lowly are lifted up, the poor are made rich, the barren bear children. Her answered prayer does not mean that she no longer identifies with the oppressed. She remembers her vulnerability before Samuel was born. A vulnerability that she could be plunged back into at any moment. And so Hannah uses the pain and the fear, that she understands to her very core, to proclaim a different sort of world.

I began this morning by noting that ancient Israel's story of nationhood begins not with the birth of a king, but with the birth of a prophet, Samuel. A prophet, in fact, who will warn the people of Israel repeatedly of the danger of kings, how their power corrupts. Samuel will serve to his death as the intermediary between God and king. It is Samuel's prophetic voice that so often calls David to his senses, calls him back to God. And it is Hannah who sets this in motion. It is she who petitions God and then when her prayer is answered, dedicates her son to God's work in the world. It is Hannah's song, her call for a just and righteous kingdom that we hear first...before a king ever sits on a throne in Israel. If we listen, what else might we hear whispered in the stories of women?

