

Hannah

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at Footscray Baptist Church on November 14th, 2021 – 1 Samuel 1:4-20 & 2:1-10)

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The story that we have had read for us this morning and on which our prayers for today have been based is, I think, one of the most beautiful stories in the Hebrew Bible. Every time I read about Hannah and Samuel, I become more and more amazed at Hannah's courage. And I am grateful for her example and for what she teaches us about God and the kind of relationship we can have with God.

Her story is not dissimilar to other stories in the Hebrew bible which has many stories where a woman is barren, is unable to have children. Barrenness is a theme in the Hebrew Bible and acts as a foil to remind us of the kind of God we love and serve. To be barren in Hannah's day was a curse, not only would there be no children to look after you in your old age, but it was a sign you were not blessed by God.

Barrenness is today still a little stigmatised but we have got so clever now we have much treatment for it – IVF, surrogacy and the like. It is also much more acceptable for men and women to not have children, or to wait until it is almost too late to have them. Pursuing career and financial security is seen as being very responsible and respectable. Beyond that we have good social security systems and superannuation to cater for us as we age.

However, in Hannah's society, to not have children was seen as a curse. Women with children were blest, it was seen as shameful and you could be ridiculed if you didn't. I think I speak for many women who as they get older and the chances of having children diminishes, struggle and it is not a struggle they are going to tell you about necessarily, but it does cause pain. And you do not need to have someone else rub it in, especially in the way that Hannah experienced it from El Kanah's other wife - Peninnah.

Now I don't need to tell you the story, we've already heard it – Hannah prays and prays about her situation, the men (El Kanah and Eli) around don't really understand, they even think she is drunk. Hannah makes a bargain with God and lo and behold God keeps his end of the deal and Hannah in turn keeps hers. What I would really like to do is look at what we can learn from Hannah about her approach to God and what we learn about God which we can appropriate into our lives.

So how does Hannah approach God?

1. First, she directly addresses God out of her pain. She doesn't ask her husband or the priest Eli to intercede for her. She's not sure they can empathise with her anyway. El Kanah for his part is very concerned and keeps reminding her of his love for her, but he just doesn't get it, he doesn't understand the depths of her misery. Eli who overhears her distressed prayer and accuses her of being drunk. However, Hannah shows herself to be spiritually independent.
2. Hannah has enough courage to share her pain with God (much like some of the psalmists), to remonstrate with God and even make bargains or at least a promise.
3. Hannah has enough faith to think that God might act.

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4. Hannah has enough strength of character not to renege on her promise and to dedicate her son to God forever as her grateful response to God in her difficult predicament.
5. Hannah has learnt a great deal about God. Her experience has taught her so much about God, things she could only learn through experience. We know this because of the song or poem that she says. A song, not dissimilar to Mary's song, which Mary sings after she has been visited by an angel and told of God's plans for her. It is a song that celebrates the surprising God. It celebrates a God who reverses people's fortunes, a God who can bring great joy out of even greater sorrow.
6. And Hannah doesn't forget Samuel. Each year she goes up to the temple during the festival and takes with her a new coat for Samuel.

So, what about us?

Can we identify with Hannah's experience? Have there been times in our lives when the only place that we have felt safe enough to pour out our souls, was with God? Do we have the courage of Hannah?

Are we brave enough to bargain with God?

Have we, at various times, made promises or vows to God? What has become of them? Do they inform our living each day or have we forgotten them and gone onto the next thing?

What do we do when God does answer our cries? When we see that God has answered our prayer in whatever way that has happened, what do we do? How do we thank him? In what ways have we thanked God for that which he has given us?

Not only do we have much to learn from Hannah as individuals, when we put ourselves in her shoes for a while, but I think that as we think about our future as a church, we can learn much. Our future, post pandemic will be different from what we imagined, but I think Hannah has something to say to us.

So, what do we learn?

First, pray. Pray out our souls, bring before God all our anxiety, our fears, our pain, our hopes and our desires.

Secondly, trust. Trust God for the future whatever it might be, because we have a God who does surprising things, even making that which is barren fertile.

Thirdly, let go. Hannah gave up what was most precious to her – Samuel. Letting go takes great courage but sometimes we have to let go of the reins to see what creative and new things might emerge in the lives of others.

Finally, remember. Hannah, each year went to see Samuel and took him a new coat. She maintained a connection, yet set Samuel free to be who God called him to be. Can we do that?

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Hannah gave up what was most precious; dedicated it to God and allowed God to use it.
Can we do the same?

Dedicate ourselves to God's purposes.

Dedicate this place to God's purposes.

Allow God to use us and what we have without any of our conditions getting in the way?
That's our challenge!

Remember along the way, that we have a God who does surprising things, who seems to turn the world on its head. Are we ready for that? Are we ready for Footscray Baptist to bear fruit? Amen.