

# WHEN GOD PROVOKES

Sermon, November 14, 2021

Texts: I Samuel 1:1-20, 2:1-19; Hebrews 10:11-25

Elkanah had two wives, Hannah and Peninnah. In the Old Testament society of three thousand years ago, that was somewhat tolerated, but never endorsed ... as Jesus reiterates in the Gospels (*Matthew 19:1-12, referring to Genesis 2:23-24*), polygamy was not God's original plan. In fact, Elkanah is the only non-royal person in the books of Samuel and Kings specifically mentioned as having more than one wife. Perhaps it was tolerated because polygamy abounded in the surrounding cultures. One reason for that is in those days everyone's greatest priority was being survived by descendants. If a man's first wife turned out to be barren, well, it would be understood if he took a second wife. Not surprisingly, we have no record of this ever having produced good relationships between the wives. Discord, division, tension, even treachery abounded in the home lives of polygamous families.

Hannah was the wife who had no children. Peninnah had a slew of them, and apparently, she never let Hannah forget it. Perhaps the hardest part of the year for Hannah was that time each year when husband Elkanah would take the whole family on a pilgrimage to the sacred city of Shiloh (*this was where the Tabernacle with the Ark of the Covenant was settled after the wilderness wanderings; a semi-permanent structure was built around it in Shiloh. Jerusalem, the City of David, would later become the sacred city. Another bit of trivia: I and II Samuel originally was one book, called the Book of David, as it tells the story of Israel's greatest king; it was divided into two books and renamed with the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, known as the Septuagint*). There Elkanah would offer his annual sacrifice of thanksgiving before God; think of it as a sort of Thanksgiving vacation weekend for the whole somewhat dysfunctional family.

Now try to imagine the scene: He would go into the temple and make his sacrifice and give thanks to God for all the blessings of his life. There they all are in the temple, and Elkanah is in front of the great high altar making his sacrifice. Off to one side is Hannah, standing all alone, all by herself, and then over here on the other side is Peninnah, surrounded by all of her beautiful children, looking like she's auditioning for the role of Maria Von Trapp in the Sound of Music, stroking the head of each child, smiling beautifully at her husband ... and casting a gloating eye Hannah's way. As the text tells us, she loved to provoke Hannah in order to irritate her; maybe it was out of jealousy, as Elkanah showed his favoritism and love to Hannah ... we don't really know. But she would do this year after year until Hannah just couldn't take it any more. This particular time, when Hannah saw this scene replayed yet again, she dissolved into tears and just refused to eat. The pain was just too much. Now, notice how Elkanah, true to form as her husband, makes an attempt at fixing things. He said to her, *'Hannah, why are you weeping? Why don't you eat? And why are you downhearted?'*

To which she might have said, *"Why don't you go on a long donkey ride?"*

*"I mean, are you honestly asking me these questions, Elkanah? You don't know why I'm sad?"* He continued: *"Am I not more to you than ten sons?"*— in other words, *"I'm sufficient. Am I not enough for you?"* What he should have said, or asked, *"Hannah, don't you know you are more to ME than ten sons?"* That would have been the right question. Perhaps he meant well, but as someone put it, *"Even the best of men are men at best."* He somewhat clumsily says what he says, and maybe to Hannah it sounds more like, *"What's your problem? Am I not more to you than ten sons? You're lucky to have me, aren't you?"* We're told at this point Hannah STOOD UP ...which one commentary suggests might be a Hebrew euphemism for her putting her foot down ... and left.

We read in the next few verses these descriptive phrases of what Hannah goes through: Deep anguish, bitter tears, earnest prayer, affliction, great anxiety. You imagine that she's saying in her heart, *"O God, I thank you for my husband. I love him, but he doesn't get it. He doesn't understand me. To You, O Lord, I cry."* And chances are that Elkanah, who really does love her, was in his bedroom praying something similar: *"O Lord, I love Hannah, and I don't get it, but to You I cry."*

It's important to note that there's no indication she wants to form a plot to try and eradicate her rival, Peninnah. Nor is there any sense of her becoming resentful towards God, which would have been an understandable reaction. What she's doing is she's bringing her tears, her sighs, her longings ... which are all an expression of her sad heart ... she's bringing them into the presence of God. She's seeking to bring her life underneath God's jurisdiction, a God she trusts is too wise to make mistakes and Who is too kind ever to be cruel. Hannah went to the temple, knelt down in front of the great altar and as the tears streamed down her face, she prayed. I mean she really prayed. She just laid it all on the line with God. *"O Lord Almighty, if you will only look upon 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. I'll really do it, Lord!"*

It's often when we've come to the end of our rope, when there's no where else to turn, that's when we get real with God. The Bible is full of these kinds of prayers ... prayers that bargain and scratch, prayers in which people like Hannah just stand their ground before the Almighty. Give your doubt, give your despair, give your pain a voice, and call that voice prayer. Scream it, yell it, weep it, but open it up to God ... because that is the only place where despair can turn to hope and barrenness become fruitfulness. And as we know, Hannah's prayer is answered.

Just as a bit of a related aside: When Elkanah's clan went to "church" at Shiloh, it was supposed to be a celebration of joy and thanksgiving. But for Hannah, it was there at worship, in the midst of thanksgiving and celebration, that she felt most alone and troubled. It's good to remember that, because it happens all the time today. Of course, worship is a celebration before God of joy and praise and thanksgiving. But for a number of people here on any given Sunday, tears are closer to the surface than joyful celebration. Seeing happy families and healthy people here may remind you of your broken family, or of the children you have lost, or of the children you have never had, or that you are not healthy, or your loved ones are not healthy. Worship is not only a place of gladness, praise, and thanksgiving ... for many it's a place of lament, of sadness, of struggling with God. And that's OK. Gladness AND lament, praise AND sadness, thanksgiving AND struggling with God are OK in this sanctuary. After all, that is the normal story of just about every Christian pilgrimage.

One just can't be involved in congregational life over a long period of time without being aware of the fact that in these pews on a regular basis is life after life after life that is dealing with many of these very same issues, quietly crying out to God, and quite often it is not that we prayed and the tears stopped, but it is that we prayed and we wept more! And some of us may go through years and years dealing with circumstances like this. There are many things for which there is no simple solution. The worship assembly is an acceptable and appropriate place for the tears and lament of Hannah, as well as for the joy and celebration of Elkanah. What *is* important is **you are here**.

As our reading from Hebrews reminds us, the worship assembly is the place to be whether you are feeling happy or sad, thankful or despairing. Hebrews 10:22 – *"Let us draw near to God with a true heart in full assurance of faith, let us hold without wavering to the hope we profess, since he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may provoke one another to love and good works. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another. The phrase "let us provoke one another" can be translated as let us "spur one another on" or let us "incite each other" ... provoking in a good way, mind you; not the belittling, intimidating, nasty way Peninnah provoked Hannah ... it is provoking as to encourage, to prod, to stir each other up to love and good works IN THE MIDST OF HOW IT IS. And the writer of Hebrews includes this crucial admonition: "Let us not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing." What happens in this sanctuary is not just coming together to greet friends, listen to a sermon, sing hymns, hear inspiring, excellent and uplifting music, and/or setting aside time to be "religious." There is something more we miss by not being here meeting together on the Lord's Day ... we miss the power of the Spirit touching us through song, word and prayer in the company of the faithful. And we miss the opportunity to give of ourselves to each other and to be of service to God by being a source of blessing to each other. I know there are times when one just cannot be here. But you can't welcome visitors, greet friends, help give parents a break from the children, give a welcoming smile, a warm greeting, shake the hand of some lonely person for whom that might be the only human touch s/he had all week, and so on ... you can't do that when you are not here, nor can those who are here be touched and welcomed and blessed by others who aren't here. But most of all we miss the presence of Jesus Christ who is always present when His Body is gathered in a way He is not present when we are alone. And when Christ is present in His Body, it is really He who provokes us on to love and good deeds and a better way of living in ways we can't even begin to measure.*

Back to Hannah. When she explained to the priest Eli that she wasn't inebriated, that she was pouring out her soul to God in her anguish and grief, Eli, who really didn't know the details of her need, nevertheless gives her the personal touch of the most amazing assurance and blessing and gentle provocation: *"Go in peace. May the God of Israel grant you what you ask of Him."* And it seems God touched Hannah through faithful Eli who was simply there in the temple to give her those simple words of comfort in her distress; she was apparently blessed by God through his words of assurance, for we are told her appetite returned, her face was uplifted, and she did go her way in peace.

But the really striking thing about this story is that Hannah takes her promise to God seriously. She keeps her end of the bargain. When the child was born, she named him Samuel (*which means, "God has heard."*). Then when her boy was weaned, she brought him to the temple, saying, *"As long as Samuel lives, I give him to God."* She really did it ... she took her baby boy, she packed up his little diaper bag, put him in the stroller and she brought him to the high priest Eli where Samuel lived out the rest of his childhood. And thus this obscure, but faithful, woman from a somewhat dysfunctional family became a key link in the chain that would eventually result in the great dynasty of David which, in turn, would lead to the greater dynasty of the eternal King of Kings, David's greater Son.

Note, too, that she's right back where she started, once again she is a woman without a child. Why would she give back to God the thing she wants most in life? This is really a sermon in itself, but suffice it to say for now I think the point is that Hannah *gave her dream back to God*. She knows Samuel is a gift from God. I think she knows the people and things entrusted to us by God are not ours; they're God's. We are stewards, not owners. In our prayers many of us keep asking God to give us our dreams. Ironically, God wants the same thing, with a slight twist ... He wants us to give Him our dreams. And when we really have given God everything, including our own hearts, then everything else that comes our way can come as a blessing ... blessings we can hold and enjoy for a while, and blessings we'll be able to give back when we have to.

Because one thing we will never have to give back is the love of God that will never let us go.