Hannah’s Prayer
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Hope UCC
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1 Samuel 1:4-20

I think I read the story of Hannah as a woman first, then as a mom, then as wife, then as pastor. It’s not possible for me to read it as a neutral person. It’s not possible for me to not bring my own perspective to it.

In preparation for this sermon I also talked to other women to get their perspectives. Mostly clergy women about our identities as women, about our heroines of the bible, and about our struggles. And we all had different reactions to the story today about Hannah. What are your reactions? Think about what stood out to you? What do you admire and like? What is appalling? Here were some clergywomen responses- Some of us didn’t like that God was so male sounding. Some didn’t like that Hannah didn’t appear to have as much value until she had a son. Some didn’t like the second wife. And most of us didn’t like the way the priest thought Hannah was drunk when she was actually praying.

There are many ways that we struggle with Hannah and especially with this telling of Hannah’s story. And that reflects our struggle as women too. We don’t have great role models in the bible to show us God’s perfect love separate from the sins and lies of a system. We are always needing to deconstruct and reconstruct and we strain to find God in the midst of all of it. It is exhausting.

And yet, as these women and I spoke and wrote back and forth, the spirit was so present, so undeniable, bringing us together and speaking through this story of Hannah- this story that we hold dear and this story which angers us. It is one of the few Biblical stories with a heroine, as complicated as it is. And so we continue our wrestling today bringing all of our unique perspectives to it. We are wrestling with Hannah and we are wrestling with the realities of our world, with all
of the pain we inflict on each other. We wish we could somehow see truth and love apart from all of these sinful systems that bound the writers of the Bible and still bind us today. But our wish can’t come true- we cannot know ourselves and we cannot know God completely separate from white supremacist, heteronormative patriarchy, but that does mean that there is nothing beyond white supremicist heteronormative patriarchy. God is both beyond this false system and present with us in it.

One of my clergy friends said, "the only reason this story is so frustrating is because it was told by men with God being the ultimate male patriarch. What if we told Hannah’s story with God as a matriarch? What if we talked about ourselves as women, our stories of motherhood with God as our mother?" Hmmm, what if? Would a retelling of Hannah’s story give us another voice, another conversation point for the spirit of God?

And so my friends, let’s try it. Here’s my attempt of a midrash, a retelling of Hannah’s story, informed by Psalm 139, with God as a mother figure.

*My love looks on me with love and we have known joy together, especially when we were younger. I had hoped to be his only wife, his only love. But he needs children to carry on his land and his estate and my womb has borne none. It is like an empty shell inside of me. I don’t know my purpose or even who I am. We agreed my love could marry another and she was able to bear children. While I know he still loves me, I see the way he holds those little ones. I ache to share in that joy with him. All I get is contempt and gloating from her. My heart breaks wide open every day.*

*And so I have come to your holy temple, my mother, my God. I have come to share with you that I am in pain. I have come to tell you that I am lost. Please hear me. I want to find my own way, to have my own value, my own purpose. I want to find joy in my own*
journey. Is there anything for me, for all women, besides motherhood, any purpose beyond motherhood?

AND, even in that anger and limitation, at the same time, Holy Mother, I still long to feel the joy of a child in my womb. Why must I have none? Why must this world tell me that if I have no child I am nothing? I am torn up with all these feelings inside.

Mother God: my daughter, my beloved. I am with you every day. I stroke your hair as you cry in your bed. My arms hold you and encourage you to get up, to face this, to find joy. Those around you do not always understand my ways. They misuse my power and they misinterpret. They have mistaken your situation as a punishment from me.

You have your own value and potential as my beautiful creation. No matter what you do from here, you will be blessed and you are a blessing to others. Open your heart to feel my love beyond these false rules and lies. Always remember I go before you- in birth, in life, in pain, and in death, I go before you.

So, my daughter, let us go and create together; let us go and birth new love in the world. Let us build up my people. Let us break through the chains of lies that bind you and that bind them. Go, Hannah, go my daughter.

This scene came out of my frustration and out of my imagination, my hope, my dream of what God is like, what God might say. In our imagination as we think about this story, God can inspire us with new ideas. Our imagination gives us something to go on when these times seem so dark and hopeless.

As we struggle with difficult realities, including the terrorist attacks this week, we absolutely need both our frustration to see realities of hate and intolerance and we need our imagination to allow God to inspire us to a different path.
My frustration and my imagination with this story and my dialogue with other women started a few weeks ago. And it also coincided with my starting to read Ta-Nehisi Coates’ book, *Between the World and Me*.

It’s a book written to the author’s teenage son trying to explain his own experiences as a black male and hoping, I think, to strengthen his son for the same journey. It’s full of wisdom, truth and really tough things to read.

He describes growing up with racism—“I felt in this a cosmic injustice, a profound cruelty, which infused an abiding irrepressible desire to unshackle my body and achieve the velocity of escape.”

Out of all the tough things, the hardest thing he has said in what I have read so far is that the system of injustice that oppresses blackness, that same system that made Coates fear for his body and his well being throughout his whole life, the same system that strives to limit his potential and tells him lies about himself, he writes that that system isn’t going anywhere. He writes that his son should accept that. I read that and I went NO. It can’t be true. That system of lies and oppression, it can’t be true, we can’t just accept that, NO. And then I thought, I have been saying NO about Hannah a lot lately too. Something between the world and me. And then in my heart, I knew Ta-Nehisi Coates was right. This system and these lies about black bodies and about women’s bodies and about others, they aren’t going anywhere. But that isn’t where Coates ends or where we should end. After explaining this reality, Coates doesn’t advocate that we give up and surrender. We need frustration and imagination. And so after frustration, he challenges his son then to find a way to still be free in a black body, to still know joy in a black life. And I thought, that is also what Hannah was doing, still trying to find a way to be herself, to be free. The system that told her that her body only had value in the service of men- to pleasure them and to give to birth them. That system wasn’t going anywhere and frankly still isn’t going anywhere. So how could she be free in her female body, how could she press on? For Hannah, it meant going to the temple every day and praying as long as she wanted, even when the priest misunderstood and devalued her, she said no, you
may not value me, but I have a right to be here. She was struggling to still be free. Frustration and imagination.

You can hear the same resistance in my own voice too as I say NO. And other clergywomen say NO in their reactions. You can hear my imagination of how we might still be free, as Coates’ challenges his son to be, even amid these sinful lies.

The Bible is a product of this system, but the Bible also has these break out moments in which light and truth seem to shine forth. And so life does the same. And so God tries and tries to do the same.

In this story Hannah was diminished. Hannah was diminished by a system that didn’t value her. But at the same time, we see that she also demanded value for herself, that she had moments of a different truth. And that truth made it through all the priestly patriarchal tellings and writings of this story, all the way to my preaching it here today. So as much as I may not like it, these stories and our modern day prophets challenge us to do two things at the same time: We have to acknowledge the injustice as present, we can’t be outside of it, we can’t read the Bible separate from it and we can’t even define ourselves without it. BUT there is the other challenge- Hannah shows us that also there is something beyond those walls of injustice, something beyond those lies, something else that we CAN imagine. We can be free in midst of it.

We have all felt moments when we were diminished, when we have felt the smallness of our worth or our potential, whether it is society, white supremacy, or patriarchy or heteronormative. Or whether it’s a bully or a boss or just our own inner voice that says we don’t have value, we know Hannah’s pain no matter who we are. And I pray that we also have had those small moments in the darkest nights, when we prayed like Hannah, and when we felt an answer. In the deepest places of our hearts we heard, “no, no my child, I love you. You are my beloved.” And that we take. That we use to fight. That we use to uplift mothers of prophets and prophets alike. That we use to counter hate and terrorism. That we use to find our role. We
find our role in God’s fire for justice. Whether your role is to be the flame like a
prophet or whether your role is like a mother to nurture the fire, to bring the
kindling, to fan the flames. No matter what your calling, make sure that you know
that you have value. And you can make a contribution, you must make a
contribution to God’s fire with your frustration and with your imagination. I’m
going to close with how mother God sent out Hannah in my retelling.

So, my daughter, let us go and create together; let us go and birth new love in the
world. Let us build up my people. Let us break through the chains of lies that bind you
and that bind them. Go, Hannah, go my daughter.