

Hannah's Shoes 1 Samuel 1:1-20

Hannah is almost a fairy-tale princess. Her prince charming, Elkanah, loved her deeply and provided for her abundantly. She was the favorite wife; a blessing in a day when having more than one wife was common for wealthy men. She seemed to have it all. Yet, Hannah felt only sorrow and pain.

How many times does that happen? Friends think we ought be happy; even we think we should be satisfied. Yet, grief and suffering are our experience. The sadness can seem overwhelming, matter how wonderful the rest of our lives may be. We cry out to God, the only one who understands the deep longing of our hearts, the deep disappointment of our lives.

Hannah cried out in anguish because she was barren; no children would ever call her "Mother." Barrenness is still with us today. Friends and family members struggle with wanting a child that cannot be conceived. Often, the struggle is a secret one, where people can cry only to God in their frustration.

In the midst of her anguish, Hannah turned her problem over to God. In an incredible display of faith, she "let go and let God." Hannah was not one to think that God would simply kiss the wound and make it better. Hannah's faith ran deeper. For no matter what happened, Hannah continued to worship and praise God. Hannah's trauma would not allow her to live her daily life as if nothing had happened, but she could offer her life and her prayers to the God.

Having the experience of knowing that there is nothing we can do about our situation, we can admire Hannah even more deeply for going to the temple to pray.

Even there, she was misunderstood. The priest thought she was drunk and out of line. Nevertheless, Hannah persisted in her faith, insisting on hope. Her faith and hope sustained her through the desolate years of barrenness.

Yes, her prayer was answered—she had a baby boy whom she dedicated to the temple. But, that's not always the way the story ends. My granddaughter, Etienne, once said to me while I was reading to her, "***I only like stories with happy endings.***" Don't we all? But too many times in the face of hopelessness, there are no fairy-tale endings. And even when dreams come true, the reality often means a lot of hard work and sacrifice.

So, how do we find faith in a world that's less than perfect? How do we find hope when we are faced with hopelessness? Hannah's hope had a depth and broadness that went beyond fairy-tale dreams. Her hope anticipated joy—not necessarily a perfect ending. Ultimately, Hannah was not disappointed. Hannah knew that not all dreams come true in precisely the way we dream them.

Maria Housden writes in her book "*Hanna's Gift*" of her 3-year-old daughter Hanna and her last year of life. Hannah died of cancer. In the book she tells of a worship service for Hannah's healing. Let me read from her book: "*The pastor motioned for us to come up to the altar. Hannah bounced out of her seat. She loved being the center of attention. My husband followed close behind. The pastor placed her hands on the top of Hannah's head. Hannah closed her eyes. Offering a prayer for healing, the pastor invited the family to join her. Then she invited everyone to gather in a circle, forming circles around circles.*"

While death is inevitable, knowing you are loved is not. When I saw Hannah's radiant face in the center of that circle, I realized that healing can happen even without a cure. No matter when Hannah died, she would die knowing that her life mattered, that she was completely loved. I couldn't imagine a more profound healing than that."

Although Hannah wanted a child, her hope and faith were not dependent on the birth of that baby boy. She sang in the midst of her hopelessness, worshiped, and praised God for simply being in her life, with or without fairy-tale endings. Her faith and her hope remained regardless of the outcome.

Our God is a God of miracles, a God who brings hope to us in the midst of hopelessness. Jesus responds to human aspirations in surprising ways. When our hope is broad based rather than specific, we allow room for God to be God. Human hope allows us to be faithful to the love of God, whether that love is evident or not.

Hannah's story is more than just the story of one woman in ancient Israel. Hannah's story is a story about hope and faith for all people. When her story was being told, the people called Israel were feeling barren.

They were homeless, their temple destroyed, thrown out of their Holy City, Jerusalem. They had their own barrenness to deal with, just as we have our own. Some of us feel the barrenness of living far away from close families, of feeling grief at the death of beloved spouses, family members and friends. For some of us, we face the emptiness of relationships that fail, churches that disappoint, jobs that don't satisfy, or anxiety that creeps in.

Hannah's story reminds us that God does not depend on ideal situations to do mighty works. In the midst of a scattered people, Hannah's story was told and her song of hope was sung to remind the defeated Israelites that God had not left them alone.

In the midst of our versions of barrenness, Hannah's story is told and we sing her song of hope—the same one that an unmarried, pregnant girl named Mary sang when she discovered she would bear the Christ child. That song is now sung by us, so we might remember that God has not left us alone, no matter how lonely or in despair we might feel.

And so, I invite you to put yourselves in Hannah's shoes, as we gather at this table with people around the world, to reflect on your own desolate situations, and to consider how the God of all, might work in all our difficulties to restore hope and bring joy into our lives.

Let us pray as Hannah might have prayed so many centuries ago. *"Lord, whatever happens next I will continue faithful; believing in your love, I carry on."* Alleluia. Amen.