

Singing the Blues with Hannah

I Samuel 1:1-18

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In 1903, W.C. Handy was waiting for a train in the town of Tutwiler, Mississippi. The train was late and so he fell asleep on the hard wooden bench of the station. He was awakened by an old raggedy man scratching the strings of an old guitar. He was singing about “goin’ to where the Southern cross the dog.”

Handy asked him what the song meant and was told that it was about the tracks of the Yahoo and Mississippi Railroad (which the locals called the yellow dog) where it crossed the tracks of the Southern Railroad in Moorehead, Mississippi. Handy thought this was the weirdest song he had ever heard, but he put it to music and the blues was born.

Handy has been called the “Father of the Blues” although he said that he didn’t invent them, but only presented them to the world.

The blues, as a musical style, is the foundation for most 20th century music including rock and roll, jazz, and even hip-hop. In 1909, Handy moved his band to Memphis and settled on Beale Street, the area which today is known as W.C. Handy Park. It was there in Memphis where he composed his two most famous songs, “Memphis Blues” and “St. Louis Blues.”

The Blues, as a musical style, come out of the hardship of everyday living. They express the honest feelings of those who experience lives of struggle and difficulty. We are in the midst of a Lenten sermon series on singing the Blues with God’s people, because depression and hardship are nothing new to his children. Last week we looked at Moses and the way that he overcame his feelings of depression arising from the constant criticism of his people. Today we will look at Hannah and her depression which came as a result of being denied the privilege of motherhood.

So let’s remember the story. There was this fellow named Elkanah who had two wives. Hannah was the first and the second was named Peninnah. As it so happened, Peninnah had some children, but Hannah had been unable to conceive, and so lived her life in the shadow of the second wife.

In a time when the family name meant everything, Elkanah could trace his lineage back through an impressive history. He had a proud history, but with Hannah, he had no future because of her childlessness. According to Mosaic Law, this was grounds for divorce, but Elkanah loved Hannah with all of his heart. When he made sacrifices to God, he gave some of the meat to Peninnah, but gave extra helpings to Hannah. But this was not enough. Every year, at the time of the feast, Hannah was taunted by the other wife.

I think that we have to understand the role of mothering in that culture. Children were so very important to the economic structure of the society. Often the family’s survival

depended on the children who provided a source of labor. Also, a father's wealth was partially measured by the number of children he had. Large families were a source of tremendous pride.

The pressure on women was intense. In this pre-scientific age, when there was lack of understanding about biological processes, infertility was always viewed as a female problem. They had no idea that sometimes it was a male issue.

So Hannah was living under a cloud of suspicion. Certainly, the other wife thought, there was something wrong with Hannah's relationship with God. There was an arrogance and pride in Peninnah's heart because she was able to do something that Hannah, the favored wife, could not. Out of her arrogance, she taunted and abused Hannah mercilessly. The more Hannah was abused, the more depressed she became, unable to understand why God had not allowed her to give birth. Nothing that her husband could do or say would satisfy her or ease her discomfort.

Even though her husband assured her of his love, she was still unable to be consoled. Elkanah, if we are honest, just didn't get it. He reminds me of most of the male characters on television sitcoms. Think about Tim on "Home Improvement," Jim on "According to Jim," and Ray on "Everybody Loves Raymond." They just don't get it. They just don't understand their wives. Elkanah said to Hannah, "Am I not worth more to you than ten sons?" He thought that would comfort her, but really was simply a self-centered inclusion of his own importance which completely ignored her feelings. That comment put the focus on him and not her.

Hannah was so distraught that she made her way to the sanctuary where she poured out her soul to God in prayer. Through her tears, she offered a bargain. If God would grant her a son, she would present him back to God and dedicate his entire life to God's service.

Now I know that some people really have a problem with bargaining with God. The fact of the matter is that most of us have done it from time to time. In tough times or stormy days, we are all apt to bargain with God for something or other. But it only becomes a bargain if God accepts the offer. And as we know, this was one bargain that was acceptable to God.

She was there in the sanctuary, praying with all of her might, pouring out to God her pain, desperately searching for answers. As her lips moved in silent prayer, the old priest Eli thought that she was drunk. He chastised her, but she responded that, no she hadn't had a drop to drink, but was only praying. Eli's heart softened and he gave her his blessing. "Go in peace. And may the God of Israel give you what you have asked of him." As she left the sanctuary, her heart felt light again. She felt that God had actually listened to her. She knew that things were going to be different. We now know that Hannah was indeed able to bear a son who became the great prophet Samuel, but we are getting a little ahead of the story.

One of the lessons I have learned over the years as I have pastored local churches, came from Clint Eastwood in the movie “Dirty Harry.” At one point, Harry says, “A man’s got to know his limitations.” I fully realize that I am not a pastoral counselor. My wife is, but I am not. I don’t have the skills and quite frankly, don’t have the temperament to enter into long-term, in depth counseling relationships.

Now don’t misunderstand me here. It doesn’t mean I won’t listen. It doesn’t mean that I don’t care. It doesn’t mean that I won’t do my best. It simply means that I know when I am in over my head and need to refer people to others I trust who have specialized training. I have seen other pastors do some real damage to people because they weren’t willing to accept their limitations.

I learned this the hard way because at one point early in my ministry, I thought that I could do some things that I really couldn’t do. I can tell you this story because it happened so long ago in a place far from here. With the passage of time and good psychotherapy, the situation has been overcome and this person has recovered her health.

I started having conversations with a woman on the early side of middle-age whose children had finally grown up and were off to college, leaving mom and dad alone in the house for the first time in over twenty years. Mom was devastated. Her whole life had been wrapped up in her children. That’s not a bad thing. She was a great mom. Her life had been filled with PTA meetings, sporting events, fund raisers, and home room activities. She just had trouble letting go when it was their time to start making a life on their own.

She began having trouble sleeping. Then her appetite started to diminish. She found herself crying for long periods of each day. Nothing her husband did could bring her out of her funk. She felt that God had abandoned her. Her prayers, she said, were bouncing off the ceiling and going no further.

We talked numerous times, but her depression just got deeper and deeper, until she no longer left the house. She shut herself off from her friends, from her church, from all of the activities she used to enjoy. I would give her a call on the phone and she wouldn’t answer. I would go over and knock on her door and she wouldn’t answer. I just wasn’t able to help. I wasn’t even able to convince her to find another professional who had the expertise to help. Her despair was so great that she finally attempted to take her own life.

The Bible doesn’t say that Hannah tried to take her life, but the other symptoms of severe depression are there. She lost her appetite. She spent long hours in her tears. She felt abandoned by God. She didn’t know where to turn. You could tell just by looking at her face that something was severely wrong in her life.

But then came her time in prayer. I’m not exactly sure what happened to Hannah that day, other than the fact that she put everything in God’s hands. Suddenly, she was filled with an inner peace. She knew, after her period of prayer, that God had not abandoned her.

When she left the sanctuary, she was still not pregnant, but she was filled with comfort. She knew that she God might not grant her wish, or perhaps he would. Either way, she was not alone.

She went home to her husband and nine months later gave birth to a son. As she promised, when the child was weaned, she presented him in the sanctuary to be God's servant. Hannah would go on to have more children. She discovered that sometimes the impossible isn't always impossible.

We all have periods of anguish and depression. Perhaps we don't have the depth of feelings that Hannah had. Perhaps our troubles are not as threatening to our feelings of self-worth. But we are all depressed at times.

Through prayer, Hannah understood that things were going to be alright. She had her spirits lifted. She didn't know if God would answer her prayer in the way that she desired or not. But she knew that whatever the answer was, she would continue to reside in God's favor.

God has an amazing ability to bring us comfort in our distress. When we immerse ourselves in prayer, it suddenly isn't quite as important anymore what the answers to those prayers are, because we know that, whatever the answers, we will never be left alone. That is Hannah's story. That is Hannah's witness. That is Hannah's faith.