

The God of our Longings
1 Samuel 1:1-20

Just by show of hands...who here *likes* waiting?

I mean, I guess sometimes waiting can be okay. When we know something good is coming...a big trip or a party or a reunion, the anticipation can be half the fun of it.

But when we're waiting for something to happen, and we don't know when or even *if* that thing will happen...that waiting is hard.

When the borders closed in March 2020, I'd zoom with my family and we'd say, "Okay, thirty days...that's fine." And then it would get extended another 30 days and we'd shake our heads but say, "no big deal, it's not like I was coming home anyway." And then it would get extended another 30 days, and then another 30 days, and we finally cancelled our summer vacation plans.

By February 2021, I was restless. And anxious. It was the longest I'd ever gone without going home. And the waiting...the longing for home...and the not knowing when I could go home was starting to wear on me. Waiting can be really hard.

Hannah is waiting. Has been waiting. Has been waiting for years. She married Elkanah as a teenage girl, full of the promises of a long and happy life together, ready to start a family and create a home. She moved into Elkanah's family home and learned to love the tree beside the house, the splash of mid-afternoon sunlight on the cool, earthen floor, over which she danced and hummed as she tidied up after a meal. Everyone knew her to be lively and joyful, always grinning, always ready with a cheerful "Good morning!" as she moved through the market, both graceful and frenetic.

After a year went by with no sign of children, her smile shrunk just ever so much, and her waltz slowed by just a breath. After two years, she stopped calling out a morning greeting, a smile and a nod sufficing. After three years, she shuffled through the market, and the only feet that danced over the sunlight were those of the cat. After four years, Elkanah looked at her with sorrow in his eyes before he walked to the house of Peninnah to take her as his second wife. After five years, the sound of a child cooing finally filled the house, but it was not Hannah's child. A sound that should have filled her with delight instead became a mockery, reminding her every day of what she did not have, of what she could not give.

It doesn't matter that Elkanah favors Hannah, giving her twice as much food during the Feast of Tabernacles, looking at her with love and tenderness. If anything, it's only made matters worse, for Elkanah's favoritism provokes Peninnah, whose jealous heart has led her to taunt Hannah over her barrenness. A woman who could not provide children to her husband, no male heir to continue the line, was an embarrassment and shame to the family, and Peninnah has no problem reminding Hannah of this.

And so Hannah's smile and grin is replaced by tears, anguished over her own loss, hurt by the cruelty of Peninnah, and carrying the weight of a husband who clearly loves her deeply, but who, having secured his own lineage with Peninnah, cannot seem to understand the pain it yet causes Hannah.

And so it is a desperate Hannah who makes her way down to Shiloh with the rest of the family for the Feast of Tabernacles, the annual pilgrimage to the tabernacle to make sacrifice. She travels in silence, ignoring the jabs made by Peninnah, eating little, sometimes eating nothing. Even after the sacrifice at the temple in Shiloh, a time of giving thanks for God's bounty and goodness, Hannah eats nothing. How can she celebrate God's gift of abundant life?

Instead, while the rest of the family is frolicking and laughing, she sneaks out and goes back up to the house of the Lord, though she only makes it as far as the steps before she collapses. Tears streaming down her face, she silently cries out to God, "Why have you not granted me the one thing that would make me happy? Why, after all these years of prayer, do you still not hear me? What must I do?!"

Hannah takes her hope and her anguish and brings them to the only place left to her – to her God. Hannah knows that any birth now will be a miracle, and so she places this possibility in God's hands, pledging to return the gift to God forever, to raise her child as a Nazarite, one whose whole life belongs to service of God, if he will but hear her cry.

Someone closer by *does* hear her cry, though he doesn't understand it at first. Eli, the priest, sits on his chair, guarding the tabernacle from those who get a little carried away during Feast time, when he sees Hannah break down on the steps. Annoyed, he calls over to Hannah, "How long are you going to stay drunk? Put away your wine already!" Eli, the spiritual leader of the nation, does not recognize Hannah's genuine faith struggle. Yet another person is deaf to her cries of longing.

We all know what it is to long for something, to be expectant, to be disappointed. To desire something so deeply and profoundly, because it's a good thing, because we believe we'll have some sense of wholeness when that thing comes to pass, because we think we'll then be accepted. After all, these expectations for what a proper life looks like weren't just a thing in Hannah's time. Messages come at us from every which direction, both without and within the church, telling us what's expected of us, what it means to live the good life.

We're waiting for jobs, for the one person who's going to say "Yes" to our resume after dozens of "nos." We want to contribute, we want to feel useful, we want to know that we're making a difference, we want to be fulfilled, we want to measure up to people's expectations of us. And so we wait, and we hope.

We're waiting for relationships, for that perfect someone who will love us and stay with us and complete us, for the friend who will finally understand our sense of humor, for the colleague who will sit with us in the breakroom. We're longing for companionship, for an end to our loneliness. And so we go on dates, and invite people out for coffee, and smile hopefully when someone enters the room. And we wait, and we hope.

We're waiting for kids. Desperately longing to fill our houses with laughter and small, warm bodies, and new and curious ways of seeing the world, of a love that is pure and beautiful. And every month we try, and every month we wait, and we hope.

We're waiting for good news from the doctor, for a sign that the treatment is working, that the recovery has gone well, that the disease hasn't returned, that the body is healing. Every month, every three months, every six months, every year, we anticipate the next follow up. We wait, and we hope.

And sometimes – many times – our waiting and hoping is met by disappointment. We don't get the second interview. The person we hoped might be the one doesn't think it will work out. The crib remains empty. The margins aren't as clear as we'd like them to be. And with each disappointment, we try to understand how this could be part of God's plan. Why does God not answer us in our waiting? Why does God not give us what we need?

Hannah can't see how any of her sorrow could be part of God's plan. She feels empty and incomplete. How could God want this for her? Why would God withhold this thing, this one thing, that would prove her place in the world, in the

family, that would make her feel whole, that would remove from her all her shame and embarrassment?

It's this anguish she leaves at Eli's feet. "I'm not drunk," she says, "but am pouring out my soul to the Lord. Don't think of me as being so worthless. Plenty of people already do." And Eli, moved at last to compassion, blesses her. "May the God of Israel grant what you have asked of him."

That's all he says. But it's enough. Enough to cause Hannah to lift her face up to Eli, tears still glistening in her eye, but a soft smile spreading across her face for the first time in years. The smile remains as she goes back to Elkanah and the others. The smile remains as they return home, the others bemused at this change in her countenance. And the smile grows a little wider as she grows a little bigger, as the child inside her grows month by month, until finally Hannah has her child, has a son. And she names the boy Samuel, because he was "asked of God."

Except that in Hebrew, the name "Samuel" doesn't actually translate to "asked of God." "Shem" is "name," and "el" is God. So, *shemuel*, or *Samuel* is "name of God." Why does the narrator tell us something different?

Well, the Hebrew name that *does* mean "asked of God" is Saul. And if you were an ancient Israelite listening to this story, it wouldn't be hard to put some pieces together. In our Bible 1 Samuel comes after Ruth. In the Hebrew canon, the book of 1 Samuel comes directly after Judges. And Judges ends in despair as everyone "did what was right in his or her own eyes" when there "was no king in Israel." 1 Samuel begins with a story involving Eli and his sons Hophni and Phineas, both of whom were evil and corrupt.

Israel is in desperate need of deliverance, of guidance, and of a new moral compass. Samuel is the man who anoints Saul, the first king of Israel. And so we, the readers, can see that Hannah's prayer has not just one, but two answers. She prays for a child who will restore her to her sense of personhood. *Through* her child, God will give Israel what they ask for, a king to protect them, to restore them to their sense of sovereignty and peace.

But that hope doesn't look like it will be fulfilled either. Israel's kings turn out to be, many of them, as evil as Hophni and Phineas, as spiritually deaf as Eli. And so I think there's a reason this story is placed after that of Ruth's in our canon. Ruth, also childless and alone, has her prayers answered through her marriage to Boaz and in the birth of her child, Obed, father of Jesse, father of David, from whose line would come the savior of the world, the one who would bring true peace, the

true king, Jesus. God had a plan. Bigger than Hannah, or Ruth, or Samuel, or Saul, or David.

Hannah might never have known why God chose to answer her prayer when he did. And she wouldn't have known the role her son would play in God's plan of salvation. We don't really ever know why God answers prayers the way he does. But we can trust that he has a plan. That he answers prayers in mysterious ways, but in ways governed by his knowledge of all that is to come, and from his own goodness and provision and grace. The means for living the good life, according to God, are so much bigger than our own expectations. Because God is so much bigger than our own expectations.

And so he answers our own prayers, sometimes in fullness, and sometimes in mystery. We get the job of our dreams and spend every day seeking to steward that job well for the kingdom. Or we find a job that's...just a job. But through it we meet some remarkable people, we're able to provide for a loved one, and we come to see that all work can be meaningful when done for the sake of another.

We find our special someone and get married and promise to open up our homes to all those looking to belong, to call someone or some people "home." Or we are that person, still waiting for a spouse, but also now filled with the love of a community we may not otherwise have experienced.

We have kids, and it's such a big love - and a big commitment. Or, after our waiting, we choose to adopt, to experience love that is chosen, but no less real. Or we pour into the lives of our nieces and nephews, choosing to be the very best and coolest aunt or uncle imaginable. And our lives are yet filled with friends and laughter and new experiences and love.

The surgery goes well, and the margins come back clear! Or we find out that we're facing chemo and radiation, that the cancer might never fully go away. But even in the midst of that, we experience the love of a community that rallies around us, the steadfastness of family and friends, the overwhelming peace of God.

And in all these situations, there might yet be grief. It's perfectly possible to trust in God and be sad at the same time. The little ache of our longing might never go away. As a community then, we're called to bear witness to the aches of the other. It was enough for Hannah to hear Eli pray for her and with her, to name the importance of her longing.

We, too, are called to name one another's longings. Our desires, our needs, our uncertainties, our fears. To be with one another in the longing, and so to bear witness to the God who loves us in the longing, who is faithful and present to us in the longing.

To bear witness to the one who was the answer to Hannah's prayer, though she could not know it. To bear witness to Jesus, who entered into our longing by becoming one of us, a light to a people waiting in darkness. Enfolding us and our hopes and our fears into himself, the best answer to our longings.

Would you pray with me?

God of time and space,
the first and the last,
the beginning and the end;
God of past, present, and future,
be with us in our waiting.

As you know what has been and what is to come,
so you know the longings of each of our hearts,
those things that we hold close and dear,
our hopes and desires,
our anxieties and our fears.

You know the longings of our hearts;
we know that your own longing is for us.
That you are for us and with us,
and you want nothing more than for us to find our
rest, our peace, and our hope, in you.

And so help us to trust you God.
To trust in your goodness, in the plans you have for us,
in your presence even amidst our uncertainty.

We do not know your ways,
and we can only begin to fathom your goodness.
But we know that you love us,
that you sent your son to die for us,
that we are held fast by you.

So hold us in our waiting,
that we might find our rest in you.

Amen.