

“Cultivating Generosity”

Rev. Dr. Leah Fowler

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Stewardship Sunday, Presbyterian Church in Leonia

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Hebrews 10:15-18

1 Samuel 1:4-20

Sometimes, I cry when I baptize babies. It has certainly happened here at this font. It has happened in other churches as well. My tears don't often spill out of my eyes, but my heart is spilling over because the sacrament is such a powerful experience of God, a testimony to the Holy Spirit at work in the changing church, and a reminder of Jesus offering a well of living water, that will never leave the life of the one baptised. I cry at older children and adult baptisms too; they are especially moving. But there was a time when my tears of sacred joy at a baptism intermingled with tears of longing and lament.

In the time when Chris and I were trying to grow our family, there were many disappointments. There were days when I had no words for prayer, only tears. Although Presbyterians do not follow saints per se, I would pray to Hannah to intercede for me-- figuring that a woman who had gone through such disappointment may be of more help to me. But who knows? Actually, I imagine there have been times God has desired to give birth to something that could not yet be conceived. In fact, it is likely that God is trying to give birth to something in us, through our church, right now.

Let's consider Hannah, who each year walked the 12 distance from her hometown to the temple at Shiloh, with her husband Elkanah and his other wife, Penninah. Penninah, who had children, used to taunt Hannah-- especially on their journeys to the House of the Lord. It takes some kind of faith to keep a life of prayer, when the people going to pray with you treat you poorly! As for Hannah's husband, he would give her a double portion of food-- as if that could satisfy the empty feelings she experienced-- and tried to explain to her that he was better than 10 sons. Maybe if it had been more contemporary times, both these women would realize their worth was not in their wombs; they would smash the patriarchy; and they would together become prophets to lead Israel from its lost ways. Then again, truthfully, it wasn't just the past; even today there are people living under similarly painful dynamics that pit women against each other.

How many years did Hannah return to pray and offer sacrifices to a God who wouldn't answer her? I wonder if there was something significant about someone else hearing her prayer-- or more aptly, witnessing her wordless tears and concluding that she must have drunk too much wine, then engaging her in conversation-- that gave power to her prayers? In the House of the Lord, Eli hears Hannah's longing, he listens and validates. No longer on her own before God, Hannah finds a new power and gives birth to it.

There was a power to the time, as well. It was a time ripe with need for holy intervention. Although our bibles list Ruth as the book just before 1 and 2 Samuel, the book that comes chronologically before 1 Samuel is Judges. The Judges were the tribal leaders who led different sections of Israel. But by the end of Judges, their leadership had fallen into chaos. There was no moral or political unity in the land. Even the priesthood was corrupted. Though Eli was a righteous priest, we hear of others who the bible describes as scoundrels, who treat the offerings of The Lord with contempt. The last words of Judges tell us ominously that “all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”

It is into this world that Hannah prays to bring forth a child. Not just for herself; Hannah knows on some level that this child is also for the community, and will have a role in God’s larger unfolding history. She makes a vow in her prayers that she will dedicate her child to the service of God as a Nazirite-- one who doesn’t drink or cut their hair, showing a life set apart for holy purpose. And indeed, the child Samuel, her son, grows up in the House of The Lord, under the priest Eli’s instruction. As a boy he hears the voice of God, and from there he uses his voice to shape the future of Israel: as king maker and king breaker, as wise prophet and speaker of hard truths.

In the landscape of our history of prayer to God, we see repetition. We see our holy spaces rise and fall: an Ark for one era, a House of the Lord in Shiloh in another era, a Temple in Jerusalem, which rises twice and falls twice; even the people who find our church today often come from other places of worship, some of which have crumbled in significance as the Spirit gives way to new expressions of faith.

Like Israel in the time of Hannah, we are in a period where a sense of unity in purpose and common care can be hard to find. People decide for themselves what is right, becoming their own experts in medicine and science, political conspiracies, and more. Don’t get me wrong. I pride myself in being a strong, independent-minded woman. But at the end of the day, I know I am utterly alone if I cannot carry the weight of my hopes and fears, my search for moral goodness, a care that extends beyond myself, and my prayers-- even when they go unanswered-- into a community that together seeks a higher purpose than what we can come up with on our own.

Church is a place of encouragement. It’s a place where Jesus, with the very flesh of his bodiliness, holds the curtain open so that we can know we are in the presence of God. It’s a place where, as Hebrews states, we “provoke one another to love and good deeds.” It’s a place that cultivates generosity, filling with life what was once considered barren.

I have been amazed that amidst all the loss and isolation of the pandemic, this church is a place where I have continued to see life. I have witnessed rebirth in people who have made significant life changes. People who were never part of us before have found us during this time of barrenness, some of them worshipping faithfully each week online. We have seen the remarkable generosity of volunteers, like the ones who teach our church kids with creativity and care, whether on a zoom screen or out of a church in a box, or in person. Early on in the

pandemic, people gave generously to support other church members who were struggling financially. Others did grocery runs for people who could not get out. Every time the pandemic presented us with something that we did not have, the church presented what we do have. And that generosity is contagious; for example, once Trish started volunteering for tech, Keyla and Suzanne started showing up too, ready to learn. This year with our matching pledges, so far we have received 6 offers to match new pledges, and 2 more verbal commitments. And we already have multiple first time pledges. We have regulars at our Monday night vespers group, and sometimes we pray with great joy, and sometimes we pray with tears like Hannah's. We were sad to lose the meal ministry of Loaves and Fishes, at least temporarily, out of need to protect the health of our mostly elderly volunteers as well as those coming for lunch. However, we now have regular volunteers committed to TWO additional meal outreach programs in our community: Our Community Dinner Table and Family Promise. Our church is known in the community as a place of prayer. In the past month, I have been contacted specifically for prayer from two different neighbors who belong to other faiths besides Christianity. Here in this church, we know that our gifts are not only for ourselves; God's generosity requires that we share without expecting anything in return.

The church is not perfect. It will sometimes disappoint. One day, the stones that form these walls will crumble. In a sense, I guess they already have, when we found ourselves unable to safely gather in a building due to the pandemic. But we have seen the Church as the body of Christ is more than any building. And the Spirit is before us, not just behind us in the past; she is beckoning us into a future that continues to be reborn.

We are of a faith that knows, like Hannah, the empty womb. We know longing, lament, and unanswered prayers. But we are also a faith that knows of an empty tomb-- a risen Christ who beckons us towards resurrection, even when things seem hopeless. We catch a glimpse of resurrection each Sunday we come together, in person or on screen. It's too much to believe on our own. But when the Spirit draws us together, it becomes so. Thanks be to God.