

Hannah's Prayer
 1 Samuel 1:4-2:10
 November 14, 2021*

May the God who creates us,

Please be seated.

Good Morning!

One thousand years
 after the prophet Abraham
 had his opening conversations
 with the Holy of Holies—
 One thousand years **after**
 God told Abraham
 that his descendants
 would be more numerous than the stars...
 and one thousand years **before**
 the angel of the Lord appeared to Mary—
 -one thousand years **before**
 the angels blew open the night sky
 above the shepherds in the fields
 One thousand years after and
 One thousand years before
 right in the middle—
 along the spine of salvation history-
--Hannah went to the temple to pray.

This is where our story begins.
 Hannah only knows sorrow,
 Hannah only knows anguish.
 Look at her circumstances...
 more than anything,
 she wants to have a child.
 There she is,
 married to Elkanah who truly loves her,
 but she is unable
 to accomplish the one thing
 that gives a woman value in her culture,
 she is unable to conceive.
 Only by bearing children
 could a woman
 offer esteem to her husband
 and show her worth in that day and age.
 What happens when Hannah can't do this?
 Elkanah takes a second wife
 who then bears many children.
 Now Elkanah still loves Hannah,
 that much is clear,
 but he needed children
 so he does what any man
 of that time
 in his situation would do.

Elkanah is happy,
 but his wives,
 not so much.
 Penninah, wife #2,
 (now there's title to aspire to.)
 Penninah knows Elkanah
 loves Hannah more,
 it's obvious in the way he treats her,
 so, in her jealousy
 she taunts Hannah whenever she can.

We can imagine the kinds of things
 Penninah might say:
 Look at all my children, hmmph
 "Busy, busy, busy I am-
 --you—not so much"
 You are short on value
 and long on need--
 ---merely another mouth to feed.
 With Penninah's children running all around,
 Hannah lives
 with the constant reminder of what isn't.

The story today begins
 with the annual festival at Shiloh –
 this is Holy Ground,
 the temple
 where the Ark of the Covenant is kept,
 the family has traveled together some distance to worship.
 (Certainly a road trip for the family album.)
 And everyone
 can see Elkanah has two wives.
 They'd all know why –
 we can hear the whispers –
 she's the barren one,
 he had to take a second wife,
 on and on...
 all this in the midst
 of what's supposed to be
 a time of celebration.

...after the appointed prayers
 and ritual sacrifices,
 Elkanah gives portions
 of the sacrificial meat to everyone
 in his family,
 giving two portions to Hannah,
 because he loves her so much.

But her anguish is too deep.
 She cannot eat,
 she cannot be comforted
 by her husband's clumsy
 but well-intentioned attempts to console.

(Aren't I better than 10 sons?)

Well, actually no.
Because her loving husband
can't change the fact that she can't have a child.
Elkanah can't ease her pain.
It runs too deep.
No other person can fix it.

So then---
What does Hannah do?
She prays.
She slips into the temple,
and pours out her soul to God.
She is so heartbroken
that all she can do
is weep and rock,
her lips mouthing her fervent prayers.
She lets it all out,
every ounce of misery,
every memory of torment,
every anguish-filled broken dream,
Hannah lets it all out.

She completely ignores
conventional practice,
she does what she's not supposed to do.
She does not settle for her life as it is.
She walks
right into the holy place,
she does not make a sacrifice or use incense
(which is what the priest Eli would have expected)
in fact she, a woman,
completely ignores him,
the powerful priest, and just prays.

He can't fathom that,
so he assumes she's drunk.
No, she's not drunk, it's
Worse than that she is brokenhearted,
and she needs to pray.

She does so,
in her own voice,
in her own words.
It's the most honest,
vulnerable thing Hannah could do.
Pray.
And she offers her prayer,
trusting that God loves her,
that God will hear her.

Having found the courage to walk into the temple to pray,
Hannah walks out of the temple,

a changed person,
she doesn't know
how her story will unfold.

She doesn't know
-that she will give birth to Samuel –
-the prophet
who will find and anoint David
—the Greatest King the Israelites have ever had.

All that comes later.

She just knows that having opened herself to God, having named the profound hole in her life, the hole in her soul, now God is with her.

I have to admit,
I like her story, but at the same time,
there are times
when it seems to me that prayer
is NOT enough.
Sometimes I want something
more tangible,
and simply praying
seems inadequate, anemic...
I struggle with Hannah and her prayer.

Several times this week, as I sat with people, by phone or by Zoom, my seeming inability to “fix things” haunted me. But at the end of a particularly moving conversation I was struck by the person's vulnerable request of me. The person said, “Bishop, I covet your prayers. The person went on to say, Literally the only thing that is keeping me going, is my habit of saying the daily office, that prayer keeps me going, it is the thing I hang onto. “And I would welcome yours as well.”

And I came to that profound truth again,
as if for the first time,
that sometimes like Hannah
all we have is prayer---those mumbled— barely uttered
desperate words of pure need—prayer.

We all have moments, times,
don't we,
when our hearts are broken,
when we're unsure of what will come.

When things aren't right
and no one else can fix it...
times when all we can do is pray.

There's something, about using our agency to
Come to God, to own
our brokenness,
our vulnerability----
It's in that coming to God

where we create space for God.
That's where God meets us
and joins us—and fills us.

And we are not alone.

Sometimes all we HAVE is prayer. And having that prayer, asking for that prayer, offering that prayer is enough. For today.

AMEN.