

Birth Pangs

A sermon preached by Rev. Ginger E. Gaines-Cirelli for “A Sermon Every Sunday,” November 14, 2021, The Twenty-Fifth Sunday after Pentecost.

Text: 1 Samuel 1:4-20, (Mark 13:1-8)

Hannah, the central character in our biblical text, is honored by interpreters as a woman of faith, patience, and kindness. She put up with the taunts of her sister-wife and—as far as we know—didn’t retaliate. She put up with her perhaps well-meaning, but clueless husband who seems to have missed the part in ancient economics and society class when it was explained that to be a childless woman meant that you were shamed and considered useless and worthless in the larger society—regardless of a man’s warm feelings toward you. Hannah has gumption—she goes to the temple and prays fervently to God for help and then talks back to the priest, Eli, who wrongly accuses her passion and embodied, demonstrative presence as drunkenness. Hannah *is* an extraordinary woman—to not be a jerk in the face of body-shaming and jealousy, to maintain dignity in suffering, cry out to name the pain of her life, and to exhibit an embodied agency in the face of wrongful accusation and injustice is extraordinary—in any culture or age.

What I don’t want to do today is to add to the pile of interpretations that make Hannah nothing more than a game piece on the board of history, an object lesson for faith, or an example of “pray to the ATM God and miraculously get your heart’s desire” bad theology. In the context of the story, it is true that Hannah’s actions, her vow, and her son Samuel all play an important part in the transition within Israel from one political structure to another, from the age of judges to the monarchy. Israel was vulnerable, with both “church” and “state” in turmoil and lacking good and wise leadership. The turning point is with Hannah—with one who was good and wise and, yes, faithful. She certainly does play an important role in the history of our ancestors in faith.

But before we get to that, we have Hannah in her suffering; then and now—for all sorts of reasons—a woman who wishes to give birth to a child and is unable to do so experiences a sometimes crippling, always deeply unmooring, grief and loss. Before we get to Hannah’s role in history we have this deep grief, her lament; we have her experience of injustice and wrongful accusation, her having to overcome social labels and assumptions to be taken seriously, for her voice to be heard, or her life to be given value and worth. She may be honored today, but in her own day, she was decidedly *not*. Hannah’s experience is—to a significant degree—the experience of so many women across time and culture.

Misogyny—the both subtle and overt prejudice against women—is alive and well in the most intimate of relationships and in dynamics in our professional, public, and political spheres. And yet, as the saying goes, “she persisted.” Hannah persisted. And woman after woman continues to persist in the struggle to be liberated from the life and body-limiting laws and social and religious constructs that would teach and form us to be less than we are, that try to control and shame us, that focus more on what we wear than what we say or do, that make our worth dependent upon something other than being exactly who we are. Hannah was an extraordinary woman even if she hadn’t finally gotten pregnant and given birth to Samuel. She was already an extraordinary woman of kindness and faith and patience and strength. //

What we’re experiencing over the past 5-10 years is pressure being exerted by persistent women and others who have historically not taken center stage. When a female presidential candidate receives 2.8 million more votes than the male opponent, when a black man holds the presidency for eight years, when persistent advocacy results in marriage equality across the land, when

women are stepping into leadership within institutions traditionally dominated by men—in science, finance, church, tech, and synagogue, there is tremendous pressure placed upon the old systems and assumptions and networks.

And the empire will always strike back. Power and privilege and the comfort of the *status quo* are rarely if ever voluntarily surrendered. When those who have been sidelined by prejudice, injustice, and lack of representation don't remain silent but instead cry out in lament and courage to speak truth to power; when they present themselves to serve alongside others as worthy participants in leadership and shared life, the pressure shifts onto those for whom such an experience is not only aggravating but infuriating—in large part because it is such an unfamiliar experience. And rage is rampant right now. We see it all over the place. Unchecked rage can take deadly forms.

All of us—oppressors and oppressed—can be tempted to destructive rage, to react to change and challenge with hurtful speech or bruising actions. Hannah chose a different path. She persisted in faith—not joyfully or blindly or without grief—but with a sense that the God who had led the Israelites out of slavery, through the wilderness, and into a new land, would also be with her in her barren place to lead her into new life.

The Gospel companion to our 1 Samuel text from today's lectionary is from Mark 13. It's a short passage in which Jesus speaks of the "end" times and of many things that will happen as a precursor. Jesus says, "Beware that no one leads you astray... When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation

will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birth pangs.” (Mk 13:5-8)

What strikes me is that the Mark text was likely written around year 60 of the Common Era. It’s *old*. And there have been wars and wars and wars and countless earthquakes and famines in all those years... The birth pangs are lasting a very long time. How long did Hannah wait? She had no guarantee that anything would change in her lifetime, that her circumstance would change physically. The Israelites didn’t know how long they would need to wander through the wilderness between slavery and promised land. We won’t know the final duration of any moment of personal suffering or struggle or grief. We don’t know how long the social pressure and turmoil we’re experiencing in America right now will last. We don’t know how long the COVID pandemic will last.

The only thing we know is that God is yet at work. The collect in the United Methodist morning prayer liturgy says, “New every morning is your love, great God of light, and all day long you are working for good in the world.” And because of that, we also pray that God will “Stir up in us a desire” to serve God, to live peacefully with our neighbors, and to devote each day to Jesus Christ, our Lord. This is the persistence that comes through faith, through hope, through the love that fuels us to keep pressing on regardless of the obstacles or setbacks.

In January of 2016 Valerie Kaur, a Sikh activist and lawyer, spoke at an interfaith “watchnight” service that was organized to respond to a series of hate crimes. Her core image speaks directly to our texts today. She said: “What if this darkness is not the darkness of the tomb, but the

darkness of the womb? What if our America is not dead but a country that is waiting to be born? What if the story of America is one long labor? What if all of our grandfathers and grandmothers are standing behind us now, those who survived occupation and genocide, slavery and Jim Crow, detentions and political assault? What if they are whispering in our ears ‘You are brave?’ What if this is our nation’s greatest transition? What does the midwife tell us to do? Breathe. And then? Push. Because if we don’t push we will die. If we don’t push our nation will die. Tonight we will breathe. Tomorrow we will labor in love...”¹

Our ancestor Hannah is a progenitor of this kind of speech and faith and vision. Standing in that stream of faith, we can boldly proclaim that God is like a midwife at our side and, come what may, she’s not going anywhere; God the midwife is right here coaxing and soothing us, challenging us to push through the pain in order to receive the new life that is available. God, the midwife, is holding us, the world, and all its people in her strong, capable hands, groaning with us as we hurt and grieve and fear, steadfastly urging us to choose life instead of death, gentleness instead of violence, justice instead of greed, hope instead of despair. God, the midwife, pushes us to change in ways that will allow new life to be born in the world. God, the midwife speaks words of encouragement, reminding us of how strong we are, how beautiful, how beloved, how important.

Having faith in a loving, steadfast, ever-present, midwife God doesn’t mean that we will get the outcome we desire; it doesn’t mean we won’t fear or doubt or be anxious or suffer. But it does allow us to bring all of those things into the larger vision of God’s future. And when we do that, our suffering is given some meaning, our hopes are given content and shape, and we are

reminded of who we are and what we can do: namely, we are children of God who are entrusted with giving birth to God's love in our own lives, in our communities, in our world. No matter how long the birth pangs last. May God grant us grace to do it. Amen.

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¹ <https://speakola.com/ideas/valerie-kaur-interfaith-watch-night-2016>