

The story of the judge Samuel begins with the story of his mother, Hannah, who like Sarah the wife of Abraham was barren. All she wanted was a child, but she had none. Like Rachel, who also had trouble conceiving, Hannah was the favorite wife of her husband, but that was no comfort to her. The other wife, Peninah, had sons and daughters, and “used to provoke her severely” because Hannah could not conceive. Even when Elkanah, their husband, assured her of his love, she could not be consoled.

This strikes me as important, because it underscores the specificity of her yearning. While having children was what gave women status as well as some guarantee of support in old age, Elkanah’s regard for Hannah sort of immunizes her against loss of status or fear of a destitute old age. It’s not what a child could do for her that she wants; it’s a child per se. Elkanah’s a good guy, but his loving her is not a substitute for the child she wants, even though it’s good and valuable.

So the family goes off to Shiloh for some festival or another that involves a lot of eating and drinking, but Hannah’s too miserable to eat OR drink. She goes and prays at the altar, begging God for a baby, and Eli the priest sees her and thinks she’s gotten drunk at the feast. No, she says, I’ve been pouring out my soul before the Lord. “Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.” And Eli, not even knowing the content of her prayer, recognizes her single-heartedness and says encouragingly, “[May] the Lord grant the petition you have made to him.” That seems to make Hannah feel better, because she goes back to Elkanah and eats and drinks, “and her countenance was sad no longer.”

Lo and behold, Hannah conceives and bears this little boy, Samuel, and as soon as the

child she had so yearned for is weaned, she gives him back to God—or more literally, she takes him to the shrine at Shiloh for Eli to raise him. **Hmm.**

Hannah's prayer at the festival had been a sort of bargain-prayer, in which she pledged her child to God if God would allow her to have one. And while I can't really commend bargain-praying, I learned this week that the Hebrew word for "to pray" is reflexive—that is, it implies action toward God *and* on oneself. However much Hannah may be trying to make God do a thing she wants, in the act of praying she is also allowing God to work on her somehow. Eli interrupts her prayer because he thinks she's drunk, but Eli also believes her when she explains, and even though he doesn't know what she was praying for, he *validates* her prayer. Elkanah, her loving husband, sort of invalidated her feelings by trying to offer a substitute for what she wanted, but Eli the priest validates her prayer, and she feels so much better that she's able to eat and drink. So something shifted there, and I have to think that's why Hannah was able to give Samuel back to serve at the shrine—because God had been shown to be trustworthy, and at his shrine she had felt seen and heard.

Now let's look at the song that Hannah sings, which is the model for Mary's Magnificat in the gospel of Luke. She's left her son at the shrine, and she says, "My heart exults in the Lord; my strength is exalted in my God." As is the way with Hebrew poetry, there's a good deal of generalization, in this case sweeping statements about the mighty and the feeble, the poor and the rich, and so forth. God is characterized as one who gives victory over one's enemies. She ends with these words: "The Lord will judge the ends of the earth; he will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed." And we know that Samuel, Hannah's son, was the one who grew up to anoint King David, the best king of all time, so her song that looks

forward to a king who wins victories for God's people is pointing toward the work that her son will do.

Now. Hannah's song suggests that her life is a microcosm of Israel's story. Of herself, she says, "My mouth derides my enemies, because I rejoice in my victory." Who would her enemies be? Peninah, the other wife, and maybe any other women who chided Hannah for her barrenness. Hannah has won a victory over Peninah. "The barren has borne seven," she says, getting a little hyperbolic, "but she who has many children is forlorn." In the same way as God has given victory to Hannah, God will, through the king to come, will give victory to Israel: "The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered; the Most High will thunder in heaven. The Lord . . . will give strength to his king, and exalt the power of his anointed." Hannah herself is the foretaste; Israel will see the fulfillment.

If Hannah's victory, or her "reward," was the child Samuel, and she gave him back to serve God, what does this say that Israel should do when it wins victories under its kings? It should give those victories to God. Which, I will argue, means that they should use their power to establish a more just society in which those who were hungry can become fat with spoil, in which the needy are lifted from the ash heap to sit with princes. To steal a couple lines from Hannah's song.

Actually Hannah's song is a more familiar kind of binary, in which the rich and the poor simply change places, which is why "she who has many children is now forlorn." But we know that becoming the monster you fought is not really the end of violence. Violence comes to an end with real equity *and* with a sense of having been heard, seen, recognized, taken seriously. Last Sunday on NPR Michel Martin interviewed people who had participated in two truth and

reconciliation processes, one in Maine having to do with Native families whose children had been systematically taken from them, and the other in Greensboro NC after a Klan rally in which five people died and the police did not respond.

<https://www.npr.org/2020/10/11/922849505/healing-u-s-divides-through-truth-and-reconciliation-commissions>

She started with a woman who had been taken from her family as a child—apparently Social Services had come while her mother was out shopping and bundled up all the kids' stuff in garbage bags and rolled on out with them, placed them in foster families, and they didn't see their mother again for four years. This woman is Denise Altvater, who is co-founder of the Maine-Wabanaki State Child Welfare Truth and Reconciliation Commission. But she didn't become an activist until after she'd been asked to tell her story and had experienced being heard. The state of Maine needed to change its laws in order not to lose some federal funding, and as a way to create the political will for that change, the child welfare community wanted to present the stories of real live people to whom this had happened. So she told her story. And now listen to what she said when Martin asked what was the most important part of the process:

The most important was having the space where my voice and others' voices could be heard and believed in a place where we knew that something was going to happen. So it was so life-changing to tell your story in that type of an atmosphere, and it transformed me into somebody who started having courage that I never had before. And it just transformed my life. So healing and having a voice were the two most important aspects to me. No reparations at all were necessary as far as I was concerned, and I'm still concerned.

There have been several Truth and Reconciliation Commissions, I found out, not just the one in South Africa. They're not a silver bullet, nor are they simple and easy to execute. But

they strike me as a model for the way Israel was supposed to respond when given a victory: give it back to God. If God is the One who establishes justice and brings about peace, when (and if) we get hold of any levers of power, they should be used not to flip the positions of the rich and poor but to allow truths to be told and establish the kind of trust and healing that Hannah experienced when Eli took her seriously.

The Rev. Mark Sills, who spoke about the T&R commission in Greensboro, summed it up like this:

To me, racism is like an addiction. And an addicted person may not at first see that they have a problem. It may make them feel strong or wise or intelligent or powerful. And anyone who's ever worked with addicted people knows you cannot help a person resolve an addiction, overcome an addiction, until they're ready to acknowledge that they have a problem.

Truth commissions are a way that society can acknowledge the things that are killing us and destroying us and fraying the edges of our culture. And once those things have been identified and acknowledged, then progress - real progress, substantive progress - can be made. So I think the models that are represented in Maine and in Greensboro are worthy of - for other communities to look at ways to go forward.

Knowing that God is trustworthy frees us to be generous, less defensive, braver. And people need to be heard and their stories acknowledged seriously. God willing, whatever happens with the election, we can encourage truth-telling and deep listening so as to begin mending the rifts in our society and bring about the justice that makes for peace.

Let us pray:

God who answers prayer,
We are blessed and humbled that you hear us when we call to you in our time of deepest longing. May we have the audacious faith to call out to you without knowing what will happen. May we have enough trust in you that we can listen to the painful stories that others tell. And may our own stories also find listening ears so that we can move forward together. Amen.