

"YOUR FAITH HAS MADE YOU WELL..."

The women of this church have annually celebrated WOMEN. Oftentimes we have had a guest speaker, like Vicky's sister; this year we are a bit late and Vicky's sister was not available, so we shall celebrate women together today. I was privileged to participate in a weekly discussion this past winter on the Women of the Bible.

"People unfamiliar with Scripture often assume that women play a small, secondary role in the Bible. But, in fact, they were central figures in numerous biblical tales. From the shepherdesses of ancient Israel who helped raise the future leaders of the people of God to the courageous early Christians, the women in the Bible are some of the most relatable and inspiring characters in the story of salvation. In their lives we can see common struggles to resist bitterness, despair and pride, and to instead find their true selves in faith, hope, and love. In studying these heroes of the faith, we can find wisdom and warnings for how to navigate our own faith journeys." (Insert from book description; Women of the Bible Speak, Shannon Bream)

The title of my sermon relates to Jesus healing the Bleeding Woman. But there are other stories of faith that have inspired me in so many ways. Both Greg and Lillian have challenged us these past few weeks to look at our lives and think about when we were struggling with personal issues that overwhelmed us. Greg asked us to reflect on what helped us deal with and overcome these issues. Lillian related a story about herself having a year of "being in the ditch" with one personal tragedy after another. I said something to Greg later about how I'm sure we all could have shared our personal experiences, but perhaps they were too raw, too complicated, too hurtful.... I can share one personal time that I continue to reflect on today. I was a freshman in college and had spent my entire year dealing with 3 major surgeries and spending most of the year living in the infirmary. One day I went into the college chapel and just sat in that space and wondered what I should do next???? I spent a long time thinking about all my options and after a lengthy time I could

feel the sun coming through the stained glass windows that surrounded me and I had such a feeling of peace and comfort in those few minutes that to this day I return to that time to gather strength to continue on throughout my daily life. I felt like my faith in God was allowing me to accept what I had been dealt and still recognized that I had the strength to continue on and accomplish my goals. We've all had those moments, I'm sure.

For many of us, 2020-2022 were years filled with pain: physical, financial, emotional and mental. We often felt isolated, kept away from our loved ones, and disconnected from our houses of worship and the sense of community they provide. There were adversities we could not have imagined we'd face in our lifetimes. Hardships piled up, one on top of the other. And yet...there was hope. There was refuge. There was inspiration and healing. Our faith in God kept us going forward in a positive way.

Throughout the Bible, women are at the center of some of the most critical events. They were bold and brave, finding courage in the moments when everything hung in the balance. They were voices of truth and reason. They were steady and creative, following God's direction when it didn't make sense by the world's standards.

I'd like to share the story of Hannah with you today. Hannah teaches us important lessons about faithfulness and redemption in the midst of pain.

Hannah ached for a child of her own. In the Old Testament, the culture believed that children were the greatest gift and sign of God's favor. Hannah was denied motherhood in that time; she dealt with the longing and despair of infertility. She

must have felt like being shut out of God's grace. And it was especially painful to be compared with other women who not only had children of their own, but also turned that beautiful gift into a weapon by mocking and belittling the childless. That's right where we meet our heroine, Hannah.

Hannah was married to a common Levite, Elkanah. He was financially secure enough to support two wives so he wasn't totally destitute. Every year Elkanah and his wives went to Shiloh to present a sacrifice to God. And from that sacrifice, the priests would return to him a supply of meat to share with his family.

"Whenever the day came for Elkanah to sacrifice, he would give portions of the meat to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters. But to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, and the Lord had closed her womb." (1 Samuel 1:4-5)

For most women, it's easy to connect with Hannah, whether you've dealt with infertility or not. We all know what it's like to worry that a deep desire may go unfulfilled. What's worse is to have people know of that unmet longing and for them to leverage that ache into additional pain by taunting us and our open wounds. Peninnah, Hannah's "rival spouse" wasn't satisfied to find contentment in her own full life; she had to rub Hannah's face in it, hit her where her heart ached most:

"Because the Lord had closed Hannah's womb, her rival kept provoking her in order to irritate her. This went on year after year. Whenever Hannah went up to the house of the Lord, her rival provoked her till she wept and would not eat." (1 Samuel 1:6-7)

It's difficult enough sharing our spouse with someone else, let alone longing for a child who won't materialize. But the final blow came from Elkanah's other wife: not only did she have many children of her own, but she jeered at and insulted Hannah to the point of weeping and complete despair over her barrenness. Hannah wasn't grieving with the support of another woman who walked alongside her in her anguish. Instead, she must have felt isolated and attacked. Rather than sharing the burden, Peninnah was adding to it, in a big way.

“Her husband Elkanah would say to her, “Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don’t you eat? Why are you downhearted? Don’t I mean more to you than ten sons?” (1 Samuel 1:8)

Elkanah felt that his deep love for Hannah was more than enough. He adored her. We wonder if he was privy to the abuse, insult and jeers leveled beyond his earshot? Hannah’s tears weren’t only about being barren. They were also about the stinging salt constantly being thrown into her wound.

Hannah’s response was to go to the tabernacle to pray. One of the most comforting things about our God is that He is always there awaiting our prayers, even when we can’t find the words to express our deepest grief. Sometimes our hurts are so delicate and raw that we don’t have the strength to share that level of vulnerability with another human being. God already knows the deepest recesses of our heart, so going to Him only ushers us into the safest of all possible place we can be. Philippians 4 counsels us not to be anxious about anything, “but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God.” (Philippians 4:6).

“In her deep anguish Hannah prayed to the Lord, weeping bitterly. And she made a vow, say, “Lord Almighty, if you will only look on your servant’s misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the Lord for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head.” (1 Samuel 1:10-11)

Hannah continued to pray to the Lord. She didn’t try to strike a bargain with God. Making an offering to God isn’t about God, but about us. It’s not that God needs anything from us. Making an offering to God is about making sure that just as in any loving relationship, we are not simply taking from our beloved, but also giving in return.

Eli the priest had been watching Hannah “weeping bitterly” and he jumped to an incorrect conclusion. Hannah was praying in her heart, and her lips were moving, but her voice was not being heard. Eli thought she was

drunk and said to her, "How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine."

Ouch! Have you even been stung by someone getting the wrong first impression of you at your weakest, most desperate moment? We've all been the victim, and we've probably all been the perpetrator, too. (...being guilty of misjudging someone or their circumstances, and this was a woman who needed some comforting!)

Two things the ancient world found very strange were silent praying and silent reading. In each case you'd expect to hear someone's voice. (Today it's commonplace to pray and read silently)

"Not so, my lord," Hannah replied, "I am a woman who is deeply troubled. I have not been drinking wine or beer; I was pouring out my soul to the Lord. Do not take your servant for a wicked woman; I have been praying here out of my great anguish and grief." (1Samuel 1:15-16)

She never told Eli why she was troubled but he told her to go in peace, adding, "May the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him." (1 Samuel 1:17) Those words of reassurance were just what she needed. The Bible tells us she went on her way, finally able to eat and "her face was no longer downcast" (1 Samuel 1:18). There is so much power in the words of encouragement we share with others, loved ones or strangers.

"Gracious words are a honeycomb,
Sweet to the soul and healing to the bones." Proverbs 16:24

This is what Hannah needed, some sweetness and healing. Let this be a lesson for us, to step up and lift up those around us who are suffering.

Not long after she returned home, she became pregnant. She named her first son Samuel (Samuel in Hebrew translates: "God has heard")

During the time she nursed and raised him, she did not go with the rest of the family on the yearly pilgrimage to Shiloh. But once he had reached

the traditional age of weaning, she packed up her most precious gift and took him back to Shiloh, where she had so fervently prayed that he would one day arrive. It was time for her to reintroduce herself to Eli the priest.

“And she said to him, “Pardon me, my lord. As surely as you live, I am the woman who stood here beside you praying to the Lord. I prayed for this child, and the Lord has granted me what I asked of him. So now I give him to the Lord. For his whole life he will be given over to the Lord.” (1Samuel 1:26-28)

Nowhere in Scripture do we see a moment of hesitation from Hannah. She had promised God that if He sent her a son, she would return that young boy in service to Him. It’s hard for us to wrap our human minds around the idea of dropping off a little boy, probably about the age of three, to live hours (maybe day) away with people he’s never met. But it appears Hannah was at total peace with fulfilling the promise she’d made.

No matter what emotions or human objections may surface in our own minds as we follow along in Scripture, in each case, we see steadfast obedience to God’s call. Is there anything in our lives we’re clinging to too tightly? Are we refusing to let God have control of a situation or cherishing the gifts we’ve been given over the giver Himself? We wouldn’t be human if we didn’t sometimes try to rationalize these things.

It’s a daily process of choosing to lay down what we’ve become too attached to. It would be nice to think of our ourselves as people who have been through enough valleys to have earned a measure of maturity, but reality often puts a mirror up to our faces and we don’t always like what we see. When COVID pandemic hit, people were pretty rattled. People were getting very ill and dying. Domestically and around the world, economies and markets were shaken, and so many of the comforts of life—hugging a friend or sharing a meal at a restaurant—were suddenly out of the question. It was a jolt. And it meant a “reset” for all of us. It quickly became painfully obvious to us just how many THINGS were bringing us comfort and ease, when instead we should have been fully grounded and rooted in our Heavenly Father. We needed to ask ourselves

what were we willing to part with in order to find complete and unchanging joy in God. In following Hannah's example, we put the things we cherished most into God's hands and into His service.

The very next thing we hear from Hannah is her song of praise: THE SONG OF HANNAH is the longest prayer of its kind in the Old Testament

Hannah's God is the God of reversal. He upended death. He alone could humble and exalt. He took people who had nothing and gave them everything. She had lived this reality, and her view of God's infinite power was broader than her own little hill village. ...

Hannah and Elhanah visited their son each year. Hannah made him a new robe annually.

God was good to Hannah. She had three sons and two daughters. A woman who spent years in misery and despair, taunted by her unkind rival, became a mother to many. Such joy! It's impossible to out-give God.

As Christ spells out in the Gospel of Luke:

"Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. (Luke 6:38)

Hannah watched Samuel grow into a great prophet, one who served God and who would one day anoint King David to lead His people. It was in guiding Samuel to David that we see God reveal one of His greatest truths:

"The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." (1Samuel 16:7b)

Hannah is an exquisite example of faith. As she endured years of longing and harassment, she didn't allow Peninnah's taunting to make her bitter. Was she wounded? Yes. But we never see that she returned the venom or plotted against the woman who caused her so much pain. Instead, she allowed her agony to drive her straight to the only source who could help

her. God knew every delicate, hurtful circumstance of her life, every detail. She took Him all her baggage and asked for His mercy. She continued in faithful prayer, prayer so passionate that it drew attention at the tabernacle. Hannah went boldly and openly to God with her request.

Is there some wound or need so deep in your life that, like Hannah, you should lay it at God's feet? Is there a relationship that seems beyond repair, a financial hole, a dream that seems will never become a reality? There's nothing stopping you but your own hesitation. We don't have to travel to a tabernacle or temple. If we've placed our trust in Him, God is in us and with us every minute of every hour of every single day, without fail.

One woman had the faith to turn aside from her critics, take her case straight to God, and be her most vulnerable self before Him. What great gift, miraculous answer, or deep wisdom awaits us when we are willing to do the same?

I continue to restore my faith with prayer and with music. I have special songs and prayers that fill me with such peace. I also try to walk in my woods daily and listen to my music and enjoy nature at its best. I love the song, "It is well with my soul." The writer of the lyrics, Horatio Spafford, lost his fortune during the Chicago fire of 1871 then the same year his four daughters were drowned in the Atlantic as they were heading to Europe. Horatio and his wife later crossed the Atlantic and the ship's captain stopped at the spot where Horatio had lost his family. Horatio was filled with words of comfort and hope that continued to fill his heart and mind and thus he wrote the lyrics to this moving hymn. I repeat the words almost daily; his story fills me with hope and strength. As we find ways to deal with the adversities in our lives, we think about the early women in the Bible who overcame so much because of their faith in God

God, give us the wisdom to seek your comfort and strength in our times of needs.....

