

“She Exalted”

Thirteenth Sunday in Ordinary Time
1 Samuel 1:19-28, 2:1-10
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Ellen Davis is a professor of the Hebrew Scriptures Duke University. She begins her excellent book *Opening Israel's Scriptures* with this puzzlement:

The exegesis of ancient Israel's Scriptures is surely one of the strangest activities in which Christians and religiously committed Jews regularly engage. It is strange that thoughtful people in sizable numbers would pay close, sustained attention to writings from a distant millennium and culture. It is even more strange that many are open to receiving these ancient and alien texts as having direct bearing on their own lives—that is, to hearing and reading them as Scripture.

We should every now and then pause to recognize this strangeness. Here in Saint Paul, Minnesota in the year two thousand and twenty-six, in an age of interstellar probes, genetic engineering, and artificial intelligence, we gather together and open up these books, translations of words written thousands of years ago in other languages on other continents by people in vastly different cultural and social contexts than our own.

Why do we do it?

Davis's book is a helpful introduction to the books of Old Testament and a guide in ways that we might read and apply them. She provides some helpful insights into how we ought to read scripture. For instance, we should make clear what our presuppositions and biases are that we bring to the text. We should endeavor to understand the social and historical factors affecting the writing and what literary goals the authors may have had. We should use our best rational skills to draw conclusions from that data. And, very importantly, we should remain open to constant revision, as we entertain other voices, perspectives, and interpretations and as we ourselves grow in faith and understanding. She reminds us that “critical interpretation of texts is provisional, open-ended, collaborative work.”

All helpful tools if we are going to study scripture. But that still leaves unanswered the question—*Why read and study and reflect upon it in the first place?*

Thankfully, Ellen Davis does offer her own answer, as to why she reads and studies the Bible and has devoted her professional and intellectual life to it. Her answer is on the cover of your bulletin—“What keeps me returning to the Bible with some measure of hope is a sense that it evokes a more spacious world, vastly more expansive than the sphere of reality with which we ordinarily reckon.”

I love this answer to the question.

My own answer is that I return to the Bible again and again because in its pages I am inspired, challenged, puzzled, convicted, comforted, consoled, and encouraged. What's your answer to the question? Why do you care what these ancient texts say?

Davis's spaciousness is similar to the answer I give. She explains, “The main business of the Bible is to challenge our ordinary conceptions of how things ‘really’ are—to call into question the necessity and even the reality of the limits we impose upon ourselves and others, and to show us that the cramped conditions of human existence are most often the result of misplaced fear or desire.”

Reading the Bible compels us to see beyond our immediate moment—the blinders of our own social and cultural context and the way our own needs can limit us. We are invited to witness and experience human life and the struggle of faith from wildly different perspectives. Thus the challenge to our status quos.

Ellen Davis elaborates that in this expansiveness she experiences a form of salvation. Being a Hebrew scholar she analyzes the Hebrew words for distress and salvation and points out that their

etymological roots convey notions of “restriction,” in the case of distress, and “make spacious,” in the case of salvation. In Hebrew, to save is to make room for those who feel restricted. So, for her, to read and study and interpret the Bible, makes room, and thereby is an experience of salvation.

When we feel confined by our own circumstances—personal, professional, political, economic—reading the Bible can be a chance to get out of ourselves and our focus on the self and experience a bigger world.

Davis concludes her answer as to why we read the Bible with this enthusiastic statement—“Eagerness to be surprised by what Scripture reveals, and awareness of my human limitations, yet confidence that in poring over *torah* I will discover that my genuine needs are met.”

May we turn to scripture with such eagerness and curiosity and open our minds for the word God may have for us.

So, we turn today to First Samuel and more of the story of Hannah that we began last week. In persistence and faithfulness, she has prayed to the God Who Hears to respond to her despair and to deliver her.

She was infertile, and experienced the alienation of that, especially in the patriarchal society she lived in. She desires a son. But, as we said last week, she doesn’t seem to want the son for herself to raise and nurture. From the beginning, she wants the son so that she can commit him to God and to service. She wants her son to become a leader of the people.

The interpretation I offered last week is that she was a woman who saw the awful circumstances of the world in which she lived—its violence, injustice, and corruption—and she wanted to do something about it. But the patriarchal circumstances of her society limited her options. So she decided to change her nation through a son who would become a just and righteous leader of the people. That’s what she prayed for and that’s what she achieved.

We should take a moment to refresh ourselves on the state of the society she was living in. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Book of First Samuel follows immediately upon the Book of Judges. If you haven’t read Judges lately, let me remind you that it is a book filled with horrific violence. Ethnic tensions and warfare between peoples destroy lives and land. The leaders that the people do have get worse and worse. And throughout the book, women are often the victims of the worst violence. Something we know is a feature of much of human history.

By the end of Judges, there is no leader, and the book concludes with one of the most terrifying and graphic stories in the Bible. Rape, murder, dismemberment, and then a bloody war of revenge. Game of Thrones has nothing on the final chapters of Judges.

And, yet, in the Hebrew Bible, if you turn the page from that story, the very next one is the story of Hannah, mother of the nation, who births a new order through her persistence and prayer.

Eugene Peterson draws our attention to the fact that there are seven different times in her story when Hannah prays or worships. Her life seems to be grounded in spiritual practice, and that spiritual practice comforts her pain, gives her confidence, inspires her vision, and empowers her actions. Peterson writes that Hannah is an example that “worship is a way of life.”

Last week we encountered her praying through her despair in the tabernacle, praying such that the priest Eli believed her to be drunk. She corrected him and defended both her right to pray and what she was praying for.

Today, we see her taking matters into her own hands. Again, not intimidated by religious authority or the way things are normally done, she engages in worship herself. Her own ritual to dedicate her son to lifelong service to God. Which concludes with her song of exultation, celebrating the justice of God, a vision of a world reborn, with the mighty brought down and the lowly lifted up.

As Eugene Peterson points out, “This story began with Hannah weeping. It ends with Hannah singing.” Her life of spiritual practice and worship has given her what she needs to rise from her despair and mother a new vision. A vision not only for herself, but for all people.

Let’s look more carefully at this song which Hannah sings. For it is a song filled with power and vision. Her vision is not only that her own needs will be addressed by God, but that God will intervene radically on behalf of the people to deliver them from evil and establish a better, more just future. Her acts of worship have ethical and political imperatives.

The arrogant will speak no more. The weapons of the mighty will be broken. Those who have lorded themselves over others will be brought low.

Instead, God is turning everything upside down. Those that hunger will be fed. Those who are barren will be fertile. Those who are feeble will have the strength of warriors. The poor will be rich. Those living among human waste will have the seats of nobles. God will guard God’s people and establish justice upon the earth.

What a song!

And this song has life! And a history.

This song has become *the* source for the radical, justice-making vision of the people of God. Let’s trace some of its history.

Coming here at the beginning of First Samuel and the advent of the monarchy, it is the vision in this song that will be used to judge the kings and queens of Israel and Judah. David, that greatest of heroes, lives in the shadow of the vision of this song. At his best, David will embody the vision of this song, and at his worst, he will be judged for failing to live up to it.

Think of his own heart-felt prayer of confession after being confronted by his great sins and brought low:

Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and put a new and right spirit within me.
Do not cast me away from your presence,
and do not take your holy spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation,
and sustain in me a willing spirit.

The words and images and ideas of Hannah’s song became central to the visions of the prophets and the lyrics of the poets. Such as this from the prophet Isaiah:

Say to those who are of a fearful heart,
“Be strong, do not fear!
Here is your God.
Who will come with vengeance,
With terrible recompense.
Who will come to save.”
Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
And the ears of the deaf unstopped;
Then the lame shall leap like a deer,
And the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

It is Hannah’s song which Mary herself covers and remixes and makes her own in the Magnificat.

My soul magnifies the Lord
Who has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
Who has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

And lifted up the lowly.
Who has filled the hungry with good things,
And sent the rich away empty.

And, I would argue, that Mary sang her song and Hannah's song to her son Jesus. Such that it was this vision, originating in Hannah's song and growing and developing over the centuries, that became the core message of Jesus. Jesus, who embodied as fully as one can the grand ideas of justice that Hannah sang.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.
Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.
What a song! What a life! What a history!

This song has become *the* source for the radical, justice-making vision of the people of God. Maybe this song even helps to give birth to these words which we will celebrate this week:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

And this part of the Declaration really sounds like Hannah's vision:

That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

A government concerned with the safety and happiness of the people is precisely what Hannah desired for herself and for her nation.

And, I'm sure, what we desire too.

Why do we read scripture?

To see a bigger world. To expand our vision. To rattle our status quos and imagine possibilities.

Hannah is an icon of creating life out of pain and taking the steps to respond creatively to the violence and injustice of her world. From her individual pain, she envisioned something better. She believed that God would listen and respond. And so she centered her life on worship and spiritual practice—on her own terms, not bound by convention or intimidated by religious authority. Her acts of worship, of persistence and faithfulness, became the source of a tradition that continues today, in us and the work that we do to nurture communities of care and outreach, supporting and encouraging one another, and engaging in the work of justice.

May we be surprised by her story. May a new vision of a new world open up for us in the reading of these ancient words. And may they inspire us to live into the ethical demands of our faith and practice, for the good of a better world.

Happy Pride. Happy Independence Day. Happy day that God has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it.