

Pentecost 25 Year B – (Stephanie’s version)

## The God who gives and takes away: coming to him, praising him and lending his gifts back to him, bearing witness to him in the world.

Have you ever wanted something with all of your heart? Perhaps you can think of any number of significant things. For some, it might have been a particular job, an opportunity that you had waited one, two, five or even ten years for. For others, it might have been a holiday, a trip or adventure that promised to be the best yet. Others still might have felt this way about the home they had dreamt of, the car they had always wanted, or some other possession of one kind or another.

For me, I can think of many things I have wanted with all of my heart. I can remember how much I wanted to win the scholarship in secondary school that allowed me to go on a three month exchange. I can also remember how much I wanted to do well at school and to be accepted into the course I wanted to study. For me, these things did happen, and I remember how thrilled I felt. Of course, there have also been things I have wanted with all of my heart that I have waited on for a long time. Sometimes, I felt like I wanted the school holidays to begin with all my heart. . . in the first week of the school term. For that, I was waiting for what felt like forever. There have also been carefully thought out ideas I have suggested month after month, year after year, that were never taken up, and were eventually forgotten about, even by me, even though I had wanted it with all of my heart.

[1:SEP] In our reading from 1 Samuel, Hannah also wanted something with all her heart that had not yet come to pass. In those days, in her culture, there was a great deal of emphasis on bearing children. Even in our modern culture, many people can understand longing for a child, and some, just as then, can also understand the pain associated with not having yet welcomed a child as hoped and prayed for. And Hannah desperately wanted a child, but, “the Lord had closed her womb.” We can see from the text that Hannah not yet having a child is no accident; that for this period of time, for this season, the Lord had given her this circumstance.

But Hannah, as we read, was a victim of a merciless bully in her rival. We read that she was "severely provoked" and "irritated" by her rival year upon year, whenever she entered her place of worship. Many of us can relate to this from bullies at school, from unkind coworkers, from surly neighbours and from gruff members of the public. We see and feel how much Hannah was grieved by this provocation. She was frustrated, she was angry, and she was hurt. Her heart was sad. The bully, her rival, was adding insult to injury. Hannah already wanted a child with all of her heart, and here was her rival, poking her exactly where it hurt the most.

We notice in this striking story of Hannah that her relationship with her husband is loving. We can hear Elkanah's care for Hannah in his words of comfort, and his provision for her in their household in his giving additional portions to her. When Elkanah comforts Hannah, we can think of our own longings, and we can notice the way we also naturally approach our loved ones, our friends and our family, in our distress when we are not given what we so dearly want.

But Hannah does not only approach her husband Elkanah in her grief. Hannah rises, and brings herself before the Lord. She is desperate, and she knows bringing herself to the Lord is the best thing she can do. Her faithfulness in this speaks out from the reading sheet at me, and it says, “When you last wanted something God had not yet given, in your sadness and disappointment, did you present yourself to the Lord in prayer?” Was that my natural action, or did I fail to look outside myself, to God, on that day?

But presenting herself to the Lord did not immediately ease Hannah's suffering. Indeed, Hannah was active in prayer before the Lord, and still, she was "deeply distressed" and "wept bitterly." She was “a woman deeply troubled,” with “great anxiety and vexation . . . pouring out [her] soul before the Lord.” What an opportunity distressing circumstances are to draw closer in prayer to God.

Hannah makes an oath before the Lord. She has recognised that if she is going to have a child, if she is going to have the son she has longed for, it is only going to be because God has intervened in her life, in her story, and has granted her the desire of her heart. She knows, in wisdom, that there are no accidents on this earth that is created and sustained by God. She knows she can do nothing more in her power to become pregnant. But she knows that what she does with the gift if God does bring it to her *is* within her control, she can consciously use it to the greater glory of God.

In Hannah's oath, she promises that this good and gracious gift from God, of a male child, would be set apart for the service, worship and ultimate glory of God. She promises that she will do everything in her power to bring God the glory in the gift of a

child. I am so moved reading this that her urgency and desperation for a child did not overcome her desire for dedicating the gifts that God has given her to worship him more and more. So Hannah promised sacrifice of the gift in return for the satisfaction of her desire. That was her prayer.

And Hannah's oath also set the future child apart visibly, by the refusal to cut his hair, allow him to use intoxicants, and by the promise to bring him to the temple. These were visible signs as a witness to those around her to the promise she had made to God. The community was made witness to the God who gives and takes away because of Hannah's setting apart of the child.

Hannah's was a kind of devotion that was so all-consuming that it manifested itself in a way that those around her could easily see. She was so emotional before the Lord that day that Eli, the priest, wrongly assumed she was drunk. So Hannah's oath also included visible signs of her giving the gift of a child back to God, which brought glory to God yet again in the bearing witness of God's faithfulness before her neighbour.

And, after that awkward misunderstanding, the priest Eli joins her in prayer, and prays for the Lord to answer her prayer. Even in her private prayer and devotion before the Lord, she bore witness of her faithfulness to God before the priest. Her prayer brought about praise of God and prayer for God to answer Hannah's prayer in Eli the priest. This was surely an encouragement to Hannah and a natural effect of her visible and obvious devotion to God. People who witnessed this could not help but glorify God because of her. Hannah's devotion is the witness in itself, and the outward signs allow that devotion to encourage others in the same direction.

“In due time, Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, “I have asked him of the Lord.”” And she makes complete the promise of her oath, as we read later in the chapter, where she brings Samuel to the temple and says, “for this child I have prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he lives, he is given to the Lord there.” After a few short years of motherhood, of caring for this child, she surrenders him over to the care and instruction of a priest out of her devotion to the Lord. Elkanah prays, “may the Lord establish his word.”

What undivided devotion we can learn from in this story, and what beautiful words Hannah prays in our psalm. Hannah’s heart rejoiced, of course in Samuel, but even more so in the Lord. She can look beyond the gift, because she knows the Giver is great, and greatly to be praised. She shows incredible wisdom regarding the sovereignty and tender care of God. Strength and weakness, poverty and riches, death and life, increase and lack, these are all circumstances God places us in for our good and for his glory. In the years 2020 and 2021, we could also add sickness and health, pandemic and life as normal. Hannah has found the joy of the Lord, which looks beyond present circumstance to the present and future kingdom of God, and so can we.

Hannah’s words are echoed approximately eleven hundred years later by Mary. “My soul exults, or magnifies the Lord.” Hannah’s convictions are aligned with Mary’s. Both rejoice in the salvation of God, the holiness of God, the lowliness of humans, and in the power of God to raise and humble people. Hannah speaks of resurrection, authority and power, judgement and the exultation of an anointed King, which was fulfilled in Mary’s womb. This is a parallel of promise and of redemption in Christ.

In summary, we can learn from the story of Hannah in these significant ways. Firstly, Hannah naturally and boldly came to the Lord in her grief and sadness. Secondly, Hannah gave God's gift back to him as a sacrifice after her desire was satisfied, and bore witness of this. Thirdly, Hannah had an attitude of joy and worship of God because of his faithfulness, and praised the God who gives and takes away.

Firstly, Hannah came freely, naturally and automatically to God in her distress, in her lack and in her sadness. She poured out her heart before the Lord. As the writer to the Hebrews tells us in our reading today, we have a kind of confidence approaching the throne of God that a servant of God in Hannah's day could only dream of. The once for all sacrifice of Christ on the cross takes away our sin that separates us from God forever. We can boldly approach the throne, and come home to God completely blameless. We have "full assurance of faith". We have permission of approach and intimate connection to God "by the blood of Jesus", "by the new and living way opened up for us."

What could possibly be holding us back? What in heaven or on earth could possibly stop someone like you, or like me, who are able to have "our hearts sprinkled clean,"? There is nothing. So, since Hannah poured out her heart to the Lord in her grief and despair, how much more so can we approach God in our sadness and distress, and expect to be met with open arms? In the words of a recently written contemporary hymn, we can "run to the Father again and again."

Secondly, when God gave Hannah Samuel, Hannah gave God's gift back to him as a sacrifice, as a way of honouring the Lord, and this was visible and noticeable to those around her in the things she did differently to the child. This is for us an exciting invitation. I invite you to consider God's gifts to you. For some, your children come immediately to mind. For others, also your marriage to your husband or wife. For others still, you will think of your occupation, your extended family, your closest friends, or perhaps even your pet. And we are all gifted by God with money, time, energy, strength and attention.

When we receive these gifts from God, how can we visibly and noticeably use these gifts to bring glory to him? Can we give generously of our money, as God calls us to, in a manner without pride, so as to show off one's generosity to others, but instead, in a such way that others can notice that we have dedicated our material wealth to God? Could we use our time in such a way that others can see that we give the gift of time back to God, including serving others, and dedicating time to prayer, fellowship, and the attendance of public worship? And as for marriage, can give that gift, too, back to God in a way visible to others, by the honour and love we show? The writer to the Hebrews mentions provoking one another to love and good deeds, encouraging one another, and being diligent about fellowship and public worship. These are real, tangible ways to share the difference the Gospel has made in your lives to your friends, family and neighbours.

Lastly, Hannah learned to bring joyful worship to the God who gives and takes away, because of his faithfulness, sovereignty, and grace. Hannah speaks reverently of God's knowledge, rejoices in God's sovereignty to give and take away, and marvels at his

power to sustain the world. Imagine this woman, who lived over a thousand years before Christ, bowed before God, saying, “There is no Holy one like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God.” Out of her deepest desire in life, her greatest unanswered prayer, her most intense despair, she met the God who gives and takes away.

What in your life has given you close knowledge of the God who gives and takes away? For some, like Hannah, it may be the immeasurable joy of parenthood. For others, it might be the love of your closest friends and family members. For others still, it might be conflict within a family or group of friends. It might be illness of yourself or a loved one, or a death in your family. It might be financial hardship, unfair treatment, or some other trouble. Whatever it might be, we all know what it is to be given good gifts, and had good gifts taken away. How can we, like Hannah, use this experience to know and praise more deeply the Giver, and to worship more fully and follow more nearly the God who takes away, so that God’s “laws [are] in [our] hearts, and... [written] on [our] minds,”?

God has given us the greatest gift in the one who “offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins.” He says to us individually, “I will remember [your] sins and lawless deeds no more,” because of Christ’s death, burial and resurrection. In Christ, there is salvation from sin, reconciliation to God, and eternal life in him. What abounding and unearned grace! Let us worship and glorify God all the more so, as the Giver of this great and free gift.



In the words of the writer to the Hebrews this morning, “let us hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful.”