

November 14, 2021 | 1 Samuel 1:4-20

kind of hurt



KIND OF HURT

1 SAMUEL 1:4-20

Everything in Hannah's life was hurting her that day.

For a long time, she'd been wanting to have a baby, and it hadn't happened. The heartbreak of this unfulfilled desire to be a mother was made even worse by the knowledge that having a child, especially a son, was also her retirement plan. With no social security net other than the younger generations of one's family, having a child was a matter of love, but also a matter of long-term economic security, especially for women.

On top of that, her husband Elkanah's other wife Peninnah was...rubbing it in. It is easy to imagine the constant wearing-down that Hannah must have experienced; living in the same household with Peninnah and Peninnah's children would have been painful enough, but the constant bullying, the snide comments, the daily severe provocation...Hannah had no respite, nowhere to go to get away from her hurt.

Elkanah's attempt at reassurance – am I not more to you than ten sons? – it's well-meaning, but it kind of makes it about him, don't you think? Rather than acknowledging Hannah's hurt and vulnerability, for her sake.

It's a pretty dysfunctional family situation. A three-person marriage is an unusual family configuration these days, but it was socially-acceptable then, so we can't really call that the root cause of it. Imagine if, instead of constantly bullying Hannah, Peninnah had been a supportive female friend to her; a shoulder to cry on, an ear to listen, perhaps even sharing together in the mothering of the children – not the same, of course, but a close friendship can be a deep well of strength and encouragement when we are hurting.

Or imagine if, instead of trying to re-direct Hannah's focus away from her own fears and hurts and onto himself, Elkanah had instead said: Hannah, you are worth me than ten sons. Don't worry about the future; I'll see to it that you're okay.

But no.

Neither Peninnah nor Elkanah offered Hannah the support, the love, the economic security, that she needed to heal her broken heart and let go of her fears. So in desperation, when she could stand it no longer, Hannah made a pilgrimage to the Temple at Shiloh to beg for some divine help instead. As she prayed out her misery to God, made passionate by years of Elkanah's well-meaning uselessness, by Peninnah's bullying and her own deep heartbreak and fear, Hannah was hurt again, this time by Eli the priest.

Eli assumes that Hannah's drunk and babbling, right in the middle of God's holy place. And he told her to pull herself together and leave, because she's making a public spectacle of herself.

Would we have made the same assumption that Eli did, in those circumstances? I like to think we wouldn't, but it's hard to say. Perhaps he was in a hurry, or not looking very closely. A few chapters on in 1 Samuel, and we will discover that Eli is not the sharpest knife in the drawer when it comes to the deeper significance of what's going on around him. For those of you who remember the story of Hannah's son Samuel and Eli, you'll know that it took Eli a while to work out that if it wasn't Eli calling for Samuel in the night, then it's probably God.

But you know, I wonder if Eli's misreading of Hannah, his assumption that she was embarrassingly and publicly drunk, I wonder if that had more to do with Eli's own dysfunctional family situation than anything else. His sons, Hophni and Phineas, who had inherited their positions as priests in the Temple, too, were not good men.

Sacrificing animals was part of how God's people asked for forgiveness back then, and Eli's sons would steal the best cuts of meat and make a feast of it, offending God, stealing from the Temple, and violating the trust that the people offering those sacrifices placed in them. They drank and acted violently, even assaulting the women who served in the Temple. They were awful men, and their father Eli either didn't or couldn't stop them.

When we are carrying a hidden shame like that, when someone in our family or we ourselves have a deep flaw...sometimes we might be hyper-aware and extra-critical of that same flaw in others.

So worn down and embarrassed from constantly dealing with his sons making a public spectacle with their terrible behaviour, Eli jumps all over Hannah as someone he can tell off and punish, because he sure can't do it to his sons.

So Eli makes a mistake, accuses Hannah of something bad when she's really hurting, and then of course he has to back down. And maybe his blessing of Hannah and his priestly assurance that what she asked for would be granted comes at least in part from the fact that he was over-compensating for his priestly, pastoral screw-up.

We can imagine the sinking feeling in Eli's gut, his frantic inner monologue, the red flush rising up his neck and his face as he realized that the woman he had just accused of being a drunk was actually a faithful and devout person who was pouring out her broken heart to God. We know what Hannah was praying for: a son, which she thought would be the solution to all her problems, a balm and an end to all her other hurts. Eli did not know, though, and given Hannah's situation she could have been asking God for something else. Eli had no idea what the source of Hannah's anguish and grief was, and human beings are not perfect, so she might have been praying for Peninnah or her husband to just drop dead. Eli didn't know she was asking for a son, and he certainly didn't know that he himself would end up raising that son as soon as he was old enough to leave home and be dedicated to the Temple in service of God. All Eli knew was that he had made a stupid mistake and it had embarrassed him, so he over-reached a bit as a way to compensate for his error.

There are two ways to tell the story of the birth of Samuel, and both are equally true.

Samuel's mother yearned for a child, and in a repeated miracle in the Bible, coming about through a deep moment of personal encounter with God, she conceived after years of infertility. The child is born, grows up in the Temple, is personally called by God and plays a pivotal role in the unfolding of the political and theological history of God's people. Samuel, after all, would go on to anoint Saul as the first king of Israel, and David after him. And from that line of kings would eventually come Jesus, and the fulfillment of God's saving plan for creation and everything in it.

Told like this, the story becomes a tale of miracles and God's powerful hand shaping history, the kind of supernatural, dramatic divine action that we just don't seem to see much these days.

Anyone who reads the Old Testament and thinks that it is a collection of simple, straightforward stories in which the machinations of God's providential care work in miraculous ways, the likes of which we could never see happening in our world today, anyone who truly thinks that, may need to take a closer look at how things actually happen in the Bible.

The other way of telling this story is to start with bullied, heart-broken Hannah, clueless, ineffectual Elkanah, and mean, abusive Peninnah; with passive screw-up Eli and his blasphemous, drunken publicly-embarrassing sons.

The fact is that the extraordinary work of God often emerges from the cracks and fissures of ordinary people: from their ordinary, sometimes flawed and unpleasant personalities and their ordinary, hurt-filled, mistake-laden lives. Out of this tangled mess of dysfunctional relationships emerged one of the great movements of God's good and saving plan, a movement that led all the way to Jesus, born of King David's lineage. God did something incredible through Hannah's son, Samuel; but perhaps the most unexpected part of it is that God did it through these unhappy people and unfortunate events.

At the heart of every Christian's faith is a challenging pair of truths: that God is completely sovereign – in charge and powerful – and that God is completely good, all the time.

It's easy to agree to those two statements independently of each other – that God is sovereign and God is good – but it takes a bit more thinking to believe both of them at the same time. Because where does that leave Hannah?

God's sovereign plan is Samuel and everything good that happens through him and after him. Did God set aside God's goodness when it came to Hannah, though? Did God withhold the longed-for baby and the economic security that came with a son, and inspire Peninnah's bullying, and nurture Elkanah's self-centeredness, and cause Eli to be publicly critical and rude to her? Just to get to Samuel?

I want to answer no to those questions; I hope that you do, too. Yes, God had a plan for Hannah and for her son, Samuel. And no, God did not cause Hannah's suffering.

Most of the suffering and tragedy that human beings experience is caused by the choices and actions of human beings.

Sometimes we suffer through the consequences of our own decisions; often, we are hurt by others; always, we are impacted by the larger human-made processes of economics and culture, justice and politics.

Like it or not, God created us with the capacity to choose how we think and speak and act; he also offers us a bottomless well of wisdom to draw from, encouragement and good examples, a clear path to redemption in Jesus, and the indwelling Spirit to help...but in the end, God loves us too much to force us or coerce us.

We make our choices, and sometimes those choices hurt us or hurt others.

The sovereign power and goodness of God are found in God's ability to take even our worst mistakes and most painful moments, and create something new and good from them.

God's plans can't be stopped by our foibles, our wrong turns, our meanness, even our sinfulness. In God's sovereign hand, even the tragedies of this life can be a prelude to something new and good.

I'm not going to ask you if you've ever experienced the kind of hurt that Hannah did; even though the details might be different, I know that you have, because we all have, at some point; you might even be coping with it today.

But I am going to ask you if you've ever been tempted to pray for a sign from God. Or maybe you've even done it, asked God to show you something real and definite to help you make a decision or know that God is there, with you.

That's kind of what Hannah was doing with her prayer; no one else in her life seemed to see her as a real, hurting person, choosing to either using her pain and desperation against her or failing to acknowledge that she was hurting at all. But if God gave her a son, then she would know for sure that God saw her and understood her pain.

Of course there are Bible stories that seem to support the idea that God does operate through the doling out of special miraculous signs; Moses and his

burning bush, for example, or the parting of the Red Sea for God's people to cross, Egypt hot on their heels.

Mostly it doesn't work like that; I don't think it even really worked like that for Hannah: she got her baby in the end, but only for a few years, until he left as young boy to go and live in the Temple. We're sometimes even a bit suspicious of people who claim that God gives them signs, more likely to chalk it up to coincidence or hope, because most of those "signs" are nothing so obvious and unequivocal that every person who saw it would know it was from God.

Instead, I would say that "signs" from God are part of a conversation that someone is having with God, a revelation and a certainty about God's power and presence and goodness that emerges through the kind of deep personal encounter between us and God, like the one Hannah had in the Temple.

In this story, if we look closely, the working of God is a much more ordinary than a first glance might lead us to think. St. Teresa of Avila, the leader of a monastic community in the 1500s, once wrote that "Christ dwells among the pots and pans." That was her way of saying that if we don't bump into Jesus on an ordinary day, we likely won't run into him much at all.

And that is good news for us.

We don't need to be able to handle the extraordinary on a regular basis, but we can do ordinary. And if we can see and be seen by God in our ordinary lives, if God can work good through our ordinary selves, even when we are petty or clueless or judgemental, well, I think that's pretty miraculous all by itself.

God's ability to create good from anything is not an excuse for us not to try, to choose to behave in hurtful, ugly ways, to not choose to work and live for God ourselves. But it does provide a light at the end of the tunnel, some hope, that our lives can always be vehicles for good, for the history-shaping, life-healing, saving work of God. And that work is not going to be stopped. Not by us, and not by the kinds of people out there who chose to hurt and abuse and not care about their neighbours at all.

The whole story of Hannah and Samuel and how Samuel is called to be this pivotal figure in history – it's a lovely, inspiring story.

But just behind the loveliness and the lyric unfolding of God's plan are a lot of other things that are very familiar to we inhabitants of this broken, flawed world filled with people and things that can hurt of us, sometimes in devastating ways. And while miracles and prophets and changing the course of a nation's history may be a bit beyond our experience, the kind of hurt Hannah experienced is not. We can see ourselves in this story. Thankfully, we can see God in this story, too. Thanks be to God. Amen.