

“An Act of Bold Faith”  
 Sermon by the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson  
 1 Samuel 1:4-28  
 November 17, 2024 – 26<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

“Years ago, I was on [a cross-town] bus in [New York City], in evening rush hour, in January, in the sleeting wind and rain,” writes author Elizabeth Gilbert.<sup>1</sup>

A crowded bus. Bitter cold. Traffic gridlocked. That’s all we need to know to imagine this scene. Everyone on the bus is weary after a full day’s work. Their feet hurt; their eyes are tired. They just wanna be home. But the bus is crawling across town. It would have been faster to walk, but the weather is too gosh-darn awful. So, they’re piled into a rolling tin can, sweating inside layers that will barely keep them warm enough once they get off. They’re all grumpy—each and every one of ‘em. A busload of human misery.

“When we reached 10<sup>th</sup> Ave., the bus driver made a surprising announcement,” Gilbert continues.

*“Ladies and Gentlemen,” [he said]. “We are now nearing the Hudson River. I’m going to ask you to do me a favor. When you get off the bus, I’m going to hold out my hand. As you walk past me, I want you to drop your troubles into the palm of my hand. I’ll take your troubles for you, and when I drive past the river, I’ll throw them in ...”*

“The whole bus—the whole grumpy lot of us—broke into laughter,” Elizabeth Gilbert remembers. “... Some of us [...] even shed a tear or two. And one by one, as we filed off the bus, we dropped our troubles into the palm of this good man’s hand, and we stepped off the bus with smiles on our faces.”

There is a profound grace in being able to turn over your troubles, to leave them in the outstretched hand of one who has offered to carry that burden.

We see this, too, in the story of Hannah—the bereft but bold woman at the center of today’s text. Hannah is one of my favorite figures in all of Scripture, which is why I feel compelled to tell her story every time the Lectionary sets it before us. It’s a story the church has often overlooked because, on the surface, it’s just a domestic tale. And institutions—both church and society’s—have a way of dismissing domestic tales as unimportant. But clearly, the biblical writers weighed her plight differently. Which is why they anchor the account of Israel’s fledgling monarchy in this story of a barren woman.

As we learn at the beginning of this narrative, Hannah has no children because, “The Lord [has] closed her womb.” It is a singular sorrow to long for a child and to find—month-after-month, year-after-year—one’s hopes dashed. Even with the marvels of modern medicine, too many couples still endure this grief.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Gilbert, post from October 23, 2014, [www.elizabethgilbert.com](http://www.elizabethgilbert.com)

And, for women, the sense of loss is often complicated by the expectations society still places on us, on our bodies.

In the ancient world, societal factors would have compounded this grief. Without a scientific understanding of reproduction, people assumed infertility was always the wife's fault. And, because they couldn't explain barrenness any other way, they erroneously chalked it up to divine disfavor. To make matters worse, women in ancient Israel *needed* children—sons, specifically—because *sons* could provide for a woman after her husband died. Bearing children was a matter of security. Without sons, a woman would have to rely on the generosity of her community. So, Hannah has many reasons to mourn. Not only is she grieving her inability to bring forth life. She is grieving the precariousness of life.

Barrenness is hard enough to bear. But Hannah's circumstances are made worse because she is isolated in her emptiness. Her rival, Peninnah—Elkanah's second wife—taunts Hannah. Year after year, she provokes her as the household makes its yearly pilgrimage to Shiloh. And year after year, Hannah weeps and refuses to eat. Elkanah is of little help. Even though he loves Hannah, he doesn't understand the reality of her circumstances, the depth of her sorrow. So, he diminishes his wife's grief: "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" His words may have proved more comforting had he said to Hannah, "*You* are more to *me* than ten sons." But that insight is lost to him.

Hannah could have simply swallowed her sorrow. Or retaliated against her rival. But she does neither. Instead, she rebukes the provocations of Peninnah and refuses the half-comforts of her husband and seeks solace *outside* her household. Hannah goes up to the house of the Lord.

In her distress, this bereft and broken woman pours out her soul to God. She lifts the desires of her heart, asking the Lord to look upon her misery and to satisfy her longing. Hannah's prayer is a plea and a promise; if God but grants this gift, she vows to dedicate her son to God. But, more than that, Hannah's prayer is a lament. It is an authentic expression of grief; it is an honest account of her lived experience—an experience that does not reflect the promises of God.

In this way, Hannah's prayer is not unlike the psalms of lament, which protest the disparity between the realities of the world and God's intention for the world. These psalms defiantly declare that the way things are is not the way things *are meant to be*, that the brokenness of the present age belies God's vision of wholeness.

To those on the outside, such lament may appear an act of *unfaith*. To those on the outside, it may seem that doubt has set in, that the mourner has lost faith in God's promises or providence. But, as biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann writes of the lament psalms, it is actually "an act of bold faith" to lay your grief before the Lord. For prayers of lament express trust in God, the one "who is present in, the one who

is participating in” even the most desperate circumstance. Prayers of lament are acts of defiant hope because they insist that nothing, including our trials and troubles, can separate us from the love of God.<sup>2</sup>

Hannah goes to the house of the Lord and lifts her lament. Yet, even here, she initially finds her concerns dismissed, her grief diminished. Eli, the priest, assumes she is drunk and tells her to stop making a spectacle of herself. But Hannah persists. She rejects his scorn; she refuses shame. She stands firm. “No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled,” she counters. “Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.” Upon hearing Hannah’s response, Eli relents. He blesses her and sends her forth in peace. “Then,” the text tells us, “her countenance was sad no longer.”

Though her circumstances have not yet changed, Hannah does find peace in this moment. Her grief becomes lighter. Her sorrow slips away. Not because God has *answered* her prayer, but because God has *heard* her prayer. It’s as if God has held out a hand, and said, “I’ll take your troubles for you.” And Hannah, has laid her grief before the Lord, trusting that God is present and participating in her life. In her faith and faithfulness, Hannah believes that the Lord is *also* faithful, that the God of Heaven is attentive to her lament, even as the Almighty works in a mysterious way to bring forth new life.

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There is an episode of the BBC series *Call the Midwife* that honors the importance of lament.<sup>3</sup> This show follows a group of nurse midwives who care for the families of London’s East End during the 1950s and 60s. In this episode, a midwife named Shelagh tends to Gloria, a woman who is preparing to deliver her first child. But this is not her first pregnancy. Far from it. Shelagh and Gloria actually met when they were both on bedrest in a hospital ward, due to complications with previous pregnancies. Shelagh carried hers to term and delivered a healthy baby boy. Gloria lost that pregnancy, along with six others. Now, for the first time, Gloria is nearing her ninth month and preparing to welcome a baby with joy rather than sorrow.

But the labor is progressing slowly, and Shelagh can see that Gloria is struggling. So, Shelagh makes a surprising suggestion: she invites her to recall each of the pregnancies she lost. Gloria has never been encouraged to talk openly about the pain of those losses. Others have told her to put them out of her mind. They’ve dismissed or diminished her grief; they’ve suggested Gloria should simply swallow her sorrow. And the bereaved woman pretended that she had. But, all this time, it has weighed heavy on her heart.

“That’s a lot of not talking, and a lot of pain,” Shelagh acknowledges. So, Gloria tells the midwife about each child she lost—the ages they’d be now; how Gloria pictures them in her mind’s eye; the kinds of

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<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 52.

<sup>3</sup> *Call the Midwife*, Series 10, Holiday Special (2020).

mischief she imagines they'd make. And Shelagh listens attentively to each memory. She holds space for an authentic expression of grief, for an honest account of Gloria's lived experience. She holds space for lament. It's as if Shelagh is holding out her hand, inviting Gloria to drop her troubles into the midwife's open palm.

After Gloria recalls each of her losses, Shelagh lifts up the names of the children that Gloria has held silently in heart: Brian, David, Peter, Ruth, Rebecca, John, Anthony. And, soon after, Gloria welcomes the gift of new life— a healthy baby girl.

Even with joy imminent, Gloria needed space to lament. Rather than the half-comforts of well-meaning friends, who told her to put those losses out of her mind, Gloria needed the comfort that comes with honoring the depths of grief. Shelagh knew this. The midwife knew that naming her loss was key to Gloria's capacity to make space for the gift of new life.

Lament is often woven into stories of joy. Perhaps lament *needs* to be voiced in order to realize joy fully.

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For Hannah, the story does end in joy. God grants her the desires of her heart. She receives the gift of new life through the birth of a child. Hannah wraps her son in her love, caring for Samuel until the day he is weaned. And then, she pours out her love for God by lending her son to the Lord. Immediately after delivering Samuel to the temple, Hannah pours out her soul once again, this time in a song of praise. For she knows that God will prove faithful to her people, just as God proved faithful to her. And Samuel, as a servant of the Lord, will participate in this holy work. Hannah trusts that God will use her son to bring about a new world, gracing her people with the gift of new life.

As I watch Hannah give to God the son who embodies the deepest longings of her heart, I have to wonder: Would this mother have placed her son in God's hands had she not first placed her troubles in God's hands? Would this second act of faithfulness have been possible without that first act of faithfulness?

Sometimes lament is necessary as we wait, as we prepare to participate in the new life God is bringing forth.

I cannot resist telling the story of Hannah because this "domestic tale" reminds us of God's particular concern for all of us—for each individual, for each household. And Hannah's decision to present herself before the Lord invites us to place our troubles in the hands of God. Her prayer reminds us that, when our *experience* of the world does not match God's *intention* for the world, lament is an act of bold faith. If that is all this story teaches us, that is enough.

But Hannah's story is also more than the story of one woman's suffering, of one woman's faithfulness, of one woman's joy. It is the story of a community's suffering—of a community waiting for, longing for, praying for God to prove faithful.

The biblical writers anchor the account of Israel's kings in this story of a barren woman because Hannah's grief echoes the nation's suffering. Just like the household of Elkanah, where one wife provokes another, the nation is plagued by division. In fact, at this point in Israel's history, the tribes are mired in civil war; they lack leaders who are faithful to God's covenant, so the nation is on the brink of collapse. Just like the household of Elkanah, where Hannah's future is insecure, the future of Israel is in doubt.

But, as we see here, their distress is not the end of the story. Because with God, despair is never the end of the story. The biblical writers anchor Israel's history in Hannah's story to remind the covenant community—to remind us—that God proves faithful, even when joy seems impossibly far off. To remind us that God is always working to restore our broken world so that it more closely reflects God's vision for creation.

No matter the cause of our distress—whether we are reeling from a personal plight or a communal crisis, whether we grieve a private trauma or a public tragedy—Hannah's story reminds us that we can lay our grief before the Lord. Sometimes our experience of the world is so far removed from God's intentions for creation that the only faithful act is to pour out our heart's lament, knowing that the One who is always working to bring forth new life is able to hold *all* of life. The Lord holds out a hand to us, inviting us to drop our troubles into the Almighty's palm. And, trusting our good God to hold the lot of them, we can step into the world feeling just a bit lighter. For we know, in the depths of our souls, that the Lord will help us bear our burden until the day when we find the capacity to participate in the new life God is bringing forth. Until the day when we—like Hannah—are able to raise our voices in exuberant praise.