

“Dedicated to God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
November 18, 2012

1 Samuel 1: 4-20

As a country, we will pause this week to celebrate Thanksgiving, taking time to give thanks for all the blessings God has bestowed on us. But if you’ve been in shops and stores the last few weeks, you might think Christmas has moved ahead of Thanksgiving on the calendar, with all the sales and advertisements around us!

Our passage today offers an interesting mix between these two holidays which are on our horizon. It is the story of Hannah, and the gift God gives to her in the form of a son, Samuel. It is a story of asking and receiving, as well as persistence and faith. But most importantly, it is a reminder of God’s faithfulness in the most dire of situations, and how even the lowliest of the world are considered blessed by God.

This story begins with a man, Elkanah, and his two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. In ancient Israel, it was not unusual that men had more than one wife, and in this case that is the source of tension within this family. Namely, that Peninnah was able to have children, while Hannah was not. If you or someone you know has been faced with this situation, you then know how painful it truly is. The science today allows for more women to conceive and give birth than ever before. Yet the pain and sorrow present when all measures have failed is tremendous and rarely ever disappears.

To compound Hannah’s plight, the other wife rubs this in her face whenever she gets the chance. On this particular occasion, it is while they are at the temple at Shiloh for one of the Jewish feasts. Peninnah irritated Hannah so badly that she wouldn’t even eat the food which Elkanah gave her. He loved her dearly, and would do anything to make her happy once again. But the sorrow which Hannah felt could not be lifted by food, riches, or other gifts; only through the birth of a son would she “rejoice before the Lord.”

And so she goes to the temple and pours her heart out to God. Have you ever done this? Have you ever laid everything bare and said, “Here’s the deal Lord . . .?” If you have, then you know how Hannah felt. She didn’t think she had done anything wrong, that she had committed any great sin which made God keep her womb closed, as the text states twice. But, instead of a son all she gets is misery. So, in God’s house, she makes a vow to God: “If only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death.” In other words, if God would only bless her with this one request, she will give back to God what is rightfully his in the first place: a gift of grace.

While she is praying, the priest Eli was watching her from a distance. Instead of praying out loud, or praying in total silence, she was saying the words of her prayer with her lips, but no sound came out of her mouth. From all indications, Eli figured she was drunk. But after confronting her, he realizes she is not full of wine, and is rather pouring out all that she has to God in prayer. You have to give Eli some credit. He could have easily dismissed her, sticking to his past experiences with men and women who appeared to be a discredit to the temple and its worship. But with Hannah, he heard her out, and was taken aback by what he saw. In fact, he blessed her: "Go in peace; may the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him."

The end of the story is familiar: Hannah's faithfulness and persistence is rewarded with the granting of her petition. She and her husband conceive and she gives birth to a son, whom she names Samuel, meaning "I have asked of the Lord." This sounds familiar because it is a common theme which runs throughout the Old Testament: in the face of impossibility and no chance of life, God makes possible a new way and a new life.

And this new life comes from one woman being truly transparent and honest with her God. Marcia Mount Shoop writes: *Hannah's anguish is real, whether it comes from her yearning for a child or from the uselessness that she feels in a culture that puts great worth on a woman's fertility. Hers is a "prayer of groaning" that comes from a place of utter vulnerability. When Hannah seeks out God's presence in this state of anguish, her prayer signals that she is aware of a divine concern for those who are of questionable cultural worth. She does not just come to God with formal petition. She comes in loneliness, isolation and despair. She lays bare all the emotion and all the pain.*

Her "prayer of groaning" makes her an icon not simply of the mother of a son who is prophetic and powerful, but of a human being who knows herself to be known and loved by God. It is significant that the monarchy of Israel is born in such emotion and in such surrender to God. With Hannah's mode of encounter the monarchy springs from a place of trust, a place of humility, even a place of mystical union. It is Hannah's humility and honesty that seem to get her somewhere, not her station in life (*Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 4*, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2009: 292-294).

Hannah was blessed by God with the gift of a son, a grace-filled experience. And yet Hannah did not keep that grace to herself, and that is essential to our faith if we are to understand how to live within the bounds of God's grace. She made a promise to God that if he blessed her with a son, she would give him back as a nazirite priest. When she received what she had asked for, she did not go back on that promise, but later brought Samuel to the temple and left him with Eli, who taught him the ways of God and molded him into a great leader.

One commentator puts it this way: "We can learn from Hannah that the proper response to the gift of God's grace is to give it back. If we attempt to keep it as a possession, we will lose it. Hannah knew this from the beginning

and vowed to give back of the grace God might grant. When the time comes, Hannah's response teaches us something of proper response to the gifts of God . . . When grace brings new life, we, too, must give back of the grace we have received. This will include worship, which is the giving back of grace as praise. It will further include dedicating the grace we have received to the service of God. In every generation there has been a need for some in the church to move beyond receiving grace to returning grace . . . What was *asked* must become what is *lent back*. People and communities of faith must become less concerned over who and how many have received God's grace and more concerned with the ways in which God's grace is given back into God's service" (Bruce Birch, *New Interpreter's Bible*, 978).

How do we lend back what we first asked for? How do we live grace-filled lives, dedicating our small and large acts back to the one who has blessed us in immeasurable ways?

I've witnessed it this week within this community of faith. The church office will be closed on Friday for the Thanksgiving holiday, and the Alcoholics Anonymous group which meets Friday mornings does not have a way to get into the building. So church members, who volunteer on Fridays in the office, have offered to come in this Friday to open the building, since, in their words, "the holidays are one of the most crucial times for people struggling with alcoholism." Giving back God's grace in service.

A staff member states that she would like to offer to come in early during Lent one day a week, to open the church up for anyone to come by on their way to work and find peace, meditation, and personal worship during the Season of Lent. So, starting on February 13, on Wednesday mornings, this space will be open to anyone who wishes to use it, not unlike Hannah who sought God's presence in the temple at Shiloh. Giving back God's grace in service.

There are others who embody this spirit of grace, and I am grateful for how those small and large acts of grace ripple through our community. I also grieve for those who are unable to live grace-filled lives, who believe that they deserve everything they have been given, and judge others who, in their view, are not worthy of God's love or grace. Our world, our neighbors, dare I say, our church, is still very adept at making judgments on who is worthy of God's love, and who is not worth our time or attention.

I think we will become the people of faith God intends for us to be when we stop worrying about who has received the grace of God and worry instead about how to share God's grace with others in mission and service. Until we make that change, we must be reminded of Hannah, of her asking, her receiving, and her giving back to God. As we prepare to enter a time of thanksgiving and anticipation, give thanks for the gifts God has given to you, and when you receive those measures of grace, do not keep it to yourself.

Thanks be to God for God's tremendous blessings in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.