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St. James', Mt. Airy
11/15/2015

Proper 28/B
1 Samuel 2:1-10
Hebrews 10:11-14 (15-18) 19-25
Mark 13:1-8

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

Several years ago, on a dark winter evening, in the days that are slowly gaining more light but when darkness still holds sway, the parish where I served created time and space for prayers of groaning not unlike the plea of Hannah we hear today.

It was a night for women and men to lament and mourn, to grieve and pray, seeking hope.

For some it was a way to mark the loss of children, the all too often unknown death of a child through miscarriage or the shock of a stillbirth. For others it was a place to name the loss they experienced through terminating their pregnancy or giving a child up for adoption. And for some it was a place to lay down the broken heart of a failed adoption placement or the inability to conceive.

This *Liturgy of Lament & Remembrance*, which comes to us from a book called *Rachel's Tears, Hannah's Hopes*, offered a recognition of the deep pain many of us have carried in our hearts. A pain known throughout time, and central to our story as people of God. For in the Bible we encounter story after story of families, of love and loss, of barrenness and always, always, of hope.

For those of us here who have known these losses, we will offer this service the first Sunday in February, gathering in the evening by candlelight, sharing our stories, submerging the stones of our lament in the waters of the baptismal font, and then lighting floating candles on that same water in hope.

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I cannot imagine the strength of a woman like Hannah.

She lived in a culture which defined her worth nearly entirely on her ability to conceive and bear children, which she was unable to do. We are told that Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah, had many children and taunted her mercilessly out of jealousy, for Elkanah loved Hannah despite her inability to give him children. I imagine many days she must have felt like she was simply enduring, not living.

It took something more than desperation to make her take her plea for a son to God. Yes, I imagine she was desperate after years of shame. Humiliated again by Peninnah at the family feast after Elkanah sacrificed at Shiloh. A well-meaning but unhelpful husband who minimized her grief. A sense of being utterly alone in her loss.

And yet, she had a deep assumption that God cared about her, and from this place of knowing she was in the heart of God, her strength was finally born.

So it was that she rose and presented herself before the Lord.

She did not stop to talk to the priest, Eli. She walked past him and into the temple and fervently prayed, laying her heart open to God. Heavy with grief and longing, her strength began to reveal itself in the vow she made to God – give me a son and I will dedicate him to your service.

It was further revealed when, confronted by a dismissive Eli calling her a drunkard, she did not back down, but instead revealed her woundedness and trust in God with the pouring out of her prayer.

She left that place, having told her story to God, no longer sad in countenance, but strengthened by her ability to name her pain and loss, and lightened of her burden as she turned it over to God.

We are told that God remembered Hannah, and in due time she conceived and bore a son whom she named Samuel.

As the story of Hannah and Samuel continues, we are told that upon weaning him from her breast she fulfilled the vow she made to the Lord, and took him to the priest Eli at Shiloh to dedicate him to the Lord and give him into the Lord's service all the days of his life, leaving him there to be raised.

Her strength was made manifest in that moment – the moment of turning over a desired and loved child. I can only imagine the myriad of feelings coursing through her.

And yet what we hear from her mouth, her song which we read just a few minutes ago, is a song of thankfulness and praise, and a prophetic witness to the power of God to raise up the marginalized and bring forth life from the barren places.

A song whose echo is heard in that other great song, the *Magnificat*, proclaimed by another woman touched by God's power – whose strength enabled her to say YES. The mother of another miraculous baby – Mary.

Our stories draw us near, endings and beginnings flowing into one another, as we approach the end of the church year and get ready to begin again with a season of expectation and hope.

It is no coincidence that last week we heard the story of Ruth and Naomi. After Naomi's husband and sons died, leaving her and her two daughters-in-law in a foreign land with no way to support themselves, she decided to send them back to their families and return home to seek the protection of her extended family. Her daughter-in-law, Ruth, however, loved her dearly, and where Naomi went, Ruth followed.

Loving Ruth in return, Naomi worked to secure her a new husband, which led to her marriage to Boaz, and her son, Obed.

Obed, son of Ruth, became the father of Jesse, the father of David.

Samuel, son of Hannah, anointed David as king.

Jesus, son of Mary, born of the line of David.

These women, their stories, their pain, their songs, and their strength were the foundation of faith that formed their sons, transforming them and the world. Forming and transforming us as well.

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Hannah teaches us a deep form of prayer, of our need to reach out to God from the deepest places in our heart. It is not easy.

It took her years before she found the strength to enter such prayer, and when she did she was accused of being drunk. But in releasing her prayer to God she was able to walk away and into new life – not because she was guaranteed that her prayer would be answered, but because she lived into the truth we must all remember, *God is God, and I am not.*

She was able to fulfill her vow and take her beloved Samuel to Shiloh to serve the Lord because, just as she had turned over her shame and anger and pain to God, so too was she called to give to God her blessing and joy.

Ruth and Naomi teach us *hesed*, steadfast love and trust. In a world where they lost everything, their love for one another gave them strength; they found grace in taking care of each other, trusting in God to show them the way forward.

Mary teaches us YES. Not a faith unexamined, but a willingness to step out in expectation that God's incarnation will change everything.

God is God, and I am not.

It is a trusting, in something we perhaps aren't always sure of. It is a desire to feel the embrace of the holy when our world is falling down around us. It is a letting go of our illusion of control, of our pain, of all the things we've been told by others, and that we tell ourselves. It is a YES that alters the fabric in our lives. It is reconciliation with each other, within ourselves, and with God.

And when we make this space in ourselves, it is always surprising what we then have room for.

Hannah let go of her anger and shame. And like the stories of many other couples, it was only when they stopped 'trying' that a miraculous baby appeared.

How many of us have had those rock bottom moments when we either have to laugh or cry, or perhaps both, and in the absurdity of the release, a space opens up for a hope we thought we'd never find again?

When are the times that we've been so full of anger that we were blind to abiding love that surrounds us, only seeing it when we finally grow so weary of holding onto our fury that we collapse, take a deep breath, and open our eyes to the world anew?

God is always waiting to meet us. In a temple at Shiloh. Gathered around the baptismal font when we float candles in memory of our suffering and loss, and in trust of hope restored. Any and every time we open our hearts to God, in joy or sorrow.

This is the gift of Hannah to each of us. The wisdom of Ruth and Naomi.
The boldness of Mary. May we too find our strength and sing songs of trust, faith
and justice to our God.

~ AMEN ~