

Mary Elizabeth Hanchey  
November 14, 2021

## The Lord Closed Her Womb 1 Samuel 1:4-20; 1 Samuel 2:1-10

“The Lord closed her womb” is a ridiculous and hurtful thing to say and it is a poignant demonstration of why we have to do a better job reading scripture: why we have to learn to read scripture with more than a passing glance, and why we must put energy into studying it together as a community.

That’s my whole sermon. It’s stewardship Sunday. Please Shine your light. Let’s pass the plate.

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You are totally wondering if I really am just going to sit down, aren’t you. It’s tempting.

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It’s possible that if we pick at these passages we might find something more.

Something that makes me even more irritated!

This is a story about infertility.

And as this story is set up, Hannah is already the second wife in a polygamous marriage. So it’s not a trustworthy script for approaching infertility from a world view, or God-view, that meshes with our experiences.

But on top of the polygomy, there is the derisive assessment of Hannah's response. The grieving woman is praying. She is praying silently - only her lips are moving - and Eli says "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine."

For the love of God, when are we going to stop doing this to women? We haven't stopped yet.

Did you know that 1 in 4 couples have trouble achieving and sustaining a pregnancy? 1 in 4. But we don't really talk about it because we wouldn't want to make a spectacle of our grief. Don't announce your pregnancy until the second trimester because something might happen. . .

What?

Because you might go through one of the most traumatic and heartbreaking times of your life and you wouldn't want anyone to know?

Eli represents the religious institution at that point and Hannah has to talk back to him - "Hey. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time." Make it plain, Hannah.

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But then, suddenly there is this neatly packaged end of this story, like a perfectly wrapped baby gift - crisp corners, fluffy bow - "the Lord remembered her. In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, ' I have asked him of the Lord.'"

And I am over here banging my head on the desk because we all know THAT IS NOT HOW IT WORKS. "Just rise early in the morning and worship the Lord, and you will get whatever you ask of the Lord" is nothing more than the prosperity gospel, which I cannot abide as a pastor to people whose lives are sometimes unbearably hard.

But don't we accidentally make that claim sometimes? "Just trust God's timing," we might say. "God has a plan," we might carelessly offer. And look, I'm not saying there isn't divine and holy engagement with our lives, or hurts, our dreams, our becoming...but I am saying God doesn't just go around closing wombs. Or breaking hearts. Or causing cancer. Or COVID. Or locusts or hurricanes. If we latch on to that idea, or the prosperity gospel with which it is inextricably tangled, we have missed an opportunity to ask better and more powerful questions about what is really going on.

And look, those stories and that sort of reading is woven all the way through this Holy text, so it takes a whole lot of

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work to make sense of it. Or to allow ourselves to sit with the nonsensical with nuance and integrity.

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Many of you know that we are going to be using a lectionary this Advent that highlights stories of women - many of which get dropped from the New Revised Common Lectionary that has guided us for these many years. But as I prepared for today's sermon I noted that this Hannah passage, the bit about her song - which is offered to us for today by the lectionary we are currently using, would also fall on Advent 4 in the new lectionary. But we will be having the Service of Lessons and Carols that Sunday, so we might not really soak in it.

Perhaps this IS divine and holy engagement in our becoming. We get to soak in it today and let it undergird our preparations for Advent.

Hannah's song is a whole lot like Mary's song. And of course the structure and the ideas attributed to Hannah are put there by a writer or editor who is borrowing from other annunciations, other birth songs, from contemporary sources. (The same is true for Mary's Magnificat, of course.) We can study the structure, the three strophes, the parallel couplets, the strange allusion to a king when there was NO KING at the time.

But why? Why are these soaring words written into this story?

Hannah's song makes claims about YHWH's expansive power - presented as a living paradox. God is creator of world, establishing its foundations from the beginning - and also one who sees individuals in their broken grief. God reverses the fortunes of those who are suffering and topples the wicked. Human understanding cannot fully grasp the paradox and human might is no match for the expansive power. God is God and we are not.

This is, then, a song of hope, one that sounds awfully familiar to those who spend time with the Gospels.

It feels so much better to focus on this hope, on these promises that there is holy and divine work that is beyond our power and understanding.

But I return to the danger in the way the story is told. Much of the commentary warns pastors to be careful how they preach this because women in their congregation may hear it through a fog of grief. This raises some pretty poignant issues.

1. You think? You only have to give pastors this warning if they are men who have somehow

escaped conversations about this grief to begin with.  
And that takes a fair amount of not paying attention.

2. This assumes the pastors aren't women to begin with.
3. This also assumes that men don't also know the grief of infertility or miscarriage. And though the grief that parents experience in the face of infertility or miscarriage is often different and nuanced, the grief of both partners is real and powerful.

Why am I going on about this? Because it is a microcosm of what happens when we read the Bible without reading the community. It is a microcosm of what happens when we try to to understand and apply the Bible without being fully immersed in a faith community that is full of folx whose stories are totally different from our own.

This is certainly a story that encourages making offerings to, and behaving faithfully toward, God. And it is certainly a story of hope. And we could skim that off the top and make a beautiful bumper sticker. But it's the willingness to engage with the whole story, as a community, in community, that makes us a faithful people.

You are invited on this Stewardship Sunday to bring all of who you are and dump it into this space that we call United Church, and you are invited to sift through all the mess that has been dumped here and help each other pick up the broken pieces of our hearts and our lives.

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What does it mean to dedicate our lives in service before God? What might that mean for you?

Come. Let your light shine. We need to do this thing of drawing near to the holy in community with each other. That's my whole sermon. It's stewardship Sunday. Please Shine your light. Let's pass the plate.