

“She Persisted”

Twelfth Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 Samuel 1:1-6, 9-18; Psalm 113
June 21, 2026

Rev. Dr. E. Scott Jones
The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
Saint Paul, Minnesota

Back in April we hosted the Scottish hymn writer John Bell for our annual Didier Seminar. It was a rich weekend. We explored the words and images we sing and how the songs of worship should speak to our current concerns and needs. John got us using our imaginations to interpret familiar scripture passages. And I enjoyed my one-on-one conversations with him about ministry.

As he departed that weekend, he gave me a book he had written on the psalms, entitled *Living with the Psalms*. I recommend it to you. It's a brief, engaging discussion of what the psalms mean to us.

About them, he writes, “They emerged from concrete situations in which people felt blessed or puzzled by God, delighted by good fortune or demeaned by the hostility of others, cheered by beauty or depressed for any number of reasons.” The psalms reflect the spirituality of ordinary people of faith, living with all the situations, experiences, and emotions that people of faith continue to encounter over the centuries.

I've long advised people in need of pastoral care to read the psalms. For in the psalms we encounter every human emotion from intense rage to calm serenity to ecstatic joy to deep anguish. It's all there—the breadth and depth of the human condition.

Yes, there are plenty of songs of praise and thanksgiving and celebration in the psalms, but there is also much anger, grief, and lament. John Bell writes that one reason we are so drawn to the psalms is that they provide “a vocabulary for pain.”

He writes, “Illness, distress and disappointment are perennial facts of life that all of God's people have to endure.” Therefore, “Faith does not act as a prophylactic against disaster, but it should enable us to walk on with confidence and hope.”

According to John Bell, the psalms make it clear that God doesn't expect us to be happy all the time. He writes, “It is bad psychology to suggest that the goal in life is to be constantly grinning.” And he adds, “God does not want us to be nice; God wants us to be honest.”

And the Psalms afford us opportunities to be honest. To explore the depths of our emotions—to celebrate our joys, lament our griefs, express our pains, rage when necessary, and sit calmly in the presence of the Holy.

This particular psalm, Psalm 113 that Bruce read earlier, is about God's revolutionary and transformative power. As Walter Brueggemann puts it, “the incomparable sovereign over all reality is allied with the poor, the needy, and the barren women, all those who are without social power.” The infertile woman, looked down upon in a patriarchal society, receives the mercy of God and is empowered.

Which, as Walter Brueggemann points out, reveals something significant about the God we worship. God's power is deployed with compassion. God's power is deployed on behalf of justice. God's power is aimed toward social transformation for the better.

And, in that way, God's power is different from how power is so often exercised. Not for domination or entitlement or cruelty. Power used to help the needy and the excluded. Power used to bring about a better world.

No wonder the people erupt in praise and thanksgiving. Brueggemann writes, “the new life to which the hopeless are raised is indeed a miracle.”

So, is it possible that Hannah prayed a psalm like this one when she was in pain?

Here is a woman, unable to give birth and confined by a patriarchal system, who desires something more and better for herself, and she goes to God to express that pain and hurt and seek God's

deliverance. And the God she confidently and faithfully prays to is this God of compassion, who listens to the prayers of the downtrodden, and moves on their behalf.

One feature of this story that resonates for many of us in the 21st century is Hannah's struggle in her effort to have a child. Many families struggle with fertility. Many must find alternative paths to form their families. This isn't a story about some conventional family, for one, Elkanah has two wives. A reminder that families come in various forms. Adoption, in vitro, donors, surrogates—these and other methods have become common aspects of family formation in the 21st century. In a story like today's, we can find parallels to our experiences.

Which is part of the power of the Bible. As Eugene Peterson described it, "The biblical way is to tell a story and invite us: 'Live into this—this is what it looks like to be human in this God-made and God-ruled world; this is what is involved in becoming and maturing as a human being.'"

So these ancient stories call for our participation—to find the ways that God connects to us and speaks to us and the ways these stories resonate with our own.

Let me give a little introduction to the Book of First Samuel, which is the text I'll be exploring the rest of the summer in my preaching. First Samuel is part of a series of books recounting the stories of the nation and how the monarchy came to be. Kings and rulers figure prominently in the stories of First Samuel and how power is deployed.

One of the most fascinating aspects of these stories is that they are in-depth explorations of moral character. Unlike most nations, who tell triumphant stories of their rulers that gloss over any defects, the scribes of ancient Israel recorded both stories of triumph and failure. All the weaknesses and shortcomings of their rulers are made clear. Which is one reason these stories still draw our attention all these millennia later. We resonate with the moral struggles and psychological depths of these characters.

First Samuel begins by centering a woman—Hannah. Which means that the Book of Samuel tells us that the project of building the nation begins in the prayers of a woman.

Next April, our Didier lecturer will be Wilda Gafney. Gafney is the Right Rev. Sam B. Hulse Professor of Hebrew Bible at Brite Divinity School in Fort Worth, Texas. And the author of books that center the stories of women in the Hebrew Scriptures. She is a bold, insightful, and provocative preacher and teacher, and she will contribute mightily to our intellectual and theological life.

One of her projects in recent years was the four volume *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church*. The Revised Common Lectionary that many churches standardly use only covers, even in three years of readings, a small sliver of the biblical text. And it doesn't do a great job of lifting up the stories of women in the Bible.

So, Gafney set out to create a new lectionary, that would center the stories of women and women's experiences. Her volumes include her own translations of the Biblical texts, prioritizing in her translations metaphors and idioms that also lift up female experiences and expressions. And she wrote commentary to accompany each week's selections.

For this summer, in order to familiarize you with some of her work before she preaches and teaches here next year, I will be using her lectionary for Year A, which lifts up these stories of women in First Samuel, beginning with Hannah.

Let's attend to Hannah. What is it that she desires?

That's the provocative question asked by biblical scholar David Jobling in his magnificent commentary on First Samuel. Jobling takes an interesting approach to this story, beginning with how he views Elkanah, Hannah's husband. In many commentaries, Elkanah is interpreted as a man of great integrity and moral character, with deep affection for Hannah. But David Jobling isn't so sure. He says it's possible that Elkanah with his two wives is enjoying a best-of-both-worlds available to a man in that kind of polygynous patriarchal system—he has one wife for bearing and raising children and another wife free of all those complications. Jobling wonders if Elkanah "has no need of children from Hannah, and perhaps fears that she would cease to be attractive if she were worn out by childbearing."

Hannah goes into the shrine and pours out her heart to God about how she feels in this situation and the way she's being treated. Possibly praying something similar to the psalm we read today. A prayer that calls upon God's compassionate power to deliver her.

She wants a son. But, as David Jobling points out, it's not exactly clear why she wants a son. Because she does not raise this son. To get ahead of the story a little bit, Hannah gives her son Samuel away, when he is very young, in order for him to be a servant of God. He grows up at the shrine, with Eli this not very good priest.

It doesn't seem that Hannah wants a son for her husband Elkanah. Nor does she seem to want a son to nurture and care for and raise herself. What does she want?

According to David Jobling, the story suggests that she wants a son who will be in service to God. A son who will be a leader among the people. He writes, "Perhaps this is an ambitious woman who, having little scope herself, hopes to satisfy her ambition vicariously through her son."

Here is Jobling's interpretive theory. Hannah sees the state the nation is in—disorder, violence, and chaos. She also sees the corruption of the priests at the shrine. In the next chapter we are told about how the sons of Eli the priest have extorted people and engaged in sexual harassment and probably worse.

So, Hannah takes the initiative to do what she can to address the situation. Her patriarchal society limits what she is capable of doing herself, but she envisions a son who will become a leader of the people and serve without corruption. Jobling writes, "As the initiative-taker in her story she is the cause of the restoration and glorification of judgeship in Samuel. Through her son she achieves the resolution of the . . . scandals of her time." Through Hannah's persistence and faithfulness, change for the better is brought to her people.

So, she is, in many ways, a mother of the nation, helping to give birth to a new order.

Hannah begins her revolutionary work with prayer. Some commentators call her a "prayer-warrior," to parallel the actual warriors we so often encounter in these stories. Eugene Peterson makes much of Hannah's prayers. He points out how she's not intimidated by religious authority, and that she goes around the prescribed rules for religious rituals, taking matters into her own hands. He writes, "She uses her own words, her own voice, without intermediaries." She boldly asserts her needs and is confident that God has addressed them.

Which suggests that she believes in a God who listens, who is present with us, who lives in solidarity to human need and suffering and responds.

Peterson also writes that she "stubbornly and prayerfully sets herself against 'the way things are,' the circumstances handed to her by society, and before you know it, history is flowing in a different direction."

Hannah, despite her circumstances and her pain, persisted. And because of her persistence, she changed her nation. It did not happen immediately. She herself may not have even lived to see the outcomes. But she had a vision and called upon the compassionate power of God to assist her, and she birthed a new beginning.

Hannah can serve for us as a model. Of how to express our hurt and pain. Of how to pray. Of how to rely upon God's compassionate power. And also how to persist, despite our circumstances.

When we are in pain, struggling with illness, grief, heartbreak, and loss, we too can pray to a compassionate God, who hears us, is present with us, and responds.

This week was another troubling one for us here in Minnesota. More ICE raids. More chemical irritants used upon peaceful protestors. The arrests, not of Renee Good's and Alex Pretti's murderers, but of citizens who organized to defend their neighbors. We've been reminded, yet again, as we have too often in the last year, about the ways in which power can be deployed for cruelty and harm.

And, so, we must persist. No matter how exhausted we might be. No matter that we thought the worst was past and that we were now winning our profiles in courage awards.

We must continue to deploy compassionate power. To love our neighbors in the ways we learned this winter. To stand up for one another, support each other, and speak the truth. We continue to be at the center of God's work in our time, called to bear witness that a more just and loving world is possible.

With Hannah, let us pray to God, maybe using this very psalm:

Hallelujah! Give praise, you [servants] of the Most High;
Praise the Name of the Wisdom of the Ages.
Let the Name of the Holy One of Old be blessed,
From this time forth forevermore.
From the rising of the sun to its going down
The Name of the Author of Life is praised.
She Who Is Wisdom is high above all nations,
And her glory above the heavens.
Who is like the Mother of All our God, who sits enthroned on high,
Yet bends down to behold the heavens and the earth?
She takes up the weak out of the dust
And lifts up the poor from the ashes.
She sets them with the rulers,
With the rulers of her people.
She makes the woman of a childless house
To be a joyful mother of children.