

Women Rise Up! Advent Study

November 28, 2021 ~ 4 p.m.

Hannah – Chapter 4

Welcome

First Session of our Advent Study sponsored by United Methodist Women and the Academy for Spiritual and Social Practice at St. Paul UMC. We have folks from around the country with us and we welcome you all with open arms!

Covenant: Our Common Covenant as a Community

- Listen First
- Step up/Step back – pay attention to who’s speaking and who’s not...make space
- Confidentiality
- Respect for All – we may have different perspectives, different beliefs....

Deep Breaths...

For this one moment

All is perfect

I have breath!

Divine life fills me

I need nothing but to know the Now

Where my heart celebrates and my soul rejoices.

Overflowing with serenity

I rest in the rich fullness of being still

To simply be is ecstasy.

--by Kalila Volkov

Reading of the Biblical Texts ~ 1 Samuel 1:1-18

Devotional Reading – “For the Interim Time” by John O’Donohue

When near the end of day, life has drained

Out of light, and it is too soon

For the mind of night to have darkened things,

No place looks like itself, loss of outline

Makes everything look strangely in-between,

Unsure of what has been, or what might come.

In this wan light, even trees seem groundless.

In a while it will be night, but nothing

Here seems to believe the relief of darkness.

*You are in this time of the interim
Where everything seems withheld.*

*The path you took to get here has washed out;
The way forward is still concealed from you.*

*"The old is not old enough to have died away;
The new is still too young to be born."*

*You cannot lay claim to anything;
In this place of dusk,
Your eyes are blurred;
And there is no mirror.*

*Everyone else has lost sight of your heart
And you can see nowhere to put your trust;
You know you have to make your own way through....*

*...What is being transfigured here in your mind,
And it is difficult and slow to become new.
The more faithfully you can endure here,
The more refined your heart will become
For your arrival in the new dawn.*

from: "To Bless the Space Between Us" by John O'Donohue. Pub in 2008 by Doubleday.

Poor Hannah. One of two wives of Elkanah – the other wife being Peninnah who had several children. Hannah was so distraught and desperate to have a child – a desire that haunted her for years. She, too, was faithful to a God who she believed heard her and cared about her...even though her prayers for a child went unanswered for years. She was living in the "Interim Time" which John O'Donohue so aptly described. As he said, "...it is difficult and slow to become new. The more faithfully you can endure here, the more refined your heart will become for your arrival in the new dawn."

This Biblical story is filled with all sorts of "issues" to address: role of women and motherhood, multiple wives, humiliation, faith. Hannah was living in a time when people believed God decided when or if a child would come into the world. But Hannah didn't seem to lose faith in that God in spite of the forces working against her.

We are aware that pregnancy was – and still is in some cultures – a key role for women, a definer of her worth and a guarantee of descendants which were important in that day and this day. That cultural message was not lost on Hannah. She was bereft. Desperate. To not have children was a curse, of sorts. We've witnessed this in the lives of other biblical women...yearning for a child that would bring, not only joy, but value and new generations.

According to commentary in the Common English Bible, "A barren woman, Hannah, ridiculed by her rival (Peninnah) is God's instrument to begin the transition to kingship in Israel. God's use of barren women to advance the story of Israel is also displayed in the stories of Sarah." We know that Hannah eventually

birthed Samuel who eventually chose and empowered Saul and David as kings of Israel. The barren-ness, one might conclude, might not necessarily be a curse, but perhaps a badge of honor.

Hannah's life is one of challenge, for sure. She wanted something so badly. She suffered with great sadness, disappointment and depression. She even lived with a man who just didn't get it which, I suspect, deepened Hannah's distraught. We read that Elkanah asked her, "Why do you weep?" The cultural message about the import of having children was lost on Elkanah, for sure.

BUT Hannah was persistent and she did not hesitate to bargain with God. She makes a solemn promise to dedicate any son to God's purpose which she did.

Katey, who weaves personal stories into each chapter in her book, recalls her own personal journey of persistence when praying for her grandmother, Honey, who meant the world to her. Katey prayed for her to live. How she wished she hadn't died. She describes this angst as well as confessing that the year Honey died, her parents divorced. What would happen next?

We've heard the saying that "God hears all our prayers, but may respond with silence". What does that mean for us? It is said that Hannah went 19 years before God "answered" her prayer. How many of us would have been this persistent? How many of us would hang onto a dream – an unfulfilled dream?

Break out group: 10 minutes – Question – introduce each other and respond to this question: Describe a time when your prayers went unanswered or were answered in a different way. How did that make you feel? How did you make your way through any disappointment that might have resulted?

After sharing her story of her grandmother, Honey, dying, Katey writes of her relationship with the church – a place where she found comfort and friendships but also a place of discomfort, fear and doubt. Katey's life in the church has been a mixed bag. Katey details her experiences around sexuality and the prohibitions placed on young people. She wrote about the "Purity" pledge when one commits to not having sex until marriage and also lectures about behaviors that were either "right" or "wrong" and if one crossed the line, psychological damage caused from being shunned or criticized by adults and others if one didn't live a straight and narrow life! Katey witnessed the "shaming" of young women who violated the "norms" and, given the age of most of us on this zoom call, I bet we can remember going through situations such as these.

Katey writes about "guarding your heart" and her experience of being given the message to "shut out the possibility of love, which includes shutting down vulnerability." Fortunately, through authors such as Brene Brown, this concept has been challenged and actually reversed. Brown writes in her book "The Gifts of Imperfection" that "vulnerability is our most accurate measurement of courage". Katey expounds on this by writing that "Designing one's life around avoiding pain was not a divinely inspired goal. It was motivated by fear, not love." Messages given to us by trusted adults when we're teens, are powerful – for good or bad.

Break Out Session – (20 minutes) Remember your group #

Question for discussion: "Guard your heart" is a message some churches preach as a caution against dating and sexual intimacy. What messages about being vulnerable have you received throughout your life? What do you believe vulnerability ought to look like in our faith communities?

Reporting Out -

We know that all women in the world do not yearn to birth children. But for many it is a strong yearning. Katey reminds us that the issue of infertility is alive and well in our world today affecting between sixty and eighty million people worldwide. In the US, one in eight couples will be diagnosed with infertility. Between 25-60% of infertile couples experience emotional or psychological distress as a result of their condition. A question for us is how we, as a community of women and men, be a supportive presence to women/couples who are traveling this path. How might we bring them comfort?

We know how Hannah's story ends. Her plea is heard and/or witnessed by Eli, the temple priest, and he thought Hannah was drunk. He made false assumptions about Hannah, and Hannah's comeback to him was one of courage and self-advocacy. She made her case by becoming vulnerable. Eli changes his perception and offers her comfort. It is said that Hannah's prayer to God is a precursor to Mary's Magnificat. And, she is known as a "Prophetess". <https://udayton.edu/imri/mary/h/hannah-as-a-type-of-mary.php>

Christmas Giving Suggestion: Dulac Community Center – UMW National Mission Institution, Louisiana. Provides food, housing rehabilitation, job training, exercise classes and other services to assist women, children and Native Americans in lower Terrebonne Parish with an emphasis on women, children and Native Americans. We will send the link in our follow-up email. <http://www.dulaccommunitycenter.org/>

Closing Prayer:

May the love of God watch over you,

May the peace of Christ fill your heart;

May the presence of the Holy Spirit give you courage to endure and to love with abandon knowing you are sacred in the sight of God. Amen.