

## Uppity Women of the Bible, pt 5 – The Childless

I hope I've said enough on the subject of "uppity women" in the past that I don't need to begin this morning with the usual preliminaries. For those of you who've not had the dubious privilege of hearing me wax eloquent on this subject, let me just say that I find uppity people of all kinds wholly admirable. Of course, this begs the question of why? If we begin with the definition of an uppity person being one who refuses to accept the designation of second-class person from those in power and who rebels in word and deed against that characterization, then the reason should begin to come clear. Throughout the Bible, we read that God stands against the oppression of one set of people by another set. Indeed, many who regularly spend time reading the Bible will tell you that the Scriptures point to God's preference for the poor, the dispossessed and the underdog. I agree with that assessment and so I believe that the uppity women of whom I speak and uppity people in general are specially blessed by God because in their importunate pursuit of their rights and the rights of those like them, they are helping to move the world towards the Beloved Community.

So with that in mind, let us spend some time this morning with three uppity women of the Bible: Hannah, Ruth and Tamar. We'll give their stories a quick once-over and then dig a little deeper to see how our first impressions of these feisty gals change with added context. We'll learn a little more about their situations and then try to determine if their stories still have something to teach us today, both about the situation of women and of any others who may still need a boost from those with enough grit, determination, and outrage to be considered uppity.

We'll start with Hannah. She was the first wife of a man named Elkanah, a member of the tribe of Ephraim, descended from Joseph of the coat of many colors. I say she was Elkanah's first wife because he had married again, without divorcing Hannah, after she proved infertile, as the custom of the time allowed. We read in the first chapter of I Samuel of how Elkanah took Hannah and his second wife Peninnah and her children every year to the sanctuary of Shiloh, which was where the Ark of the Covenant was kept until David brought it to Jerusalem, perhaps 100 years later. There they would worship and sacrifice and Elkanah would divide the meat for the feast between his wives and his children. "But to Hannah he gave a double portion," according to most translations, "because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb." This apparently preferential act by Elkanah, however, only engendered trouble between his two wives. Peninnah took every opportunity, apparently, to belittle and tease Hannah over her lack of children. The narrative continues, "So it went on year by year; as often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. Her husband Elkanah said to her, "Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"

But Hannah was not consoled and the Scripture tells us that she got up after dinner and went into the sanctuary and knelt and prayed and wept. She asked God to give her a son, whom she would then dedicate to God's service. The high priest, Eli, was there and was horrified at this breach of protocol. Hannah, a woman, had gone directly to the altar rather than having her husband take her petition to the priest to take to God. Moreover, in her distress, not only was Hannah "weeping bitterly," as the Scripture says, but she was moving her lips while praying silently. Eli thought she was drunk! "So Eli said to her, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine." But Hannah answered, "No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled; I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before

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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.” Then Eli answered, “Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him.”” And, indeed, it was so. When the time came for the next year’s pilgrimage to Shiloh, Hannah could not accompany the rest of the family because she was nursing baby Samuel. And when the boy was weaned, Hannah took him back to Shiloh and put him in Eli’s care, where he grew, as chapter two tells us, “both in stature and in favor with the Lord and with the people.” Samuel became Israel’s first great prophet and the last of the ruling judges. It was Samuel who anointed first Saul and later David as King over Israel and he is remembered as one of the heroes of faith.

Unlike her more famous son, Hannah is a rather ambiguous character. As I was planning this sermon earlier this week, I asked Connie to read the first chapter of I Samuel and to tell me what she thought of Hannah. We agreed that at first glance, she seems a bit whiny. She’s got a husband who loves her and pampers her, after all. What’s the big deal? Why can’t she find a way to get along with Peninnah and keep peace in the family? To begin with, I think we must be careful not to minimize the deep emotional wound that is caused to some people who are unable to have children. I have had dear friends who were in this situation and some of them were able to find fulfillment in raising adopted children or a series of foster children and some sublimated their maternal or paternal instincts through throwing themselves into their work or their church or volunteer activities. But those who shared their deepest feelings with me invariably spoke of the deep sadness and sense of loss which they experienced, regardless of these other outlets.

We must also remember that it has been true at most times and in most places in the world that a woman’s honor and sense of self-worth, indeed her worth in the eyes of her community, has been tied to her ability to bear children. This was particularly true of ancient Israel. With this in mind, Elkanah’s words to Hannah begin to sound like cold comfort. While not quite as bad as Job’s comforters in that he does not blame her for the situation, he also offers the sort of facile cheeriness that those who are deeply grieving find to be hurtful rather than helpful. Jo Ann Hackett writes, “Since he had already filled his need for a family to remember and honor him (the only kind of 'immortality' known to these narratives), his lack of understanding for Hannah's unhappiness begins to look less sentimental and more naïve or even insensitive.”

But Hannah’s real problem goes beyond a sense of grief or a loss of face. Because of the laws of inheritance followed in Israel, all of Elkanah’s property at his death would go to his sons by Peninnah. A widow in those days was without inheritance and without rights. She was completely dependent upon her sons or sons-in-law or some other kindly relative for her sustenance. With the likelihood that Peninnah’s hateful attitude for Hannah would be passed down to her children, Hannah had little hope that her husband’s children by her rival would take pity on her after his passing. Seeking help from a relative must not have looked like a very strong option for her either. There was a good reason that the prophets of ancient Israel continually railed against their contemporaries for their failure to care for the vulnerable in their society – the widows, orphans and immigrants. Had care for those Jesus was later to call “the least of these” been commonplace, the prophets would scarcely have made its lack such a constant theme in their pronouncements. In order to avoid a future of begging and misery, Hannah had to have a child. Even a son dedicated to work in the sanctuary could have cared for her better than she would have been able to manage left on her own. In the event, after Hannah

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fulfilled her vow to bring the boy Samuel to Eli, “the Lord took note of Hannah; she conceived and bore three sons and two daughters.” But she had no way of knowing that would be the result when she returned her son to the God who had blessed her with his birth.

Far from being a whiny ingrate, Hannah begins to look like the best type of an uppity woman. She perceives the injustice built into her society and complains against it. She ignores the conventions of society and takes the action she believes will remedy her situation. Eugene Peterson beautifully contrasts the uppity Hannah with Eli, the symbol of conventional authority who took her audacity for drunkenness: “To Eli, the normal way of prayer is by means of ritual, incense, and animal sacrifice, a gathering of the community directed by a priest. And then Hannah shows up, without bringing a sacrifice, without asking directions from the priest, and simply prays, soaring past all the liturgical conventions of her age, boldly presenting her petition before her God without benefit of clergy. She uses her own words, her own voice, without intermediaries.” We heard another example of Hannah’s words and voice in our Scripture reading this morning, to which we will return in a few minutes.

But first, I want to briefly consider two other uppity women. Before my pal Chuck Neighbors so generously offered to perform for us last Sunday (and wasn’t his performance a treat!), I had thought I might take advantage of the Old Testament Lectionary for last week to talk about Ruth and Tamar then but I’ll just touch on them briefly now. Ruth, who along with Esther is one of two Biblical women to have a book named after her, is usually held up as a model of self-sacrificing loyalty and faith but it turns out she is an uppity woman, too! The story of Ruth actually begins with a family from Bethlehem: a man named Elimelech, his wife Naomi, and their sons Mahlon and Chilion. During a famine, they moved to the neighboring country of Moab for better farming and the young men married Moabite women named Orpah and Ruth. But Elimelech and his sons all died, leaving the three women as childless widows. Naomi knew she had no chance for survival but to return to Bethlehem to her family. She told Orpah and Ruth that they, too, should go to their fathers’ homes – they were young enough to have a chance of remarriage. But Ruth, who had apparently bonded deeply with her mother-in-law, refused, giving us the beautiful words for which she is best known: “Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Where you die, I will die— there will I be buried.”

We tend to remember bits of the rest of the story – that Ruth went to glean in the fields belonging to her late husband’s rich relative Boaz, that Boaz was taken with her and became her protector, that he sought and received permission from a closer relative to marry Ruth. It’s all quite romantic and lovely. But, again, we need to look more closely at this story. As childless widows, Naomi and Ruth were facing the danger that Hannah only imagined – there was no one to protect them from harm, no one to give them a roof over their heads or food. As a foreigner in Moab, Naomi was doubly endangered and when Ruth accompanied her to Bethlehem, their positions were reversed. Only the righteousness of Boaz, who remembered the Torah command to allow widows, orphans and immigrants to glean his harvest behind his reapers, saved their lives. But Naomi and Ruth were not content to eke out this precarious existence and so the uppity Naomi conceived a plan and the uppity Ruth implemented it.

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At the end of the barley harvest, Naomi told Ruth, “Now wash and anoint yourself, and put on your best clothes and go down to the threshing floor; but do not make yourself known to the man until he has finished eating and drinking. When he lies down, observe the place where he lies; then, go and uncover his feet and lie down; and he will tell you what to do.” A little context is necessary: in agrarian societies, the feasts following harvest and threshing were often blow-out affairs. People often over-indulged. For those who worshipped deities of fruitfulness and harvest, there were often activities that celebrated human fruitfulness. Into this rather charged atmosphere, comes a young, eligible woman, perfumed and wearing her nicest frock, who lies down next to the rich bachelor and uncovers his... feet. It may have been Sigmund Freud who said, “Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar,” but many Hebrew scholars believe that in the Bible, feet are not always feet. When Boaz awoke in the middle of the night, he found himself in a rather compromising position with Ruth, who, far from waiting for instructions from Boaz, seized her opportunity. “He said, “Who are you?” And she answered, “I am Ruth, your servant; spread your cloak over your servant, for you are next-of-kin.” Boaz, being a righteous fellow and already taken with Ruth, complies and smuggles her out the next morning to preserve her reputation. He then sets the wheels in motion to marry Ruth properly and everyone in town gives their blessing: “May the Lord make the woman who is coming into your house like Rachel and Leah, who together built up the house of Israel. May you produce children in Ephrathah and bestow a name in Bethlehem; and, through the children that the Lord will give you by this young woman, may your house be like the house of Perez, whom Tamar bore to Judah.”

This blessing is a tad ambiguous. It compares Ruth with Rachel and Leah, the matriarchs of Israel who were certainly held in high esteem. But it also links Ruth with Tamar, which leads me to believe that Ruth’s rather audacious midnight visit to Boaz had not gone unnoticed. Tamar, you see, was another childless young widow who had gone to rather remarkable lengths to ensure her future with children. Like Ruth, she came into the family of Israel from another people – she was a Canaanite girl given in marriage to the oldest son of Judah, son of Jacob and older brother of Joseph. When her husband, Er, died, Judah commanded his next oldest son, Onan, to take Tamar as his wife, as demanded by custom in order to provide an heir to his brother’s line. Onan, not surprisingly, was less than enthusiastic about being the progenitor of a child who would receive an inheritance over him. He practiced a primitive form of birth control to deny Tamar a child. When Onan also died, Jacob put Tamar off, saying that his youngest son was too young for marriage. Even when young Shelah came of age, Jacob ignored Tamar’s plight, as the book of Genesis tells us, “for he feared that he too would die, like his brothers.”

If we are mildly shocked by Ruth’s forward behavior, we are likely to be completely scandalized by Tamar’s. In order to conceive a child who will be her father-in-law’s heir, she dresses as a prostitute, including covering her face, and stations herself on a route she knows Judah will take. Sure enough, the lascivious Judah falls for her plan and, due to Tamar’s careful stratagem, gives her the evidence which will prove the child is his. Ultimately, Tamar is not left to her fate as a childless widow but is remembered, perhaps with a bit of smirk, as the matriarch of the clan of Perez, the primary inhabitants of Bethlehem. Ultimately, both Tamar and Ruth take their place in the ancestral roll of Israel’s greatest king. The end of the Book of Ruth says of Tamar’s son by Judah, “Now these are the descendants of Perez: Perez became the father of Hezron, Hezron of Ram, Ram of Amminadab, Amminadab of Nahshon, Nahshon of Salmon, Salmon of Boaz, Boaz of Obed, Obed of Jesse, and Jesse of David.” And, as we will remember in the days

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leading up to Christmas, the Book of Matthew begins with a genealogy that includes both of these uppity women and ends with “Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.”

Two uppity women who are remembered as forebears of both King David and of Jesus the Christ. A third who was the mother of Israel’s greatest prophet, the one who anointed David as God’s choice for the one whose line would carry the blessing of Israel to the rest of the world. We would certainly not condone the actions of Tamar or even those of Ruth towards Boaz, but we must remember that these women were fighting for their very lives, fighting for what had been promised and denied them, fighting with the only means at their disposal. Alongside the stories of Ruth and Tamar, the story of Hannah seems rather tame. But her words are far from tame. They are what Walter Brueggemann calls “Israel’s most dangerous song;” a song that certainly inspired the song we call the Magnificat, sung by Mary in rejoicing for her son who is to come. It is a song, as Kate Huey writes, “of radical and discomfoting transformation... of the mighty brought down and the lowly lifted up.” If Hannah begins to earn her place alongside Ruth and Tamar as an uppity woman with her unconventional actions at the shrine of Shiloh, she seals her membership in the sisterhood with her prayer after leaving her son with Eli. “The bows of the mighty are broken, but the feeble gird on strength. Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread, but those who were hungry are fat with spoil. The barren has borne seven, but she who has many children is forlorn... The LORD makes poor and makes rich; God brings low, God also exalts. God raises up the poor from the dust; God lifts the needy from the ash heap, to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.”

It is a word of promise to us and also a word of challenge. Certainly there are those times for all of us when we face an uphill road, when we seem to be squared off against insurmountable odds. There are times when it is all we can do to summon the energy to get through the day, let alone be uppity! For us at those times, there is the promise that God sees us and knows our struggles. When we feel that our hunger will never be satisfied, that we are unloved, that we have taken our place with Job on the ash heap, there is the promise that God can and will lift us up. Salvation comes to those who are least or little, to those who are lost or last. God works to heal the world through the barren and the ostracized.

And for the times when all is well with us, when our mouths are full of bread and we are sitting pretty, Hannah’s song and the stories of Ruth and Tamar remind us that there are those to whom the system, the culture, the world has been less kind. In some parts of the world, widows are still in danger of hunger and abuse. Connie and I recently watched the film “Water,” by Indian filmmaker Deepa Mehta. Not a brilliant movie, it is none the less worth watching as a reminder of the precarious lives that widows have led in very recent times in conditions that still persist today. Orphanages are rare in our country but there are children around the world who languish unloved, who have been abandoned on the streets, who have been sold into slavery. Even in our own community, we can read of foster children who are abused, kids who need a friend. And it is still the plight of the immigrant, in almost every land, to be the first to suffer job loss, the first to become the target of suspicion and hatred, the last to reap the benefits taken for granted by others. If God has blessed us, my brothers and sisters, then it is up to us to bless others. Hannah knew that it was God who raised up the poor from the dust and the needy from the ash heap. But we now know that God came and dwelt among us and we called his name Jesus. And when

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Jesus departed from among us in the body, we became his body, we, the church. And so, for the Hannahs and the Ruths and the Tamars of the world, it is now we who are called to be the instruments of salvation, to reach out and to lift them up from where they have fallen.

I know that in many respects I am preaching to the choir. This, after all, is the congregation that ceded half its land to senior housing, that feeds hungry people and collects socks and opens the building on freezing nights and buys gifts for children. But let us never grow complacent in what we do. Let us always be ready to lift up the cry of the dispossessed when we have the ear of those in power. Let us always open our eyes and our hearts to the little ones, the weak ones, those who are of no worth in the eyes of the world. For we, too, have been in need of the love of God and God's people. And, thanks be to God, we have not been disappointed.