

## Costly Lessons

### 1 Samuel 1:4–20

In Wednesday Bible study, we discussed how God is not the cause of suffering, yet through our suffering, we might learn lessons about ourselves, the world, even God. For this sermon, I hope we can draw messages from this story that can apply to all of us in challenging and comforting ways as we continue to think and pray about the election results. Let us pray: *Lord, as we remember the faith of Hannah, remember us with your grace and open our minds that we might learn from our experience today, through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

The name Hannah means grace. The free gift. Unmerited favor. However, the scripture makes it clear that Hannah's life was filled with trials and heartaches. The truth is, trials and heartaches are an inherent part of human existence. While we don't all suffer the same, we all suffer. How will we respond? One question to ask when bad things happen is, "What is the story I'm telling myself?"

Rev. Ed Bacon teaches that we tell ourselves three basic stories in response to trials. We are either the victim, the hero, or the learner.<sup>1</sup> Think about Hannah. She might have considered herself a victim—certainly, her sister-wife, Peninah, and the priest, Eli, were cruel to her, taunting her and accusing her of drunkenness. On the other side, her husband, Elkanah, wanted her to be heroic and cheer up!

Hannah's wisdom was that she became a learner. She prayed to the Lord, trusting that God would hear her and lead her to uncover a profound truth. She will not let either Peninah or Eli cast her as the victim. She refuses to be a hero for Elkanah. She goes to the Lord with her questions, her desperation, and her heartache.

I'm going to extract a lesson from this story that applies to our larger culture at this particular time. In every election, winners and losers exist. That is how democracy works. However, the social alienation and tribalism prevalent in our culture often lead to the creation of victims and heroes, a dichotomy that fails to accurately reflect the intricate issues of our time or the multifaceted nature of individual experiences. Walt Whitman was correct; we all contain multitudes.

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<sup>1</sup> Rev. Bacon's teaching is found in Rabbi Sharon Brous's book *The Amen Effect*.

So, then, what can we learn? Rabbi Sharon Brous tells a story about another Hannah, a member of her congregation, who grew up a lesbian in an Orthodox Jewish family in Jerusalem.<sup>2</sup> That's a multitude of experiences.

In 2015, this Hannah was present at the Pride Parade in Jerusalem, where an ultra-Orthodox rabbi fatally stabbed a young woman in the street. Hannah witnessed this atrocious crime firsthand.

That evening, she attended shabbat dinner with her extended family and sat across the table from Asher, a cousin who had been radicalized by Orthodox teachings against LGBT+ people. It seemed that Asher had more sympathy for the attacker's cause.

Though Hannah seethed with righteous anger, she remained at the table. At the end of the meal, she stood up and addressed the entire room. "Every day there are more and more stories of hate crimes, retaliations, racism, sexism, and senseless hatred. These are real struggles. I pray that we will keep our eyes and ears and, most of all, our hearts open as we go through life."

Asher said nothing. But later that week, he reached out to Hannah's parents. He confessed that, as she spoke, he had grown indignant. But then he realized that he would never want anything violent to happen to Hannah, his own family member. Asher's heart softened. He realized that, while he would never stab anyone or commit violence, his rhetoric still had consequences. Three years later, Asher attended the Pride Parade as an ally!

I tell this story, in part, because it has a happy ending. Such endings are essential: Hannah fulfills her heart's longing for her baby, and Asher opens his own heart to love.

However, I am not naïve. Such heartfelt transformations take time and effort. The biblical Hannah showed up at the Temple to pray again and again. The modern Hannah remained seated at the table, maintaining her relationships with her family. And this courage to work costs us, certainly some more than others. Some much of our culture is trumpeting heroism or falling into despair. How can we find the middle way and learn from others at such a time as this?

As her name, Hannah, means grace, I'm reminded of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concept of costly grace, meaning that sacrifice, sweat, tears, and even blood are

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<sup>2</sup> *The Amen Effect*

required from followers of God who seek to make the world more into an image of the kingdom of heaven.

My charge to all of us is to stay in the story. Stay at the table. Seek to be a learner. Keep our eyes, ears, and most importantly, our hearts open during the real struggles and challenges.

To assist this aim, I want to close with an observation about prayer. Hannah, after all, prayed, and the ancient rabbis considered her an exemplar. They noted how she prayed silently, not for show but pouring out her heart to God. The rabbis connected Hannah's prayer with the verse Psalm 69:13. Many English translations provide a verb, reading "I made my prayer to the Lord" or "I prayed to the Lord." But the Hebrew literally reads, "I am my prayer to the Lord." The prayer is *not* something one recites or memorizes, but rather *who* one *is*. How do you pray like that, like Hannah?

In my own prayer life, I practice breath prayers. I silently repeat a short phrase as I inhale, followed by another phrase as I exhale. As Cole Arthur Riley wrote, "I've found this practice to be restorative as it grounds me in my body and reintegrates my flesh, mind, and soul daily."<sup>3</sup>

Next week, I will provide copies of an Advent devotional I have written for our church, which includes a breath prayer for each day. I'd like to give us space this morning to pray in this way. So, settle in comfortably; consider placing your feet on the ground and keeping your back straight. As you inhale, I invite you to think, "Help me, O Lord." As you exhale, "Teach me, O God." Help me, O Lord; teach me, O God. Let us pray for a minute or so.

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<sup>3</sup> This quote is from Arthur Riley's website: [Breath — Cole Arthur Riley](#)