

“Hannah & Mary”

Sunday, December 30, 2018, First Sunday of Christmas

First Baptist Church of Worcester

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So, my parents are here visiting from Texas today. Give a little wave, mom and dad! Everyone please be sure to tell them all of the great things about New England (they are not super happy with me for moving their only grandchild 2,000 miles away). I know I'm putting them on the spot here, but my dad was a Baptist pastor for all of my growing-up years, and I provided him with plenty of sermon fodder. So it's payback time! One of the stories my parents love to tell is about the time my dad accepted a call as pastor at a new church. The church he'd been serving threw him a going away party, and after all the goodbyes and hugs and well-wishes, my mom and dad drove away. I'm not sure how far they got before realizing they'd left me at the party. I was four. Don't worry, I was fine.

It's a funny story now, but I imagine there was at least a little moment of panic at the time. I have not yet left my 3-year-old anywhere, but when he's running around before church or after at Forum, and I notice that he's no longer in my line of sight, I get a twinge of that panic. I still get a little lost in this building sometimes, so I am terrified that I'll lose track of Dominic. That he'll somehow end up hiding in the baptistery or stuck in an organ pipe or lost in the labyrinth of music rooms in the basement. There's not much scarier than the thought of losing your child, or anyone you love, really.

Our lectionary texts today tell the stories of two biblical women: Mary, who lost her child for a few days, and Hannah, who gave her child away. These women's lives were separated by hundreds of years, but their stories are connected. Both of them were underdogs. We now know them as heroes, but in their own cultures, neighborhoods, families, Mary and Hannah were both looked down-upon. Hannah was barren, she wasn't getting pregnant fast enough, and teen-mom Mary got pregnant way too fast. Hannah was seen as defective, and Mary, promiscuous. (Sidebar: Here's a moment where the ancient world and our world do not seem so far apart - judgments and shame were and are heaped on women based on our perceived fertility, our bodies, our age, our marital status, our boldness, our emotion, and the list goes on... Can we be honest and confess that the Church, big C, is the absolute worst about this kind of judgement? Let's stop it with that, okay?? Scripture's elevation of Hannah and Mary and other misfit rebel women like them tears down any ideas our culture or theirs may have about what a woman should or should not be.)

Despite what it looked like, both Hannah and Mary were devout and faithful people.

They journeyed with their families to the temple each year for the festival or to offer their sacrifices. As a good Jewish girl, Mary would have grown up hearing the story of Hannah and her son, Samuel. We can see explicitly Hannah's influence on Mary in the Magnificat, Mary's famous song that we read and sang together here just a couple of weeks ago: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my savior." Mary goes on in a hard-hitting and prophetic proclamation of social reversal – the poor being lifted up, the hungry being filled, the powerful being brought down – that remarkably resembles the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2 after she gave birth to Samuel. From both of these women, our ancestors in the faith, we learn

what it means to take our children to the temple, so to speak.

As much as they have in common, however, the similarities in their stories end at a pretty important point. In Mary's story, she loses her son and finds him in the temple, but in Hannah's story, she gives her son away. Let me back up to give you a little refresher: Hannah was married to Elkanah, who was also married to Peninnah (good old "biblical" family values!). Peninnah had children, but it just wasn't working out for Hannah. Scripture paints a picture of Hannah's grief that some of you can really relate to. And for Hannah, it was about even more than the hope of having a family to love. In ancient Israel, children were the only kind of protection that a woman could count on. There was no insurance, no Obamacare, no social security to help them when they got older. Psalm 127 says, "Sons are indeed a heritage from the Lord, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the sons of one's youth. Happy is the man who has his quiver full of them." Children, and specifically sons, in ancient Israel, meant protection and security.

So even though Scripture tells us that Hannah was the most loved wife, her role in the family was unstable. The other wife, Peninnah, provokes and mocks Hannah. Scripture calls her Hannah's "rival." (Sidebar: Women – when we compete with each other to be the favorite, the most loved, the most productive [pun intended] woman in a patriarchal system, we are still propping up that patriarchal system and contributing to our own oppression. Again, let's confess that we're really bad about this in the church, and especially the Baptist church, where it sometimes feels like there's barely room for one of us. Let's stop it with that, okay?! Lift each other up, sisters. Clear out some more room at the table, brothers.)

Hannah, in the depths of her desperation, goes to the temple where she prays, weeps, and does something that many of us have done– she bargains with God. "If you will give me a son, I will give him back to you, God, to serve you until he dies." We all know how this goes, and most of us have failed at this kind of promising at some point. God, I promise I'll be a better daughter if you'll just let my father live. Oh God, I promise I will start going to church if you'll just let me get this promotion. Oh God, I promise to start giving to the poor as soon as I pay off my student loans, or my kids' student loans. The remarkable thing about Hannah, is that she was good for her word. She finally had a son, someone to protect her, to give her a place in the family, everything she had hoped for, and she gave him away. Hannah saw her son as God's gift, and ultimately, God's possession.

In the part of the story that we read earlier in the service, we find Hannah, after all of this has happened, still going on her yearly journey to the temple to worship, and each year, she brings Samuel a little robe. I can imagine her trying to guess at how much he had grown each year, imagine Samuel running out to greet her in his old, too short, too small robe that he ministered in for the past year. It is a heartbreaking and beautiful story.

Although we don't have a temple to drop our children at (and as much as Brent and Derek and I love our FBCWooKids, we would not appreciate you dropping them off to assist us full time), Hannah testifies to the fact that our children, however old they are and whatever they might do, belong to God, not to us. Of course, this isn't just true of children. It is true of our parents, our partners, our friends, our employees, and our pastors, our congregants. We cannot possess each other, though it is easy to convince ourselves that we can. "If only I cook the right food and am kind enough, my husband will be faithful to me – If only I make enough

money and buy the right things, my family will love me – If only I make the grades, my parents will be proud of me – If only I raise them just right, my children will grow up to be good Christian people – If only I take care of my friend well, she'll live a little longer." With good intentions, we do everything in our power to make sure that our partners are faithful, that our children grow up to be the kind of people we want them to be, that our parents get the right kind of medical care.

But in the end, whether we like it or not, we realize that these loved ones are not ours. No amount of effort or guilt will change the fact that no matter how hard we try, we cannot possess each other. This is a hard teaching for me. Sometimes it is much easier to trust God with our own souls that it is to trust God with the soul of someone we love. But this is the good news, that although our loved ones do not belong to us, they do belong to God. Our children and spouses, our parents and friends are the beloved children of a God who can be trusted. Like Hannah, the best that we can do is to loosen our grip and help each other to serve God along our way.

Because even when we are unwilling to let go of each other, unwilling to drop our children off at the Temple like Hannah, we find out soon enough that they belong to God whether we like it, or not. We see this in today's story about Mary. The Holy Family had gone to Jerusalem for the yearly festival. Jesus was twelve, still a child, when they accidentally left him behind. (you're in good company, mom & dad). Jesus was lost for 3 days – 3 days of searching, panicking, not

knowing, before they found him, alive and well (anyone catch the foreshadowing there?).

Mary, when she finally finds Jesus in the temple, says to him: Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety. (I can't help but wonder what else she said...) Jesus had disappointed her. He did not meet her expectations. He did not do what she thought he ought to do, what she raised him to do. The child Jesus' response pushes back on those expectations, "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I'd be at my Father's house?? (Don't you know who I belong to?)" That's right, Jesus talks back, which I guess should be expected from a 12-year-old. I'm sure Mary had more to say at this point that does not get passed along in scripture. Luke goes on to tell us that Jesus went home with his parents and was obedient, but his actions make it clear who he really belongs to, where he really belongs.

One of the first things that Mary learned is that she can't own Jesus. This is a lesson that we have to learn with Mary over and over again: We don't own each other, and we definitely don't own Jesus. We can't control him. Jesus does not meet our expectations. Even though we tend to think that he is with us and our people, we sometimes look up and find that we left him behind three days ago. We have to go searching all over again. We don't get to make the call about where Jesus belongs, or who he belongs with. (Sidebar [this is the last one]: Confession time again, beloveds! Religious people like many of us are the worst about staking our claim on what we are sure Jesus would say or do, where he'd be. Let's stop it with that, okay?!) Because one thing we learn from Mary's story, is that just as soon as we think we own God, we lose sight of him. Just as soon as we think we've got Jesus all figured out, he turns up somewhere completely unexpected.

And this is the good news – that God is not bound to our narrow expectations, Jesus is not limited to our meager imaginations. The one we worship is wild and free and unpredictably

moving in our world and in our lives and in the lives of the ones we love, and the lives of the

ones we don't love. This is our hope at Christmas – that the God of creation, the God of the manger, can still surprise us, can still break into our broken world with hope and peace and joy and love, in all the wrong places, in all the ways we least expect.

And this is the God to whom you belong, beloveds. Not the God-of-your-parent's-expectations, not the God-of-the-pressure-to-succeed, not the God-of-a high-brow-education, not the God-of-the-perfect-family, not the God-of-always-being-right. You belong to the God of creation, the God of the manger, who enfolds the farthest corners of the universe in her lap, and who becomes one of us and snuggles up at his mother's breast. All of those other pressures and people and things that try to stake their claim on you, that try to own you, that you give yourself over to are idols, no matter how good and well-intentioned they may be. You belong to God and God alone.

Both of our sacred stories today end with children growing and mothers pondering. (Not a very exciting denouement for a narrative, but I think it leaves us in just the right spot.) So dear ones – When we look at our children, when we look at our family and friends and neighbors, instead of seeking control, may we ponder with Mary. May we treasure all these things in our hearts. May we watch and support the work of God in each other, knowing that we can't control it. And when we look at our own lives, may we hold fast to identity as beloved children of the uncontrollable and untamable God, always learning and growing into the only one to whom we belong. Amen.

Prayers of the People

God of all creation, God of every mountain and blade of grass, of every snowflake, every spider, every wild thing and every beloved pet, God of each one of us. You are so big – you enfold the farthest corners of the universe in your lap, you sustain and order it all. And yet you became so small – you cuddled up in your mother’s lap, you were sustained by your own creation.

This Christmas season, help us embrace this mystery – A God who is powerful and vulnerable, over all of us and within each of us. We ask you, creator God, to draw near again this Christmastide –

Draw near to us in our joy, our pain, our grief, and our hope.

We pray for our world, and ask you to come especially close to those who are fleeing violence and oppression.

We pray for our community, and ask you to be especially near to our neighbors and friends who feel isolated and alone.

We pray for our church family, and you to comfort and heal the broken hearts in this room and among our families and friends.

We remember and give thanks for your beloved daughter, Barbara Van Schermbeek, who we trust is at home in your loving embrace even now. Comfort her friends and family, give them your grace and peace.

And now we lift aloud the names of all those we carry on our hearts today...

Rod, Jane, Nicole Betty, Betty, Donna, Jess, Bette, John, Sara, Sue.

God who is near, hear our prayers, spoken and unspoken. We ask for healing, comfort, protection, patience, and faith. And when we don’t know how to pray or what to ask for, or even how to approach you, God, we trust that your Holy Spirit intercedes for us, echoing our groans that are too deep for words. Amen.