

## IDLEWILD PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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The Reverend Joshua H. Narcisse  
Sunday, October 13, 2024

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*There was a certain man of Ramathaim, a Zuphite from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah son of Jeroham son of Elihu son of Tohu son of Zuph, an Ephraimite. He had two wives; the name of one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children.*

*Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the Lord. On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters, but to Hannah he gave a double portion because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb. Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the Lord had closed her womb. So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"*

*After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the Lord. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. She made this vow: "O Lord of hosts, 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. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head." As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was praying silently; only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." Then Eli answered, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." And she said, "Let your servant find favor in your sight." Then the woman went her way and ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.*

*They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the Lord; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the Lord remembered her.*

One of the greatest gifts, and sometimes challenges of being a preacher is that with time, you end up studying, meditating, and preaching a passage of scripture more than once. The same is true for our individual devotional and study time as we immerse ourselves in the world of Scripture, sometimes you find yourself returning to a text over and over again.

And there's good reason for that. Sometimes nothing quite captures the confidence you're trying to muster in a trying moment than to mutter to yourself the familiar words of the Psalmist, "the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want."

Sometimes no amount of encouraging words and wisdom can break through your despair than to hear Isaiah proclaim, "but they that wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."

Sometimes you just need to hear Christ calling through the cacophony of calendar invites to remind you, "Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

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We return often to familiar passages of scripture because we find comfort in them, because they resonate deeply in our spirits, but also because time is filled with swift transition, and though the Word of God is constant, the realities of our lives are not. Beloved, the way we come to the Psalms, or the Prophets, the Gospels, or even this text before us today changes with the condition of our lives, and so too does our understanding of these texts. The 23rd Psalm hits us differently when read as a morning devotional versus when those words fall on our ears at the graveside of a loved one. The condition we find ourselves in sets the initial context for our engagement with scripture, *and* it makes it that much easier for a text to be misunderstood.

That's how I came to this morning's text. This is not the first time I've meditated on Hannah's story. Hannah and I have hung out before. I've been all up and in Hannah's business. Quite honestly, Hannah is probably a bit tired of seeing me at this point.

And yet, there was something about her story this time around that just would not let me go. I've sat with Hannah and unpacked the heaviness that comes from living with an unanswered prayer while you're surrounded by people who are experiencing the blessings God seems unwilling to send your way. But that's not what I felt the spirit nudging me to talk about today.

I've sat with Hannah as she's dealt with the disappointment of being called one thing and a reality that contradicts your very identity, because if you check the Hebrew, Hannah's name can be translated as God's favor, and yet God's favor seems real absent from Hannah's reality. But that's not what the spirit nudged me to talk about today.

For some time now, what I've been unable to let go of are Hannah's tears, and that makes sense given the context I approach this scripture with in this season of my life. And it helps me to understand the tears that Hannah sheds that have been so misunderstood by everyone around her.

You just heard the story. Hannah is married to a man named Elkanah, but they're not the only two people in this marriage, there is also Penninah and the issue is, not that Elkanah has another wife. Though this story doesn't fit neatly within our 2024 ethics, this marital arrangement wouldn't have gotten a second thought in the Ancient Near East.

No Beloved, the issue here is that Penninah has children, and Hannah has none. Now we don't know the exact number of children Peninnah has, but we can use our divine imagination and say with confidence that she probably has at least a starting five and maybe a few alternates.

Peninnah has children and Hannah has none, and in the society in which Hannah is living, that's a major problem because she's been taught, she's been socialized, she's been encouraged to tie her self-worth to her ability to produce children.

Allow me to pause parenthetically for a moment and give you a tip my own therapist gave me. We have to be careful of aligning our self-worth with external expectations and affirmations that we do not have control over, because if our self-worth is grounded in what we do, what we earn, what we wear, what people think of us, what people say about us, what we are noticed for, what we are congratulated for; so long as our self-worth is tangled up in other people's perspectives we'll always be struggling to see ourselves the way God sees us. And we'll be at greater risk of misunderstanding ourselves, so long as our sense of who we are has been co-opted by the caricatures of our lives that exist in other people's minds.

And that's exactly where we find Hannah. Year after year she's living with the same unanswered prayer and a misshapen sense of self-worth. Year after year she has to go on the annual Fall

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Break vacation to Shiloh for worship and year after year all she gets is salt rubbed in the wound as her sense of self-worth is assaulted and her tears are misunderstood.

The picture is painted vividly in the text, Elkanah is eating, Penninah is provoking, children are playing, and all the while Hannah's tears are falling. And as we drop into the midst of this dinner table conversation as eating, and provoking, and playing, and tears are all feasting together, we confront the first issue in this text: Hannah's misunderstood tears are met with misdirected comfort.

If you listen closely you can pick up Elkanah's voice as he leans over to Hannah and says: "Why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad?"

Someone needs to tap Elkanah on the shoulder and tell him to "read the room!" How tone death can one person be? How aloof, how disconnected, how unaware to ask these questions of Hannah as if he doesn't see what is going on in his own home year after year after year. But to make matters worse, Elkanah ends his series of questions with this, "Am I not more to you than ten sons?" Really?

Maybe my imagination is just running a bit too wild and you aren't hearing this exchange the way I am. Because in a real sense, Elkanah is saying, "I know this is rough but is it really all that bad, I mean you aren't eating you're always walking around here sad, I mean look on the bright side, you've got me after all, and aren't I better than a few kids?" Misdirected comfort.

That's what we can run into when your tears are misunderstood. When the reason for your pain is not seen by another, when your pain is too awkward and your sorrows too deep, when you've been hurting and the hurting can't be touched by human hands, when your tears are misunderstood, there is a risk that the comfort that is offered is misdirected.

What does misdirected comfort look like? It looks like folks trying to make themselves comfortable because they can't stand to be in the presence of someone else's pain. It looks like cliches and trite sayings because the presence of tears has wiped you of any wisdom you'd have to offer. It looks like being more interested in getting out of the conversation rather than seeking ways to offer a caring presence. It looks like turning the focus of the situation onto you because it's more comfortable to talk about the weather than deal with the fact that the person in front of you is a living representation of your worst fears.

Misdirected comfort is often how we show up for folks who are struggling, we have all done it, and I'd venture to say we've all been on the receiving end of it too. Misdirected comfort becomes our default response.

As Pastor Mary reminded me while I was wrestling aloud about today's message, she said, "You know us Presbyterians are not an overly emotional people, we really like to avoid any displays of emotion if we can help it." And so we turn to minimizing someone's pain or relativizing someone's hurts, we contribute to an inhospitable emotional environment where folks don't feel safe.

It's Kate Bowler, the Duke Divinity School professor whose life was upended by a diagnosis of Stage 4 colon-cancer at 35 years-old, which she often reminds folks, is the second-least-sexy form of cancer, behind rectal cancer of course. Kate wrote a line in her book, *No Cure for Being Human*, that has remained with me as a sobering reminder about the world we've constructed, she simply says, "The world is not safe for people in pain."

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When we practice a misdirected form of comfort we make those words even more true. When we prefer to ignore a person's suffering or refuse to allow loss to be loss without any redemptive quality to it or when we become emotional tourists on the most intimate parts of another's broken pieces, then we make those words even more true.

"The world is not safe for people in pain." But could Idlewild be? Could your couch be? Could your heart be? Can you be a safe place for those who have been gripped by the pain, and sorrow, and the sin that has caused the losses to mount up beyond number?

As many times as I have sat with Hannah and heard her story, I have misunderstood this passage. It is more than just a birth narrative, it is an invitation to us to see if we can abide with one another while tears are falling. And even more this text is a challenge to us, to see if we can be a safe place for people in pain.

Hannah doesn't find that safety in our text, even though she does what we teach the little ones in our midst to do when hard times come. Hannah goes to church and even at worship her tears are misunderstood.

The text tells us that Hannah slips away from the provoking and placating so that she can spend some time alone with God and her tears. And the Bible says that Hannah is so distressed, Hannah is so miserable, that all she can do is weep bitterly before God, and pray silently while her mouth moves mimicking the words flowing from her the quietness of her heart.

And we're told that while Hannah's tears are still falling, and prayers are ascending, Eli is watching. Little does Hannah know that in addition to her misunderstood tears being met with misdirected comfort, she's about to have to deal with someone who is going to misjudge the situation.

Eli, the pastor no less, sees her praying, and instead of seeing someone who through their worry is worshiping, instead of seeing someone who has pushed through the pain to pray, instead of seeing someone who is struggling with sorrow, Eli misjudges the situation and rather than offer a pastoral presence makes a personal accusation, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine."

Eli really makes us clergy folk look bad. But if we're honest, Eli responds like many of us, especially people of faith when confronted with the unexpected or the unacceptable, or even the inconvenient, we make assumptions that fit into our understanding of how the world works. Beloved, we have to be careful about making our norms other people's standards. How you would have responded to the impossible, how you would've handled it, how you would've acted cannot dictate how someone else survives.

But there is also some drama in this text that will come to a head in a few chapters that perhaps gets to why Eli so grossly misses the mark. An allusion is made to it in the third verse.

Hannah is at Shiloh on this annual Fall Break trip, and at Shiloh, Eli's sons are also priests. The problem is that Eli's sons Hophni and Phineas are living recklessly and disgracing both their father and the priestly duties they've been entrusted with. They are manipulating congregants, stealing from the sacrificial offerings, and on top of all this they have what we might call a complex relationship to strong drink.

Beloved, we have to be careful that our own context doesn't cloud out our ability to empathize with another's hurts. And we have to be careful not to make our unresolved issues into another person's problem.

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Perhaps Eli misjudges Hannah's situation because he is still wrestling with the unresolved disappointments of his own life and can no longer expect anything but disappointment from everyone else. Beloved, no matter how much pain we may be in, it is never an excuse to pass that pain around.

Hannah's tears are falling and they are misunderstood by her husband. Hannah's tears are falling and they are misjudged by her pastor. And at this point in the sermon someone should be asking themselves, if her husband misunderstands her and her pastor is misjudging the situation, where in the world is God in the midst of all the eating and provoking and running and tears and prayers and observing, where is God in the midst of all this pain?

That's a question I've asked myself these past few months, it's a question I've got a funny feeling you've asked when life has decided to unfold in ways you didn't think possible. Where is God? And what does God have to say for Godself concerning my tears?

And the answer, at least according to this text, is that God has nothing to say. God in the 19 verses of scripture that were read into our hearing doesn't say one thing, there are actions that are attributed to God, there are prayers that are directed toward God, but God is conspicuously silent in the face of Hannah's tears.

And I am frustrated with God because after all she's dealt with Hannah is still faithful, Hannah wants nothing more than to serve the Lord, and even Hannah can get a call back from God. And yet, there are 4 words that conclude this passage of scripture that encouraged Hannah and can help us in the seasons of life when our misunderstood tears are met by a silent God, "and the Lord remembered."

Pain can be so isolating, when our tears are misunderstood and misjudged, when we feel as if we are not safe in our pain, when our pain feels like an inconvenience to folks, the promise is that God remembers, that every tear that has fallen, every prayer that has been whispered, every dream that has been deferred, every scar that has been accumulated, God remembers. And even if God is silent in the face of our suffering, God remembers us. God does not allow us to slip from God's mind, God does not turn away from our tears, indeed God will wipe every one of them from our eyes.

God remembers, even when we've forgotten the prayers we've prayed. When we've forgotten how to hope, when we've forgotten how to love, we've forgotten how to understand, when we've started overidentifying with our pain and forgotten our purpose, God remembers. God remembers, for it is the very nature of God, it is at the very heart of God to remember: every hair on our head, every tear that is shed, every prayer that is prayed, God remembers.

And if God remembers, then God is sure to continue authoring our stories in such a way that even the painful parts find their place, and we see in the rearview mirror that everything belongs. Not everything happens for a reason, that's an unhelpful and unthoughtful lie. But in the awesome sovereignty and awful grace of God, even the broken pieces find a place to belong as part of the story God is weaving together for our good and God's glory.

Beloved, we return to familiar passages of Scripture often, sometimes because of the comfort we find in them, sometimes because of how deeply they resonate in our spirits, but also because we need to be reminded in every season that the story of God's great love for us and all of creation is a promise that God remembers, God understands, and God never leaves us alone. To the glory of God, Amen.

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