

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"Hannah's Song"

Scripture: 1 Samuel 1:9-11, 19-20; 2:1-10

Rev. Steve Filyk

October 25, 2020

Songs/Hymns: #434 -- For the beauty of the earth, #749 Be still my soul, Blessed be your name (Matt and Beth Redman), Everlasting God (Brenton Brown and Ken Riley)

On Facebook you will find a group called
"The Presbyterian Church in Canada".

It is an unofficial page where Presbyterians
From across the land can share news,
Share resources, and engage in discussion and debate.

This fall, a past moderator of our church, the Rev. Peter Bush,
[who I believe is situated in Manitoba]
wrote a series of posts about the changing numbers in the PCC
over the last twenty years.

Every year our congregation submits a statistical report
Which catalogues all sorts of numbers
around attendance and spending.
This data is then compiled
with other congregations across Canada,

And is made available both digitally and in print.

Peter looked at those statistics at the beginning of the new millennia
And compared it with the numbers from today.
From that data, he made some significant observations
That were shared in eight different posts.

As you might have imagined,
The numbers aren't that encouraging.

“At the turn of the millennium (1999)
there were 989 congregations in the PCC
with a combined membership of 134,683.

[Twenty years later] there were 821 congregations in the PCC
with a combined membership of 79,961.

That is a membership decline of almost 55,000 over 20 years...
2,500 plus per year...

[To make these number more comprehensible consider that]
In 2000, the average was 136 members per congregation;
in 2020, the average was 97 members per congregation.

[This means that over the last 20 years there are]
39 fewer members in each congregation, on average...

That means 39 fewer people to potentially be in worship.
39 fewer people to serve on the Board of Managers,
to sing in the choir, to serve on committees,
to help with congregational dinners,
to engage in outreach projects...”ⁱ

This goes a long way in explaining volunteer fatigue and burnout.

But these aren't the statistics I found most troubling.

The statistics I found most troubling
have to do with our Sunday Schools.

"In 2000 there were 28,120 children registered
in the Sunday Schools of the PCC.

Twenty years later there were 15,055 children
connected to the congregations of the PCC.

That is a drop of 46.5%.

[In] 2020, 1 in 6 PCC congregations had no children
(that is 136 congregations).

Further, 70 additional congregations had 1 or 2 children
in Sunday School."

Bush notes that the absence of children
Is heartbreaking to most congregations.

"The lack of children quietly eats away
at a congregation's hope for the future.

Members look around and know they are the last generation—
and a sadness seeps into the life of the congregation.

Families are signs that there is hope for the church –
that there is a new generation
being introduced to Jesus..."ⁱⁱ

Last week I saw another post in that group on Facebook,
from another minister, this time in Ontario.

He wrote:

“Hey old PYPS peeps:

I just witnessed the closing of what was apparently last chapter
of PYPS [Presbytery Young People’s Society]
across Canada.

Thank you for all the amazing memories,
faith encouragement and relationships!”ⁱⁱⁱ

It is worth celebrating an organisation
That encouraged the faith of Presbyterian youth across Canada.
But there is also something very tragic about its demise.

The numbers of our children are shrinking.
And the youth are nowhere to be found.

Well if you didn’t come here downcast,
By now you are probably quite depressed.

But there is Good News.

The Good News is that the Bible has lots to say
to those who are barren,
and to those who are losing hope.

Today we are making a huge leap in our survey of the Old Testament.
Two weeks ago we were with the nation of Israel in the desert.

Today in our readings, that same nation,
after the death of a generation,
Has made it to the Promised Land.

But while God has given them rules to live by
They continue to ignore these rules and fall into bondage
With their neighbors.

And so God sends a series of judges to rescue them
And call them back to faithfulness.

But this pattern of forgetfulness and faithlessness continues.

If we set aside the book of Ruth,
The last historical note about the nation
Is that “In those days Israel had no king;
everyone did as they saw fit.”^{iv}

The nation of Israel is barren, lacking the leadership,
To keep it from lawlessness and faithlessness.

Within this broader story,
Today we encounter the story of Hannah:
a story of a barren individual.

If you read the surrounding passage
You will learn that Hannah has a co-wife
And that co-wife has had children with Hannah’s husband.

In a time and culture where women were valued
For their ability to produce offspring
Her co-wife's children made it clear that Hannah was deficient.

Hannah's hopeless infertility
was a burden that she seemed destined to bear forever.
And her co-wife wouldn't let her forget it.

She continually tormented Hannah, in particular
When Hannah went to worship.
Could it be that she knew what Hannah was praying for?
She tormented Hannah, until Hannah stopped eating.

Hannah suffered from her co-wife,
And she suffered from her own barrenness.
But Hannah didn't suffer alone,

The Bible tells us that:

"In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly."^v
Hannah brought her pain and grief to the Lord.
Hannah cries out to God for help.

PAUSE

Bringing our concerns to God in prayer
May seem like the obvious thing to do
In difficult situations.

But even those raised in the church don't always respond this way.

We live in an educated and wealthy culture.

We are used to seeing results when we exercise our 'agency'.

When we can't reach our goals individually,
we call in the experts who can.

But there are limits to what we can accomplish
with all our wealth and knowledge.

How many billions have been spent on COVID?
How many experts have been recruited
to solve this problem?

Yet we still haven't figured it out.

We don't always turn to God because we are trusting in our own power.
And we aren't always sure that God is involved in our world.

While we call ourselves Christians, and say we believe in the Bible,
Our theology seems more influenced by Deism than Scripture.
Yes, we do believe that God created all things,
But we aren't completely sure God's still involved
In our lives and the world around us

In our minds God is like a clock-maker.
God wound up the world, set it in motion
And then walked away.

As a minister I see these approaches
In my own life and in the life of our denomination.

We consult experts.

We determine to work harder.

We overlook God's power and God's concern.

But not Hannah.

The Bible tells us that:

"In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the LORD, weeping bitterly."^{vi}

Recognising that in this situation,

she can do nothing,

Hannah puts her future in the hands

of a God who can do anything.

In a piece of the narrative

That was skipped over we are told that

"[Hannah] went her way and ate something,
and her face was no longer downcast."^{vii}

Hannah finds peace

Because she is trusting God with her future.

PAUSE

The narrative continues

Telling us that after worship the following day

They headed home,

That Elkanah made love to Hannah,

And that “the Lord remember her.”^{viii}
The Lord remembered her!

Hannah became pregnant,
And gave birth to a son she named Samuel.

In the chapter that follows Hannah, sings about the God
Who disrupts life, rewarding the downtrodden faithful
With strength and food
and fertility and honor.^{ix}

Note that this isn’t a song in praise of her new baby.
It is a song in praise of the God who remembered her
And created a future where there was no hope.

God created a future for Hannah.
But at the same time God created a future for Israel.

The birth of this baby isn’t just a blessing for Hannah.
But represents hope for a barren nation.

This baby will be a ruler and king-maker
who will usher in the greatest era
In Israel’s history.

PAUSE

Let’s go back to those statistics I shared
at the beginning of this sermon.

“In 2000 there were 28,120 children
registered in the Sunday Schools of the PCC.

Twenty years later there were 15,055 children
connected to the congregations of the PCC.
That is a drop of 46.5%.”^x

From what we can see the PCC is becoming a barren denomination.
Our churches are closing.

Our churches are aging.

Our churches have few kids.

We have exercised our agency.

We have brought in the experts and tried working harder.

But as time has passed our barrenness
is only more pronounced.

And so we start thinking that there really is no future.

The only thing we can do is give thanks for the past.

But could it be

Could it be that the Lord is waiting to hear from us?

Waiting for us to cry out, to weep and wail,

And ask God for a future?

As one commentator points out

“we often think of the world as a closed, static place
that relentlessly moves along on its own.

Hanna, however, speaks of the world as the place
where God is both willing and able to intervene
in order to transform what God creates, including human lives.

[And] if an infertile woman can have a child,
who knows what else God can and will do?”^{xi}

ⁱ Peter Bush “An Overview of the Numbers—the Presbyterian Church in Canada”

ⁱⁱ Ibid

ⁱⁱⁱ The Rev. Greg Davidson in Facebook post on October 16, 2020

^{iv} Judges 21:25 NIV

^v 1 Samuel 1: 10 NIV

^{vi} 1 Samuel 1: 10 NIV

^{vii} 1 Samuel 1:18 NIV

^{viii} 1 Samuel 1:19 NIV

^{ix} See 1 Samuel 2:4-5, 8

^x Peter Bush “An Overview of the Numbers—the Presbyterian Church in Canada”

^{xi} Doug Bratt “1 Samuel 2:1-10” November 9, 2015 cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/proper-28b-2/?term=%221%20Samuel%202:1-10%22