

Kerrisdale Presbyterian Church

“God Remembers Hannah”

Scripture: 1 Samuel 1:1-20; 2:1-10; Psalm 113

Hymns: Oh worship the King 313, Give Thanks (insert), Blest are they 624, For all the Faithful Women (insert, TUNE: Aurelia)

October 16, 2016

Rev. Steve Filyk

Many of you read the our award-winning
Denominational magazine: the Presbyterian Record.
And so you’ve probably heard the sad news.

After 140 years of service,
The Record will close its doors.
That’s right our magazine is shutting down.

In their farewell announcement,
David Harris, the magazine’s publisher and editor,
confides that despite generous donations
“the magazine simply couldn’t transition quickly enough
from a subscription-based model
to a philanthropically financed model.”ⁱ

The announcement further describes
how the Record’s decline
Is intimately connected
With the decline of our denomination,

Noting “Over the past 25 years,
readership has been declining at an average rate
of 2,000 subscribers a year,

while the denomination itself
—the magazine’s sole market—
has been declining at a rate of about 2,800 members a year.”ⁱⁱ

In response to the news,
one on-line commentator noted, rather pessimistically:

“So – approximately 91,000 members left
in the Presbyterian Church in Canada
and the numbers are declining about 2,800 per year [?].

The loss of the Record is just the beginning.
If the decline continues
I can expect to see the end of my denomination
within my lifetime.”ⁱⁱⁱ

Today we continue in our journey
Through the Narrative Lectionary.
In this journey we have moved geographically
While leaping over several Biblical books.

The people of Israel
Who had been wandering in the wilderness,
After escaping Egypt,
Have finally made it to their destination:
the Promised Land, Canaan.

But their place in the land remains tenuous,
As they fail to conquer all the previous inhabitants.
And though God provides them with a series of leaders,
The nation quickly skids
into a “downward moral and religious spiral”.^{iv}

The book of Judges ends on an ominous note,
Saying “In those days there was no king in Israel;
[And] All the people did what was right in their own eyes.”^v
They all did what they saw fit!

It is in this setting, that we hear the story of Hannah.
Hannah is a woman who lives in a plural marriage.
This isn’t a happy arrangement,
for unlike her husband’s prolific partner
she has no children to call her own.

As one commentator notes,
“It was a terrible fate to be barren in a patriarchal world.
It was bad enough if one were the only wife;

Lack of children, after all,
could be the fault of the husband.

But for Hannah the taunts and false pity
Would have been unbearable.”^{vi}

Without any children, Hannah is persecuted.
Without any children, Hannah has no future.
Without any children, Hannah feels god-forsaken.

Of course this isn't just a story about Hannah.
Hannah is Israel in microcosm:
Victimised and abandoned.
Together they seem to have no hope.

But as the story develops,
We soon realise
That Hannah has had enough of her situation.

She refuses to lie to herself, saying:
“I'm not into kids.
I don't want to change diapers anyway!”^{vii}

She refuses to sink into bitterness asking:
“Why do I deserve this?”
Or complaining “God really hates me!”

She refuses to be stoic,
To accept this situation as her cross to bear:
*God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change...*^{viii}

Instead of embracing resignation
She heads on over to the tabernacle
where she offers up all her anguish, anger,
And disappointment to God.

When a priest walks in on her praying,
He thinks she is drunk,
He berates her for being intoxicated.

She boldly corrects him
Saying between tears and sniffles
that she has been pouring her heart out to God.

He sends her on her way.
He sends her on her way with a blessing.

She leaves remarkably transformed, at peace.

Hannah goes home when the pilgrimage is over.
And we are told something very important:
“the Lord remembered her”.^{ix}

The Lord remembered her
And her barren womb is opened.
She conceives and gives birth to a son,
Who she names Samuel.

Now for someone who has struggled like Hannah,
This gift is truly staggering.
The only way she can express her joy
Is to burst into song:

“My heart exults in the Lord;
my strength is exalted in my God.
My mouth derides my enemies,
because I rejoice in my victory.”^x

You may be surprised to realise
That this song, this psalm,
Is understood to be a psalm of “national thanksgiving”.^{xi}

It speaks of an incredible upending,
Where the Lord “raises the poor from the dust...
To make them sit with princes.”
Where “the wicked shall be cut off in darkness”
But the Lord will “guard the feet of his faithful ones...”^{xii}

It speaks not only of opened wombs,
But the emergence of an anointed king!

This song is about Hannah's son,
 And yet it is also about Hannah's nation.
 The Lord's 'remembering' of Hannah
 is a sign for everyone.

God has not forsaken Israel.
 No, God has given them a future.
 The Lord "will reorder the social reality...
 in the interest of those too poor and too weak
 to make their own way."^{xiii}

God will bless his people with a new leader,
 A king.

Keeping with her vows,
 When Samuel is weened,
 Hannah brings Samuel back to Shiloh,
 To serve with Eli at the Tabernacle.

And by God's design Samuel will not only be a prophet
 But will be a king-breaker and a king-maker,
 Ushering in a new era in the land.

Most of us don't have a lot of hope
 For our future as a denomination
 Or even a congregation.

Maybe that's why we're always thinking of the past
 Always telling old stories.
 It's too hard to confront ourselves with the present
 Let alone contemplate the future.

I was a commissioner at June's General Assembly.
 To be honest it didn't make me very hopeful.

Much of our meeting was spent with trying to 'manage'
 The decline we have entered into.
 We heard plans for downsizing.

We heard a plea from the Record.
 We made decisions to bolster
 the ailing Pension Fund.

Things looked pretty desperate
 And yet there was a certain lack of desperation.

I mean there was no-one tearing their clothes
 Sitting in sack-cloth and ashes.

And there was no-one pouring out their soul,
 With tears and a runny nose.

Our evenings weren't marked by prayer meetings,
 But socialising with scotch and cigars.
 If someone complained about public intoxication
 They might have been right on the mark.

Now don't get me wrong.
 I enjoy scotch and an occasion cigar,
 But it felt like we were playing the fiddle
 While the city burned.

Maybe for those of greater faith
 This was an expression of trust in God's sovereignty.
 I think it is expressed our resignation.
 Resignation in the face of incredible difficulties,
 And great fears for our future.

Maybe we could learn from Hannah.
 You see when God acts in this story,
 God's "power is evoked, summoned,
 and triggered by lowly Hannah".^{xiv}

Yesterday I attended Synod,
 Which is the meeting of the Presbyterian church leaders
 In the province.

Our keynote speaker was the pastor of 10th Church,
 The Alliance church in Mt. Pleasant,
 Ken Shigematsu.

Ken told the gathering a story about a family
 That was struggling with a son that was wild,
 A child who had gone off the rails.

At the tender age of 13 the boy
 Was 'borrowing' cars from a neighboring garage
 And bombing around the city at night.
 He was dabbling in drugs,
 And he was also dealing them,
 At his neighborhood school.

His dad was so concerned he took his son
 To the local penitentiary and told him:
 "Son, take a look at your future!"

But even this couldn't scare the kid straight.

His, mom, desperate and broken,
 Went to a church prayer meeting
 And asked the people to pray to God
 On her son's behalf.

She didn't share the details,
 She was too embarrassed.

But some people at the meeting
 promised to pray for this boy.

And by a surprising, gracious act of God,
 T his young man ended up having an encounter with Jesus.
 After that, he slowly began to change.

T hat young man, we later learned,
 Was our speaker;
 he was sharing his autobiography.

T he man who was our speaker,
 Who had been a catalyst for a famous-turnaround
 At a dying congregation,
 Was that kid who stole cars.

Some have painted his story, and the story of 10th Church
 As another story of great men,
 Doing great things.

But as he told it,
 His story was really about a desperate woman
 Who turned to God in prayer.

And a God who remembered her.

I wonder if there are any modern-day Hannah's
 Among us.

Don't stop praying for your families.
 Who knows what God will accomplish for them.
 Don't stop praying for your church.
 It might be that our best years are ahead.

Our story teaches us
 T hat God is waiting for us
 T o grow weary of our barrenness.

When we turn to God in our need and desperation
 God will open up an incredible new future.

Amen.

ⁱ "Goodbye to the Record" *Presbyterian Record* October 2016

ⁱⁱ *Ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ Comment by Janey on September 30, 2016 "Goodbye to the Record" September 26, 2016 <http://presbyterianrecord.ca/2016/09/26/goodbye-to-the-record/>

^{iv} see notes *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* 3rd edition, Michael D. Coogan editor, 353 (Hebrew Bible)

^v Judges 21:25 NRSV

^{vi} John C. Holbert Twenty-sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Year B; 1 Samuel 1:4-10”

The Lectionary Commentary: the Old Testament and Acts, 166

^{vii} Jim Cymbala “The Power of Desperate Prayer” November 8, 2014

www.faithgateway.com/power-desperate-prayer/#.WAFao5Mrlyk

^{viii} The Serenity Prayer is the common name for a prayer authored by the American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr “Serenity Prayer” *Wikipedia*

^{ix} 1 Samuel 1:20 NRSV

^x 1 Samuel 2:1 NRSV

^{xi} see notes *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* 3rd edition, Michael D. Coogan editor, 401 (Hebrew Bible)

^{xii} see 1 Samuel 2:8,9 NRSV

^{xiii} Walter Brueggemann *First and Second Samuel* 20

^{xiv} Walter Brueggemann *First and Second Samuel* 15