

Hannah – Woman of Fiery Hope

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1 Samuel

If you were asked, at your lowest moments, what you look to as a sign of hope - what would you say? When you're personally discouraged and feel misunderstood..... or you've watched one too many news programs and you feel like saying what's the point. Where do you turn? What sustains you?

Is there an image - a thought - a person - an action - that gives you hope, restores your spirit and gives you what you need to go at it again? (silence)

More and more people, I find, are feeling hopeless these days. Where to turn? What to do? Right off the top I have to say I have no easy Pollyanna answers, and depending on the day you ask me, my own answer to that question would bewell...some days I might just shake my head and say ask me tomorrow. You know?

Being outside helps. If you know me you might be laughing right now but even I know that walking among trees, or watching the water, or listening to the wind....is restorative.

So is sleep. And something helpful to do.

Now - this is not 10 easy steps to restore hope. But it's good to say out loud to one another that there are times when hope seems far away, and it's good too, to speak honestly about what helps.

One of the most helpful things I've ever done is to deliberately develop a cluster of quotes, short prayers, images and people that inspire me and give me hope. More and more I turn to them. Do you have some of those?

Let me offer you two possibilities from today's text: Signs of hope? The birth of a baby. And Hannah herself. Hannah is a woman whose story really gives me courage. We meet her first, caught in a terrible predicament: she is unable to bear children in a society where her value is measured by her ability to produce sons. Her husband loves her, but doesn't understand her deepest pain. I like the honesty in her. I like her emotions and the way she expresses them. And mostly I like how she believes so fiercely that God will bring new life into her life. She goes to the temple and pours out her heart to God. Do you remember what happened?

9-11

What a sign of strength and hope! Someone not afraid to pour out her heart to God. I find that so many of us are ashamed, maybe, or afraid of our strongest feelings - especially if they're negative ones. . . anger, or deep pain and we hide them from each other and from ourselves, and especially from God. (As though you could.) And as though they weren't acceptable - you know?

But of one of the things I like about the Bible is that it's so honest about human feelings - read the Psalms - every human emotion is there - and strongly. People angry - shaking their fist in the face of

God. Deepest despair - tears, loud weeping - all poured out before God.

And there is Hannah - obviously a woman of strong feelings and able to express the. She weeps. She refuses to eat. She cries bitterly. A strong and passionate woman. There's strength in that. There's hope in that. As long as you're pouring that out and as long as you're in conversation with God - even if the conversation is like that - there's hope and openness there,

But not everyone feels that way, do they? Strong feelings are not acceptable in some quarters . . . sometimes in the church. When someone expresses anger and tears - instead of seeing it as strength and a form of prayer and justice seeking. What do people say? That person is hysterical - unstable - maybe they've been drinking. The priest - the religious establishment did not understand or respect her strength of emotion, her form of prayer.

vs. 14

We don't want you and your pain here. We don't want to see that. The way that you pray? It just doesn't cut it around here. Please leave. Your emotions are disturbing to us – embarrassing.

It's that way too, often, when people feel passionately about a social cause. The environment, race relations, gender equity, name it...these are things that touch people deeply and often they are emotional when they speak and actand I don't know if you are on Face Book or other social media, but the response to that passion can be brutal. What's WRONG WITH YOU – and your emotion, your deepest passion and compassion is used against you.

I don't know if you've ever had that experience - if not I hope you never do. If so - you're in good company. To bring the pain of your being - the deep anguish of your heart bring it to the one place you'd expect understanding and support and have it misunderstood and dismissed.

vs. 14

What would you have done in Hannah's place? She answers with intelligence and dignity. She will not be driven away from the house of God by someone's misunderstanding of her, deliberate or not.

She will not be driven away.

She will not, either, sink to answering with hurtful words back.

She looks him square in the eye and says how it is for her. Honestly - without spite but also without backing down:

vs. 15

He replies to her "go in peace" but it was he who received a blessing from that exchange. Hannah believed passionately that things could and would be different and she prayed and waited offering herself as a vessel for the new life God was going to bring into being. She believed with all her heart, she believed fiercely that things could change that life would come and she waited actively until that day came.

I don't know if that touches your life personally but it certainly touches mine. I really admire her - she's

one of my Biblical heroes - and when I get discouraged she's someone I remind myself about.

What I wonder, though, is what this has to say to our church. When I think about our church right now this morning - and by that I mean the whole United Church of Canada - all mainline churches as well as WUC I'd like to lift up that encounter again and see if there's some light shining through.

9-18

We've got strong things going on there. Eli is the priest - he's getting old - his sons, Hophni and Phineas are not going to take over - his time is almost through. His ways are going to be replaced and the future is not as he had imagined or counted on. He's a good priest - he's given himself and served well. But his time is fast coming to an end. And he's angry.

Hannah on the other hand is also struggling with know that things haven't turned out the way she expected or wanted - she wants new life - changes - and she's angry.

On the one hand people hungering, aching, hurting for change that they believe will bring new life. On the other hand, people hungering, aching, hurting because that change is happening because they found life the way it used to be and they know that time is over now. And yet others are longing, crying, praying for that change to happen faster. It's hard The church of our childhood is no more. The church I chose for my own and was trained to lead - conciliar government, social justice and prophetic - is at times unrecognizable to me. I want it to be how it used to be. Is it that way for you?

No wonder there are clashes from time to time - no wonder we misunderstand one another sometimes. To me it's all there in this encounter between Hannah and Eli. But the clash is not the end of the story. They talk it out and come to at least some understanding of each other - and after that encounter Hannah goes home and conceives.

Out of their honest meeting comes the future which surprises both of them. The birth of a child who will be Samuel - prophet and true lover of God.

We clash here at times. We misunderstand one another sometimes, I believe deliberately. But that's not the end. We talk - we work at it and suddenly, before us there are children, and they're downstairs making lego scenes from the good Samaritan and they are making noise and it's wonderful, and we know that there is a future - God's future. And that God's future will surprise all of us and that it belongs to them more than to any of us and we are honoured to pave the way as faithfully as we can so that when God's word comes to them, we with our own agendas will not stand in their way but have the grace to put away our robes and teach them to say, "Speak Lord - your servant is listening."