



No Longer Sad

Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsobn given for the people of St. John's Episcopal Church

November 18, 2018; I Samuel 1:1-2:10

I'd like to begin this homily by asking you a question. Sometimes when I start a homily like this I'll ask you to raise your hand if your answer is yes. But not today. Today, please keep your answer within yourself. So here is my question. Have you ever had a situation in your life when you or someone you loved were in a state of chronic suffering that you could not fix? The type of situation where you really were stuck, and couldn't find any way to get out of it? Where you needed to talk about it but were afraid that everyone around you was sick of hearing about it? If you're a child, maybe your parents don't get along and they fight a lot and you can't change that but it really bothers you and makes you scared. Perhaps some of you have a loved one with dementia, and the long slow series of tiny losses are very painful, but you feel like you can't just keep saying the same thing over and over again: it hurts. Perhaps you are a person of color and you walk through this world experiencing thousands of micro-aggressions against you every day by people who are mostly oblivious to the prejudice they are acting out, except for the ones who do it on purpose, and that is even scarier. Or maybe you carry the burden of a wrong you have committed that you just don't know how to fix.

The truth is that nearly all of us experience things like this. My brother and his wife tried for seven years to have a baby, and could not. They rarely talked about it but infertility was a constant presence in their lives. In their seventh year, my husband Jeff and I decided to start trying to have a baby. I got pregnant the first month we tried. When we told my brother and his wife we were pregnant, they really wanted to be happy for us, but they were too weary and sad from their own situation to even fake it. As it turned out, that pregnancy ended in miscarriage. But later I had our beautiful daughter Carly. And later, thank God, my brother and his wife did have children

through the help of medical technology, my nephews who I adore. But at the time their reality was infertility, and it was totalitarian.

This morning's story from I Samuel is a story about exactly this type of situation. Hannah is beloved of her husband, but she is childless, and in that culture at that time it meant she had no dignity in her current life, and she also had no safety net for when she got older and her husband died. Clearly her husband's other wife, Penninah, was not going to do anything to help her. And so she lived in this constant state of despair. Her husband did what many of us do when we encounter someone else's suffering. He tried to convince her that she didn't need to be so sad. Has that ever worked in the history of the world—to try to convince someone they don't need to be suffering? I don't think so. So Hannah, understandably, felt completely alone in her pain.

What she does with her pain is remarkable. She brings her sorrow and anxiety and distress to God and makes her request. She stands up for her own dignity when the priest Eli insensitively assumes she's just drunk. And this is the part I find really amazing. She prays and makes her request and her vow, and has this brief dialogue with the priest, and then she leaves, and the scripture says this: "her countenance was sad no longer." But on the surface of things, nothing had changed. She was not yet pregnant. The priest sort of said, "God grant you what you have asked," in a cryptic grammatical phrase that isn't quite a promise, more of a wishful blessing. But something about the experience changes her. What was it?

I think what changed her was having had the courage to bring the full weight of her pain to God, and the certain sense of having been seen and heard by God. She had engaged in an ancient Jewish spiritual practice called lament, which is what many of the Psalms are about. Lament is simply taking the full weight of your suffering, and expressing it directly to God, instead of just wondering where God is in it. Hannah's lament and God's presence in it moved her from despair to hope. And so she was sad no longer. And she does, in due course, give birth to a son whom she knows from the beginning will not be "hers" – even though of course none of our children belong to us in a possessive sense, they all have their own destinies and gifts that are meant for the world. But her son, Samuel, will become the prophet of Israel. Samuel will replace the current corrupt religious leadership and bring justice and humility and the sense of

God back to the people of Israel. So Hannah's personal grief and isolation is flipped outward; she becomes the mother of one of the greatest prophets of Israel. Her personal blessing becomes the blessing of an entire people.

And I think this is what God means for us and all creation: to bless us and make us blessings for others. Do you remember the very first chapter in the Bible, the great poem where God creates the world in seven days, and everything is called good? Where God tells the earth to bring forth life—the plants with fruit with seed in it? Inherent in the Hebrew word for good, the word “tov”, is the ability to be generative—to join with God in bringing forth life. The entire cosmos is made to participate in God's endless creation.

Now I do not mean that we are all called to be literally generative. Some of us are not called to have children, and some of us, to our great grief, cannot have children, for biological or social or other reasons. But all of us are created good; and all of us are meant to bring forth life for others, to offer our gifts and ourselves for the sake of the world God so loves. Yet sometimes, like Hannah, we get stuck. We get stuck in chronic situations we feel powerless to fix, yet they cause us pain. And in that pain, it is easy to become isolated, and to feel unable to offer your gifts to the world.

What moves us out of that isolated stuck place is the practice of lament. The practice of expressing ourselves to God, which is more than just asking God to end the pain. It is about showing up fully to God with all that we are experiencing, and realizing in that place that God is already there with us. We see over and over again in our scriptures that God is with the one who is rejected or hopeless or oppressed. God grants life where it had been impossible to women—Sarah, Hannah, Elizabeth, Mary. God grants a role to the younger brother, to Jacob and Joseph and David. God hears the suffering and liberates the slaves. It is this hope that changes Hannah's countenance. She is no longer sad. It doesn't mean that everything was immediately fixed for her. But she could eat again. She could take in nourishment again. She had hope. And that hope moved her back into community with others, and made her generative.

I had the great opportunity to hear a man named Bryan Stevenson speak recently here in Minnesota. Bryan Stevenson is a lawyer who has devoted his career to fighting injustice in the criminal justice system. He has represented the poor, and people of color, and children who are accused of crimes unjustly or who have received disproportionate sentences for their crimes. And he says this: the greatest enemy of injustice is hope. It is hope that enables us to participate in God's endless work to make everything new, to make us generative. Hope gives us the power to move through our personal pain toward a place of healing for ourselves and others. Hope enables us to stand against injustice and make sacrifices so that everyone can belong, everyone can have enough, and there can truly be justice and peace for all.

If you are stuck, I pray God grants you the ability to lament—to express your pain directly to God, and to discover that God is already there with you in it, so that you can have hope again, so that you can eat again, so you can offer your gifts for the world God so loves. May God grant all of us the hope we need to follow the way of Jesus, to make us generative—to participate in God's work to make everything new. We all have a role to play. We all have gifts to offer. Even our scars can become blessings, because by healing from our wounds we can offer compassion and hope to others who are hurt. May God meet you where you are and make you a blessing.