

Rev. Julie U. Riley
I Samuel -1:4-20, 2:1-10
November 15, 2009

Annie was an aspiring artist. After graduating from the San Francisco Art Institute, her professors encouraged her to pursue a post graduate degree, but Annie had different ideas. She sold all her belongings and bought a plane ticket to Florence where she studied with the masters while waiting tables to pay rent on her room above the restaurant. When she could string two days off together, she traveled throughout Italy to see the great masterpieces; she especially loved Rome and Venice. She was a painter, and she loved the Italian artist, particularly Michelangelo. It was not unusual for her to sit for hours and study a painting. Annie could never pick a favorite painting, but Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* was definitely in her top ten. At times she would simply study that small space between God's fingertip and Adam's. That painting spoke to her, she said, because sometimes when she painted she felt as though she could almost touch God's hand. She felt such a connection when she created life on her canvass; she could feel God's power and the joy of creating something out of nothing. She had no illusions that she was God herself, but through her art she felt God's presence in an indescribable way. Annie was a very promising artist. She had sold a few pieces, and she had a show scheduled at a lesser known gallery in Florence in the fall. She wasn't ready to give up waitressing, but she thought that if the show went well...then maybe she might take the leap.

Annie went home for her brother's wedding in April. Her parents were farmers in rural Iowa, and they never understood why Annie would want to live in a foreign country, but they knew how much it meant to her, so they never complained, at least not in front of her. They were proud of her, and they knew she had talent. They wanted her to be happy; they just wished that she could somehow be happy a little bit closer to home.

While she was at home, Annie was eager to help out on the farm. Annie had been driving the tractor since she was 9 years old. Her dad still had the same tractor. In fact he had had that old tractor for as long as Annie could remember. It had always been a little bit cantankerous, but she knew what to do. Monday morning she had not been on the tractor for 10 minutes when it began to act up. She hopped down and began to tinker as she always had, but something went wrong, and before she knew it, her hand was trapped in the machinery. She survived the accident, but they were unable to save her hand. In an instant, her career as an artist was over.

In the weeks and months ahead, as Annie recovered from her accident, her family tried to no avail to console her. They told her she could live on the farm with them, they'd take care of her; maybe she could even teach. Annie thought her life was over, at time she even considered ending it all herself. Without her hand, she could see no future.

This is how Hannah must have felt that day in the temple. Without a child, her life had no meaning. As if she did not already feel like a failure, Penninnah only made things worse parading her brood about like a momma duck and all her ducklings. “Oh no, don’t bother Hannah, she doesn’t know what it’s like to be a mother.” Elkanah tried to console her, reassuring her that he loved her with or without a child, but he had no way of knowing what a child meant to Hannah. His words were empty and could not impact her deep sorrow. Hannah did the only thing she knew to do, she prayed. Hannah did not offer the double portioned sacrifice her husband had given to her; she did not form an eloquent prayer like she had heard her mother do when she was a little girl. Hannah did not even ask the priest to offer a prayer on her own behalf. Instead, Hannah laid out her heart and soul to God. She did not withhold her anger or her sorrow, but laid it all out before the Lord. Hannah trusted that God was concerned about even her. In her culture without a child Hannah had no worth, but she trusted that in God’s eyes she had value. Where Elkanah did not understand the depth of Hannah’s pain, God did. God knew her, really knew her, and Hannah trusted that God cared for her and that God would work even in her deepest vulnerability.

Hannah was more faithful than I have been. One day, several years ago, I was visiting with my spiritual mentor about a situation in my own life. He asked me if I had prayed about it. I told him that I thought God had more important things to do than to worry with my petty concerns. My mentor looked at me incredulously and asked, “Do you not believe that God is limitless???” “Of course I do,” I responded. “Then don’t you think that God can embrace all the poverty and violence in the world and still be concerned about you? Your problems may not be a concern for anyone else, but because they cause you pain, God is concerned about them.”

My mentor’s words that day have forever changed my prayer life. I no longer judge whether my problems are worthy of God’s concern, because I trust that I am worthy, not because of anything I have done, but because of everything that God is. This is what Hannah did, and what happened next is very interesting. Hannah’s sadness left her. This happened not when she conceived, nor when she gave birth, but when she gave her pain over to God and trusted that while she was helpless, God was all powerful, and while the world might find her worthless, God found her worthy.

As Hannah’s story continues, she does something else that surprises me. Her song of praise that echoes throughout the generations comes not with the discovery of her pregnancy or even with the birth of her child. Hannah breaks forth in song after fulfilling her promise and returning her son to the temple, to live out his life as a nazirite.

My daughters are only in 7th and 8th grade and I am already grieving them going off to college. I cannot imagine wanting and waiting for a son for so long, then having such a miraculous pregnancy and then giving the young boy up so soon to be raised by a man that treated you so poorly, but Hannah broke forth in song. Hannah knew that Samuel did not belong to her, but he

belonged to God. Hannah knew that the child she gave birth to was not something she had earned by anything she had done, that child was a gift. By the world's standards, the child Hannah gave birth to brought Hannah status and worth, but Hannah gave back to God her only son, for she understood that her status and worth came not from the child, but from God. Hannah gave the gift of her only son to God in grateful praise, for out of God's generosity, Hannah had a precious gift to offer, and she did so with thanks and praise. I cannot imagine a more beautiful picture of stewardship, than this.