

## That Looks Heavy

Since our time with Moses and the shiny calf at the foot of the mountain, the Israelites have entered the Promised Land. They have begun to build a life in Canaan where God occasionally appoints judges as leaders, and yet as the end of the book of Judges tells us: “In those days there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes.”<sup>1</sup> After a time with Ruth, we find ourselves at the beginning of 1 Samuel, where we meet Elkanah and his two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. [Read 1 Samuel 1: 1-18]

Hannah’s is not among the big names we meet in scripture. Hannah is barren, a dangerous state for a woman in ancient times. Without a son to care for her after Elkanah’s death, she will be utterly destitute with no one to care for her or speak for her. So she—like Sarah—is at least initially defined by her barrenness. She suffers in solitary sadness, fear, and shame over not having a child. Her husband doesn’t understand, and Peninnah rubs it in her face. “So it went on year after year,” the text tells us.<sup>2</sup> Elkanah dotes on Hannah, giving her extra attention and a double portion of the annual sacrifice angering Peninnah. And with each passing year, Hannah grows sadder and Peninnah grows crueler, taunting Hannah for being childless, as if she needed to be reminded of the emptiness and the ache, the grief that lay heavy in her arms where a child should be. We are not told what Hannah’s tipping point is, what it is about this particular moment, but during the family’s annual trip to Shiloh for worship and sacrifice, the writer tells us, “Hannah rose and presented herself before the LORD.” She heads to the temple and begins to pray, alone and in silence. Eli the priest thinks she is guilty of a PWI, praying while intoxicated. It’s a strange assumption, isn’t it? After all, Eli has seen hundreds if not thousands of people come and pray. But something about Hannah is different. She is not loud or disruptive. Eli only guesses that she is praying because her lips are moving. When he approaches her, Hannah boldly insists that she has not been pouring a stiff drink, but rather pouring out her very soul: “Do not regard your servant

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<sup>1</sup> Judges 21: 25, NRSV

<sup>2</sup> 1 Samuel 1:7, NRSVue

as a worthless woman.”<sup>3</sup> Hannah is not worthless, but she does feel empty, wretched as one translation reads. She is motivated by more than shame—this is not simply a matter of keeping up with Peninnah. At her very core she longs to be a mother. So she brings that deepest longing to God.

We’ve been there, too, or we’ve known someone who has, someone who is there now, longing for a cure, a job, a phone call, a home, a relationship, a child. After two early miscarriages and one late one, Dave and I found ourselves in that dark, hollow space filled with weeping and silence. I had become part of a secret sorority that I had never hoped to join, and yet I did not feel the camaraderie one typically feels when joining a sisterhood. Instead, I felt lost, isolated, alone, and ashamed. People tried to make me feel better, make us feel better, but the words rang hollow, and their reassurances fell flat. I may have mumbled some prayers. I’m fairly certain that I yelled some at God, too. Anyone watching closely might have thought that I wasn’t in my right mind either. That’s where Hannah is a gift to me. In Hannah I am reminded that God is not afraid of our despair, that God does not write anyone off, that God does not shelve us until we get our wits about us. Even if Eli does not get it right away, Hannah does. She seems confident that God is ready to listen to any and all the prayers she may bring.

Like many of you, I have struggled with how best to respond in the wake of Hurricane Helene, and now Milton. There is so much distress, so much heartbreak, so much loss, so very much. There has been blame and finger pointing, too, of course. And there have been stories, testimonies about unbearable devastation and tiny persistent glimmers of hope. Photos of washed-out roads and towns, stockpiles of blankets, and jars of peanut butter are interspersed with the occasional weary smile. My friends Greg and Shannon have a home in Black Mountain, a light and bright haven that they rent out for now to cover the mortgage. This place is intended for their retirement down the road. It is surrounded by carefully planted and tended native plants and blueberry bushes, or it was. Their home is fine compared to most, requiring mucking out but not

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<sup>3</sup> 1 Samuel 1: 16, NRSVue

rebuilding, so Greg has been hard at work doing what he can to tend to their place while coming alongside others to help where he can. And one of the most powerful things he is offering is not herculean strength or daring treks up collapsed mountainsides, but a raw, honest witness to what he is seeing, hearing, and feeling in that little corner of the world. Greg and Shannon are both seminary-trained, and yet, Greg will be the first to tell you he'd much rather set up chairs while Shannon does the up front work. And yet he recognizes the need for people to hear eyewitness accounts of the devastation and of the tiny slivers of hope he is seeing up close, so he posts photos and reflections on Facebook at least once a day. He writes about the tears that he shoves down and the sobs that won't stop. He mentions the gifts of the Cajun Navy and the mule trains. He paints a picture of just how hard and gut-wrenching it all is. One day this past week he wrote about some friends who have come to help with recovery in the area: "I gotta say there is just something about not being the only person to witness the devastation on our little place that makes me feel less alone in all this." He worries about his posts being too dramatic or too raw. I am convinced that his brutal honesty is holy. His story is what he needs to share, so it is what the community that loves him needs to sit with and hear.

Because like so many things that devastate God's beloved children the world over, there is no quick fix, no magic potion, no easy answer. Hannah does not expect Eli to answer her prayers, nor does she need him to correct her or silence her. No, she needs Eli to come alongside her and witness her anguish, to let her be openly wretched before God and him. And when he does that, when Eli hears Hannah's anguish, she is then able to rise up to meet what comes next. Hope sprouts not with news of her conceiving a child, but much earlier, following her interaction with Eli, the jaded old priest who gets it wrong at first. He does eventually get it right, at least for a moment. He hears her out and blesses her, "Go in peace; [may] the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." Then, Hannah rises and goes on her way, no longer downcast. She is once again able to eat with her husband and put one foot in front of the other.

The need in the wake of Helene and now Milton is astounding. And the generous outpouring of resources and prayers has been a beautiful thing to witness. In the coming weeks and months, our siblings in the mountains will need still more resources and more hands-on help. They will also still need someone or

someones to do the sacred work of waiting and watching and listening to all they are carrying. That means, if I am to answer that call, I need to find a way to resist singing about silver linings or encouraging grieving friends or strangers with a sentence that begins, “Well, at least...” I need to find a way simply to listen and witness.

One of my favorite contemporary poets, Lyndsay Rush says it well in a poem entitled, “I’ll Hold It for You”:

The worry you store neatly in your ribs

The breath you haven’t let out since 2020

The world that’s perched on your shoulders

The love that might tear you in two

I know you’re the type of person who

hates taking more than one trip to bring in the groceries

But

That looks heavy—

give it to me for a minute

I’ll hold it for you

Notice that the speaker does not promise to solve all the problems or try to brush them away. Instead, she names the heaviness she sees and offers to hold it and simply sit with it for a bit.

As we move through stewardship season and dream about who God is calling us to be and what God is calling us to do in the days, months, and years ahead, my prayer is that we will find a way to be this kind of community for strangers and friends alike. My prayer is that we will be a community that makes room for the anguish and holds it, even as we offer a blessing for one another and for the world outside these walls. My prayer is that we will find a way to help one another find our footing as we take the next right step, trusting that somehow the grace, mercy, and compassion of the one true God will carry us through and redeem it all.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.