

Nevertheless, She Persisted

Binkley Baptist Church ~ 18 November 2018

Perhaps because I never carried my daughter in my own body—one of my great joys as a first-time mother was carrying our newly adopted daughter, 3-year-old Deepmala, in my arms. I loved the feeling of her head on my chest, her weight against my right hip. She never grew too heavy for me to hold, even after my mother worried aloud about my hurting my back. Yesterday, I rekindled that embodied joy, carrying young Sola briefly, whose arms reached up happily to many a smiling adult during a meeting to envision Binkley's future.

Still, it is hard to put words to that feeling. When you carry a child, your body takes on the shape of the young one's vulnerability. You experience the wonder of that little body, intricately created, unique and ever growing, leaning against yours. The photo on the front of our bulletin speaks powerfully to all of these emotions – *but* we must take care not to romanticize this Honduran mother treading northward. We must also imagine the dogged strength of her bruised feet, her weary back, her tired arms, and her determined stride to walk days without end. We can barely touch this young mother's hope for a future that cannot be guaranteed—a future that she can only offer up to God in unknowing. Looking at the photo, I feel anxious for this mother and daughter, even despairing. Will all her efforts on behalf of the little girl she carries be for naught?

And so we meet the Hannah of our biblical story, a young woman who also understood desperation. It's hard to reckon the reality of Hannah's situation in the 21st century West. But the reality was that Hannah's value, her esteem in family and culture, were located in her "ability" to bear a child. Even harder to accept is that Hannah's economic well-being ultimately depended upon giving birth to a male child. A male heir would provide Hannah not only acceptance and esteem, but also security in her elder years. For once her husband, Elkanah died, who would care for his beloved, but childless widow, Hannah? Penninah's sons? Not likely. The shame we uncover in this story is the misogyny of

two women pitted against each other in the polygamous effort to secure male heirs.

“Nevertheless, she persisted!” became the rallying cry for women in February 2017, when during Senate confirmation proceedings, Mitch McConnell called out Elizabeth Warren for refusing, despite a rebuke from the Senate Chair to stop reading a letter from Coretta Scott King. The letter strongly opposed Jeff Sessions’ record on civil rights. Meant to quell dissent, McConnell’s words would go on to be stamped on thousands of t-shirts and bumper stickers in honor of Warren’s unwillingness to be silenced – *and that* of all women to be heard.

“Persistence,” “perseverance,” maybe “stubbornness”we might debate the nuance of these words—but wisdom, justice, and peace are rarely borne without them. Projection of ill will, hatred, and violence are much more easily created. We have only to note the political and spiritual divide in our country, and how quickly discord has multiplied in the last two years.

Looking again at the biblical story, we find that Hannah also has a political concern, not obvious at first: that being the corruption of the religious institution and culture she found herself in. The signs are subtle, but would have been evident to the Hebrew reader. For during the family’s ritual visit to Shiloh--Eli, the priest, finds Hannah praying fervently, perhaps rocking back and forth in silent gesture like Jewish men today at the “Wailing Wall.” But, Eli, the religious expert, does not recognize her spiritual fervor. Instead, he accuses Hannah of being drunk. He no longer seems to be able to discern the Spirit of God moving in this daughter of Zion. Perhaps he has grown dull by the corruption in his own house. Korean theologian Yung Suk Kim contends that this moment is key. Hannah becomes prophet speaking to priest: “I am praying with all of my heart,” she says, “can’t you see that?” Eli softens, awakened. To his credit, he is quick to offer Hannah this blessing: “Go in peace. May the God of Israel grant your petition.”

Prayers, blessings, spiritual fervency are a bit challenging for us as progressive Christians. We are so careful to stay alert to scientific understandings; and we never want to fall prey to an emotional piety that

might fail to cry out against injustice. I, for one, am disheartened that many evangelicals in the U.S. today have grown dull to the Jesus they claim to follow: Jesus, who welcomed the stranger, blessed children not his own, fed the hungry. Jesus, the one who saw the kingdom of God in the small and often ordinary acts of faith.

Nevertheless, like Hannah, I will persist; I will not give up the piety of prayer because I don't fully understand its strength. And I will not choose action over prayer because they are intertwined. I have spent twenty years life meditating on a line from spiritual writer, Evelyn Underhill. She claimed that "Prayer is the closest thing to absolute action," even as she heard and heeded the admonition in the book of James: "What good is it to say to the hungry: 'Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill,' without supplying their bodily needs." (2:16)

There is sexism throughout the story of Hannah. Her political action may be missed, but in fact, she did the only thing she could: she gave birth to a son, a son she offered back to God for the well-being of her people. She could not claim to be a full-fledged prophet, and her child would not be hers in the end. I love her hesitancy, however; she doesn't offer Samuel back to God too soon. She cradles Samuel, carries him, feeds him, instills in him a deep love for good, and gives him a righteous beginning. In fact, she doesn't quite *give* Samuel back to God; rather she lends him. Speaking to Eli, with her young son in tow, "It was for this boy that I prayed. The Lord granted me my petition. And I, in turn have granted him for the asking to the Lord. All the days of his life, he is lent to the Lord."

In the midrash of Hannah that Ellin portrayed, Hannah's yearly return to Shiloh is particularly tender: "Each year, about a month before we'd go, I would make him a new robe of the finest linen. Each stitch carefully in place. And I would imagine how it would rest on those shoulders that fit so perfectly in my hands."

Prayer, like action, takes awareness, resilience, and persistence. The apostle Paul enjoined the Thessalonians to "pray without ceasing." For, at the very least, prayer awakens us to the longings of our heart and to the injustices of our day. At the most, the Divine takes our prayer and weaves

it into the healing power that reaches persons we've never met, and into the loving web that saves creation.

I have a small story, perhaps even a parable, illustrating the power of multiplication. It's a humble story, so bear with me. About three years ago, I became interested in composting—mostly because, during Vacation Bible School, Muriel Williman, at that time an educator with Orange County, took a group of children on a walking field trip to see the composting site at the Community Center Park, just up the way on Estes.

It was a very hot day, and unfortunately, Muriel found a snake enjoying the warm food scraps in the bin she uncovered. That was discouraging, and moreover, when I looked it up online, home composting sounded too complicated to me. I gave up the idea. But over the many months as I prayed and longed for a way to help God's planet—I became more and more aware of the food that I discarded in packaging, which smothered in landfills, released methane gas, rather than nourished the Earth.

Fast forward to this past spring, and the working witness of Linda Bourne and Karin Mills in our congregation, and lo and behold, Binkley at the young age of 60 has begun to compost. Instead of vast quantities of food left over from KidSCOPE meals going to the landfill, they are going to create dirt. Instead of scraps from Wednesday Nights filling up trash bins, they are carefully channeled to compost. In case you think such an effort is small next to our global climate crisis, a healthy estimate is that at Binkley—since April—over 14,000 pounds of food waste at Binkley has been diverted from landfills, and is renewing topsoil.

So it is may be strange to think of prayer like compost; yet, it also grows through persistent practice, because as is often said, prayer changes the prayer-er. It opens our eyes to see from fresh perspectives. But more than that, it also claims our will, and changes our heart. And then like the mystery of love, prayer reaches beyond the visible realm of cause and effect. It joins the Divine in creating new possibilities in matter, and in spirit; in politics, and in churches.

There is a part of Hannah's story that we have not yet heard. It is the song that she sings, the prayer that she offers upon leaving Samuel with Eli

that first time. Reflecting on Josh Dumbetons's music notes in our bulletin, we see that Hannah's song echoes in Mary's Magnificat. It is in Hannah's song that we also hear hints of the Beatitudes that Austin read for us. Like the Beatitudes, Hannah's song is one reversal, of upending; of the small becoming great. The poor are raised up from the dust and honored, and rich and powerful must finally answer for their sins. Here, Hannah is fully prophet, her voice strong, her words remembered.

I am still worried about the young mother on our bulletin cover, and anxious all of the parents traveling with her, and for all of these children God loves. So I will pray, I will vote; I will look for opportunities to help others like her. For I see in her the face of God, persistent on behalf of love. God, too, lives by this law of love. And such love is costly and one's feet ache.

Here is the poem I thought to use at the end, but decided against it; it also informed my sermon:

"Optimism" by Jane Hirschfield

More and more I have come to admire resilience.
Not the simple resistance of a pillow, whose foam
returns over and over to the same shape, but the sinuous
tenacity of a tree: finding the light newly blocked on one side,
it turns in another. A blind intelligence, true.
But out of such persistence arose turtles, rivers,
mitochondria, figs -- all this resinous, unretractable earth.