

A Woman Deeply Troubled

United Congregational Church of Westerly, UCC, Pawcatuck, CT

September 21, 2025 – Morning worship on *Welcome Sunday*

Text: 1 Samuel 1:1-17

A woman deeply troubled. That could describe any of us at this moment in history, couldn't it? We are all finding ourselves ill at ease, to put it mildly, with the divisions and deep distrust of the "other" so prevalent in our country at the moment. As you might imagine, I have had a lot of conversations with folks in recent weeks about how anxious they are, afraid to turn on the news and afraid not to at the same time. Most folks are unsure who to trust, not to mention how to even consider planning for the future when everything feels so uncertain. Welcome to September 2025, folks. One good thing we can say, though, is that we are in the same situation together, regardless of whether our affinity leans red or blue or somewhere in between. Put simply, it feels like things are a mess in our country right now and we are all in the same boat of trying to figure out what to do in our lives in the face of it all. And there is no better place than our church to come together so we can figure this out, with God's love for each of us as our anchor.

This need to make sense of a situation that makes no sense is why I thought Hannah would work well on this "Welcome Sunday" as we continue our reflections on women in the Scriptures. Why Hannah? Well, first we have to get to know her a bit. As biblical woman go, Hannah is fairly ordinary. She's not a queen like Esther or a femme fatale like Bathsheba or anybody special really. Yet her story is a central one when we trace the narrative arc of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures. As we heard in her story just read this morning, Hannah was a beloved wife who was barren and broken-hearted because of it. This particular scenario of a barren wife is not that unusual in the Bible. In fact,

it's usually a foreshadowing that this barren women will, in fact, eventually give birth and the child born will play a pivotal role in the history of God's faithful. We've already talked about Sarah, Abraham's wife who gave birth to her first and only son Isaac in her nineties after years of barrenness. Then there's Rachel and Rebekah, Jacob's wives who still eventually birthed the heads of the 12 tribes of Israel. There is also the mother of Samson who is never named but whose son is the legendary warrior with superhuman strength who did battle with the Philistines and won. Honestly, Samson would fit right in as a Marvel hero but that's another story for another day. Lastly, moving into the New Testament, there is Elizabeth, cousin to Jesus' mother Mary, who gave birth to John the Baptist after years of barrenness.

Hannah's barrenness and her response to it is part of why she is so intriguing to me, and I suspect she will be to you as well. For one thing, Hannah had something very rare in her time, roughly the 7th or 8th century BCE. Hannah was married to a man who loved her deeply and passionately. This is unusual but not unheard of. What is unique to Hannah's marriage is that her husband Elkanah was not only deeply in love with her, but he also did not mind that she was not bearing him any children. He even says to her at one point, "Am I not more to you than 10 sons?" This is unusual enough but as feminist biblical scholar Jo Ann Hackett notes in the *Women's Bible Commentary*, "this is hardly the response of a patriarch who can see value in women only as child-bearers."¹ In fact, Hackett reminds us that Elkanah was not in fact, childless since he had children with his other wife, Peninnah. From this it could be argued that Elkanah was wealthy, wealthy enough to afford to have two wives – one strictly for

¹ Jo Ann Hackett, *Women's Bible Commentary*, ©1998 Westminster John Knox Press, p. 95.

child-bearing and one he married only for love.² Though this sounds romantic, at least for Hannah maybe, was it really? No, because even Elkanah's obvious love for her was not enough for Hannah to keep her from feeling like a failure. And this was due not only because of her own emotional fulfillment. Hannah's "prestige [in her world] was based at least partly on her demonstrated ability to produce offspring."³ This was a fact Peninnah knew well and used it to taunt Hannah relentlessly. Thus, in a very real way Elkanah's love for her was simply not enough.

This is why Hannah decided she needed to go to the tabernacle at Shiloh in order to plead her case directly with God. Sounds again like an ordinary response to us – going someplace to pray about a situation we need God's help in resolving. But in Hannah's time, this was anything but usual. Then, to make matters worse, she is confronted while she is praying by Eli, then serving as the priest at Shiloh. He accuses her of being drunk! From his perspective, he watched as this incredibly distraught woman made her way into the tabernacle (we can assume to the section in which women were permitted) and then proceeded to act crazy! She was moving her lips but no sound was coming out! She must be crazy or drunk, he thought, and he decided she was drunk. He says to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." Hannah, though, was having none of this nonsense. She answers him directly, "No, my Lord, I am a woman deeply troubled. ... I have 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."

² Ibid. p. 95.

³ Ibid. p. 95.

Honestly, every time I hear this story, I think how fun it would have been to be there just then to see the look on Eli's face when she said this. No one talked to the priests like that. No one. And here was a woman daring to speak back to a priest AND daring to pray to God in her own words. What was the world coming to!!! To Eli's credit, he believed her. That in itself is remarkable. Even more remarkable is that he then proceeded to affirm her prayers. He says to her, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." Now these words of Eli to Hannah are worth thinking about a little more deeply. Go in peace – okay, fine. But then notice what comes next. "The God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." He doesn't offer a blessing on her prayer by saying "*may* the God of Israel grant the petition..." Nor does he make a prophetic announcement that "the God of Israel *will* grant the petition." Nope. All he says is "The God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him." So, I immediately have to wonder what the heck this is supposed to mean. We could, in theory, assume this is Eli just stating what he believes to be the case based on her sincerity. To me it also reads like, on some level, Eli is hedging his bets. In other words, Eli is not sure God will grant Hannah's prayerful request. She is, after all, a woman. But, if God does grant it, Eli wants to be able to be on the right side of that miracle so he just essentially restates her prayer for her. As if her words on their own would not be enough.

And honestly, in Hannah's time, no one would think her prayers to God would be enough. Most likely they would not even believe they would be heard since she was only a woman. Did God even listen to women? At that time, and sadly for a few in our own time now, they would believe that God only heard the prayers of men. Certainly, women could worship there, but in a special place, away from the men. The central role in all worship was the men.

The women were tolerated. Hannah would have known that before she even set foot in the tabernacle, but she went anyway. She prayed anyway. She trusted in God anyway, even if it meant breaking the rules for when, how or even if she should be allowed to talk to God on her own. Her faith was sufficient to give her the courage and strength required to ask for what she needed. She was willing to pay the cost for her actions whatever that might eventually be. And, incidentally, there was a cost.

As Hannah first begins to pray, she actually makes a bargain with God in her prayers. She tells God, “If you will only look on the misery of your servant and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a Nazirite until the day of his death.” Okay, interesting vow but what does it mean. Simply put it means that once she gives birth to this male child – she is very specific that it must be a boy – she will *return him to God as a Nazirite*, someone whose entire life is devoted to the service of God through the rites of the temple. Nazirites, all of whom were male, did not cut their hair or drink wine. Wow, that seems extreme, we think. But wait. There’s more. When Hannah does give birth after her prayers are granted, she returns her son Samuel to live at the tabernacle, in the service of the priest Eli. She does this when he was weaned at about 3-4 years of age. This baby she prayed for, that she risked everything for, she literally gave him back to God when he was still not much more than a baby. Wow. Hannah and Elkanah would go up to Shiloh every year for the annual religious festival and she would bring clothes and food for him, but he stayed there, growing into adulthood there. And, the text tells us, God did “take note of Hannah” and she bore Elkanah three more sons and two daughters.” God answered the prayers of and restored life to this “woman deeply troubled.”

So, dear ones, what are we to make of Hannah's story for ourselves? How does Hannah's story speak to us? In several ways, I think, some obvious and others not so much. On the surface the most basic lesson of Hannah's story is one we know well – that prayer sincerely offered brings answers, although not always the exact answers we are hoping for. Hannah reminds us that outward appearances in her story notwithstanding, prayer does not change God's mind. Prayer always changes the one praying so that answers can be perceived when they would otherwise be missed or overlooked. In Hannah's case her prayers changed Eli, in the immediate moment when he realized his own error in assuming she was drunk. They also changed Eli in the future, when Hannah kept her vow and brought her young son, her first born after years of barrenness, back to the tabernacle to grow up there. In doing so, Hannah and God gifted Eli with this young child who became a breath of fresh air and new possibility for Eli and his role as priest at the tabernacle.

For me, though, Hannah's most important lesson to all of us is this – she refused to accept other people's judgements of her. She flat out refused to see herself as others saw her, to accept their opinions of who she was and how she should make peace with her life. She accepted Elkanah's professed love for her but did not change her mind that this wasn't enough. She needed to realize her full potential and for her that meant having children. I think she knew she had a unique role to which she was destined and that was as Samuel's mother. Samuel, the great prophet who identified and anointed Saul as Israel's first king, that was Hannah's first son. Samuel then was called by God to identify and anoint David as Israel's second king – the greatest king Israel would ever know. Samuel was God's conduit for the unfolding of this, the greatest chapter in Israel's history. And Hannah was the

reason Samuel existed in the first place. Hannah could have just accepted the woman she was when we first meet her – the beloved but childless wife of a rich and faithful man. But that wasn't enough for Hannah. And she wasn't taking no for an answer, even from God. I've always loved that about Hannah. She didn't accept her lot in life. She fought to change it and she succeeded.

This is the gift Hannah's story brings to us, dear ones. Hannah reveals what happens when our own sense of who we know we are meant to be confronts a reality which doesn't seem to agree. That Hannah's destiny was, for her, motherhood is not really the point of her story. It looks like it is, but it isn't. The point of Hannah's story is her incredible, unflinching courage in the face of an entire societal system that was willing to erase her for something she couldn't control, her barrenness. She didn't back down, dear ones. She named her own reality as “a woman deeply troubled” but she didn't stop there. She fought, she argued, she confronted everyone and everything which tried to push her into a reality she knew was not really hers. And she succeeded. And in succeeding, she cemented her place in the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition not because of being troubled by her situation but because she refused to stay in it.

One of the ironies of Hannah's story in our time is that, on the surface, it appears to reinforce the stereotype that the primary, if not the only focus, of all women should be bearing children. In our time, women are praying and fighting and arguing and organizing for an entirely different, and frankly opposite reason. They want and expect the freedom to make their own choices about having children or not, about pursuing demanding professions or not, about staying in a bad marriage or a bad relationship or not. Dear ones, make no mistake. Hannah's first words of advice to such women would be clear and

straightforward. She would say, “go for it.” She would say, first know yourself and who God is inviting, calling you to be. Then, invite God into your process of becoming and just go for it. Hannah would tell all of us, don’t let other people’s expectations hold you back. You are you, just who God created you to be. Regardless of your age, you are a gift still growing into who God needs you to be. By the way, she would also say this advice goes for everyone, male and female, queer and straight, old and young.

Hannah knew God saw her, and her deepest desires. Hannah trusted that God would make a way forward when she saw no way for herself. And God did. Not only for Hannah, but for each and every one of us – no matter who we are or where we are on our journey of faith and life. We have but to make God part of our process of living our lives and inviting God to reveal our way forward. This, dear ones, is the life of faith and hope and it’s amazing. Never easy because disappointments and hardships are always part of life. But they are never the final word for us, unless we let them be. And why would we ever do that? Hannah wouldn’t. Amen.