

Hannah – Woman of Fiery Hope

If you were asked, at your lowest moments, what you look to as a sign of hope – what would you say?

When you are discouraged, and feel misunderstood
Or feel like saying “what’s the point?”

Where do you turn?
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???

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 two possibilities today 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 own life.

She goes to the temple and pours out her heart to God – do you remember what happened?

(read verses 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 for example or deep pain. And so we hide them from each other and from ourselves and especially from God (as though we could but still) As though they are not acceptable....

But one of the things I love about the Bible is that it's so honest about human feelings. Read some of the Psalms....every human emotion is there – and strongly. People angry, shaking their fists in the face of God.... Deep despair too...tears, loud weeping....all poured out to God. And here is Hannah – obviously a woman of strong feelings, and able to express them. She weeps, she refuses to eat, she cries bitterly....a strong, passionate woman.

There's strength in that. There's hope in that. As long as you're pouring it out As long as you're in conversation with God – even if the conversation is like that – Then there's openness, and hope.

But not everyone feels that way, right? Strong feelings are not acceptable in some quarters....sometimes in 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

That's what Eli did.

The priest – symbol of the religious establishment – did not understand or respect her strength of emotion; her form of prayer.

(Read vs 14)

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

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 deepest anguish of your heart – to bring it to the one place you'd expect understanding and support and have it misunderstood and dismissed?

(Vs 14 again)

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 speaks her truth. Honestly, without spite but also without backing down.

Verse 15

Eli replies to her "go in peace" but it was HE who received the blessing from that exchange.

Hannah believed passionately that things could and would change. 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 new 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 UCC, as well as our congregation here at 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 knowing that things haven't turned out the way she expected or wanted.
She wants new life, changes – and she too is angry.

On the one hand, people hungering, aching, hurting for change that they believe will bring new life
And on the other hand, people hungering, aching, hurting because that change is happening.
Because they found life the way it used to be – they liked it that way. It fed them. And now, that time is over.
That's a pretty good picture of our church isn't it?

For example, the church I chose for my own at age 14....the church I was trained to give leadership in – the church of the 1970s...is simply no more. What was once so familiar, so...comfortable, the way Our conciliar system of government, our deep social justice voice at the national level...is at times unrecognizable to me. And I want it to be the way it USED to be!
And yet – there are others longing, crying and praying for that very change to happen, and faster. It's HARD.

No wonder there are clashes from time to time. No wonder we sometimes misunderstand one another....
To me it's all here in the encounter between H and E
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, H goes home and conceives.
Out of their honest meeting, comes the future. Which surprises both of them.
The birth of a child
Who will grow up to be Israel's first prophet, and true lover of God

We clash at times and misunderstand
But that's not the end. We talk, we work at it, and suddenly, before us, there's life

And a future. Here in this place it takes the form of a vital group of kids...and it's our privilege and joy and solemn duty
To know that the future belongs to them and to God
And to have the grace - when the voice comes in the night – to gather them into our arms and tell them to whom the voice belongs, what the voice has meant to us, to tell them That they are precious and loved and that they have the ears to hear
And then get out of the way and let the future unfold.