

*“An Uncertain Future”*  
Rev. Dr. Brandon S. Perrine

*There was a certain man . . . from the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Elkanah . . . <sup>2</sup>He had two wives; the name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah. Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. <sup>3</sup>Now this man used to go up year by year from his town to worship and to sacrifice to the LORD of hosts at Shiloh.*

*<sup>4</sup>On the day when Elkanah sacrificed, he would give portions [of meat] to his wife Peninnah and to all her sons and daughters; <sup>5</sup>but to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the LORD had closed her womb. <sup>6</sup>Her rival used to provoke her severely, to irritate her, because the LORD had closed her womb. <sup>7</sup>So it went on year by year . . . Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. <sup>8</sup>Her husband Elkanah said to her, “Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?”*

*<sup>9</sup>After they had eaten and drunk at Shiloh, Hannah rose and presented herself before the LORD. Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the LORD. <sup>10</sup>She was deeply distressed and prayed to the LORD, and wept bitterly. <sup>11</sup>She made this vow: “O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death...”*

*<sup>12</sup>As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth . . . only her lips moved, but her voice was not heard; therefore Eli thought she was drunk. <sup>14</sup>So Eli said to her, “How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine.” <sup>15</sup>But Hannah answered,*

*“No, my lord, I am a woman deeply troubled . . . I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. <sup>16</sup>Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation all this time.” <sup>17</sup>Then Eli answered, “Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to.” <sup>18</sup>And she said, “Let your servant find favor in your sight.” Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer.*

*<sup>19</sup>They rose early in the morning and worshiped before the LORD; then they went back to their house at Ramah. Elkanah knew his wife Hannah, and the LORD remembered her. <sup>20</sup>In due time Hannah conceived and bore a son. She named him Samuel, for she said, “I have asked him of the LORD.”*

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Once again, this week our text is grounded in the story of one of our foremothers in faith, Hannah. Hannah was married to Elkanah, but so was Peninnah. Peninnah had many children, but Hannah was barren. Every year the family made their way to the Tabernacle of God to sacrifice and worship. And every year Hannah endured the merciless mocking and bullying of her more-fertile sister-wife.

Despite receiving a double portion of the meat offered in the sacrifice, and presumably a double portion of her husband’s affections, Hannah couldn’t take it anymore. She wept. “Aren’t I better than ten sons, anyway?” Elkanah said, trying to console her, but failing miserably. She got up, went to the tabernacle, walked right past the priest, and began to pray—weeping as she did so.

“Remember me, O God, and give me a baby boy,” she begged, “If you do, I’ll dedicate him to your service.” Observing from a distance, the old priest drew near and accused her of being drunk and making a scene. “I’ve been pouring my heart out to God,” She explained. Relieved, the priest answered, “Go in peace and may God grant your request.” Feeling strangely better, Hannah returned to her quarters and ate. The next

morning they returned home. After a romantic evening with her husband, Hannah conceived. She gave birth to a son and named him Samuel which means, “I asked God for him.” And they all lived happily ever after. Like the story of Naomi and Ruth from last week, Hannah’s is a nice story. Maybe a little too nice—at least it seems too nice when we lift it out of its context as we did for this Sunday morning reading.

At the time when our story took place, ancient Israel was descending into chaos. The judges that governed the people were waning in influence and no longer able to keep the peace. With the exception of the old priest in our story, the priests were abusing their power. And a great threat to Israel was on the rise—the Philistine army. These were turbulent times for the whole nation and the future was uncertain.

With that back drop, we encounter the turbulent times of the childless Hannah. The pain of childlessness is real for many in our world today and we should be careful not to see Hannah’s regimen of prayer and sacrifice as a cure for childlessness in our modern context. In Hannah’s day, children, especially sons, “were not just tiny humans to love and nurture.”<sup>1</sup> They were tangible symbols of God’s blessing. They were status symbols in society. And they were security for older age. Women could not own property so if Elkanah had died, Peninnah’s sons would have inherited everything, leaving Hannah utterly dependent on their goodwill, or lack thereof. Without a son, Hannah could end up on the street.

There was still another risk. Dr. Karla Suomala reminds us that in those days children “represented the future—life beyond the present generation—in a very real and concrete way. For ancient Israelites, the concept of life-after-death and heaven was nebulous, perhaps even non-existent. Thus, during the time in which the Hebrew Bible was written, Israelites imagined ‘life-after-death’ as unfolding in the lives of their descendants. With this in mind, Elkanah's future was assured through

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<sup>1</sup> Karla Suomala. “Commentary on 1 Samuel 14-20,” Workingpreacher.org, November 18, 2012, <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-33-2/commentary-on-1-samuel-14-20>.

Peninnah's sons. Hannah's was not.”<sup>2</sup> In both the temporal world of lived experience and in the eternal hereafter, Hannah’s future was uncertain.

The future of a nation was uncertain. The future of a woman was uncertain. But the birth of one child was about to change all of that. After Samuel was born, his mother nursed him until he was old enough to be weaned. Then she took him to live with the old priest at the tabernacle. True to her word, she dedicated him to divine service. In one of the most important songs in the Bible, Hannah sang her gratitude as she prepared to leave her child at the Tabernacle. Hear now her words:

*My heart exults in the LORD;  
my strength is exalted in my God.  
There is no Holy One like the LORD;  
there is no Rock like our God.  
The bows of the mighty are broken,  
but the feeble gird on strength.  
Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,  
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.  
The barren has borne seven,  
but she who has many children is forlorn.  
The LORD makes poor and makes rich;  
brings low and also exalts.  
God raises up the poor from the dust;  
and lifts the needy from the ash heap,  
to make them sit with princes and inherit a seat of honor.  
For the pillars of the earth are the Lord’s,  
and on them God has set the world.  
God will guard the feet of the faithful ones,  
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;  
for not by might does one prevail.  
The Most High will thunder in heaven.  
The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;  
God will give strength to God’s king,*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

*and exalt the power of the anointed.*

What beautiful and inspiring words! The bows of the mighty broken, the hungry grow fat with bread, the barren have children, the powerful are brought low, and the poor raised up from the dust, the divine to strengthen strength to the king and exalt the power of the anointed...The thing is, Hannah had no king. Israel had no king. There was no anointed—no messiah to save the people from their present predicament.

Whether she knew it or not, Hannah was participating in making the words of her song come true for her people. Her son, Samuel, would grow into a man. He would be a leader for his people and a friend of God. He would anoint Israel's first king Saul and then her second king, the great David, who would bring peace to his people and usher in the golden age of ancient Israel.

There are two other songs in scripture like Hannah's—one before it and one after it. The one before it was sung by a female prophetess named Miriam after her people had escaped slavery in Egypt. The second was sung by an unwed teen who'd just heard that she'd be having a very special baby named Jesus. Each time a woman lifted her voice in this kind of song, the world literally changed—and not in little ways. Their songs signaled seismic shifts in the tectonic plates of society—the flipping of wealth, power, and prestige on its head, the bringing to the center of community those who had been marginalized or oppressed, and the intrusion of heaven's realm into time and space in a whole new way. In the face of an uncertain future, for a woman and for a nation, life erupted unexpectedly and the divine appeared to do something new.

All of us have faced an uncertain future before. Some may face one now. I wish I could tell you that in the face of uncertainty all you need to do is pray like Hannah and God will work out the rest—make your loved one well, provide your friend a job, send your coworker an anonymous gift of money, or mail your child a college acceptance letter. I wish I could tell you that in the face of uncertainty all you need to do is pray like Hannah

and God will work out the rest, but I can't because that's just not how things work.

What I can say is this: sometimes things work out and sometimes they don't and no matter how carefully designed and thoughtfully planned, the future is *always* uncertain. Whether it holds liberation and new freedom as it did for Miriam and her people, or unspeakable joy and thriving as it did for Hannah and her people, or a mix of elation and despair, death and new life as it did for Mary and for *our* people—whatever it holds may we remember that life sometimes erupts where we least expect it. May we remember that the heaven's realm is ever intruding into time and space in new ways. And whatever the uncertain future holds for all of us, may we always remember this: we will never be alone. We are upheld by this community of faith, by the countless saints of faith that went before us, by the many with whom we share life's journey, and by the same divine presence that comforted a downhearted Hannah, ushered in freedom for a marginalized Miriam, provided for a needy Naomi and resolute Ruth, and rocked the very cradle of creation for a magnanimous Mary. We are never alone, for we cannot go where God is not. Thanks be to God. Amen.