

Noe Valley Ministry
A sermon by Heather Grantham
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I want you all to close your eyes and clear your mind. Try to not think of anything. Now I want you to envision the one thing that gives your life meaning - perhaps it is a person, an idea, an organization or another type of entity. This is the thing that gets you up every morning and the thing that gives you rest at the end of the day. The thing you are envisioning gives you peace.

Now imagine your person or organization or idea is suddenly taken from you. Your life no longer has its meaning - its purpose.

Now open your eyes.

Perhaps that is a sobering place to begin, but I wanted to give you a taste of what Hannah is going through in our story today. Hannah's life was without purpose since she did not have children. This is not some patriarchal garbage that I'm throwing out here. The fact is that in Hannah's time, women saw their worth as their ability to bear children and continue on the Hebrew line. Hannah did not have that "thing" in life that gave her life purpose and direction. Yet, Elkanah, her husband, did not mind. He sought to give Hannah comfort by telling her he loved her more than ten sons. But this does not comfort Hannah - would it comfort you? Elkanah is speaking from a place of privilege - he has another wife who can have children, therefore his place in history is already established. Hannah loved Elkanah too, but this was HER life and HER journey and she saw that she needed children. Hannah was barren.

Barrenness is the way of human history without God. It is hopelessness, powerlessness, joylessness. It is to be without a future and without human power to invent a future. Wherever this theme appears, it is laden with depth and meaning far beyond the circumstances of the story, as with Sarah, Rebecca, Rachel, and Hannah. And always the future of God's people - nay, more, the truthfulness of God's promises - is at stake.

But Hannah knows the history of the Israelites. She grew up hearing about the matriarchs known as Sarah, Rebecca and Rachel. She also grew up hearing tales of other strong women - Deborah, Jezebel and Judith. She knew God loved women and lifted women up alongside men. She knew in her gut that she was going to have a child and it was going to change everything - perhaps she had a premonition

of how Samuel (her unborn son) would usher in a new age for Israel and Israel's future. She knew in her heart the function and promise of her uterus, yet she needed a catalyst. She waited as long as she could, but then something lit a fire under her. She needed to take action. She knew that God was about to do something new and that her family was part of that newness.

So she went with her husband on his yearly trip to Shiloh and the temple. She knew she needed to talk to this God of her ancestors. She needed to plea and pray. So she entered the temple, ran past the rabbi and began to speak directly to God. She didn't pray with burnt offering as was the custom. No, she was desperate and came to speak to God directly. She was so passionate, weeping and whispering out of desperation. Now I want you to think back to the beginning of this sermon. How would you pray if your purpose in life was gone? Imagine the energy we would put behind our prayer if our life was at stake. Remembering that living without a purpose is not much of a living.

Hannah's faith is intriguing to me. She prays intensely with expectancy. She fully expects God to hear her prayer and act on it. Hannah was confident. She did not hide her tears or her anger from God. The text tells us that she pours out her soul before God. I grew up thinking that I had to be all polite to God - apparently Hannah did not learn that. She learned that you tell God how you feel, being not ashamed of whatever comes out.

Now perhaps it is a weird juxtaposition to illustrate this story of a barren woman with a baby boy, but I feel there is a strong parallel between Hannah's expectancy and that of little children.

Baby Paul Tawadrous and I are pretty tight, or at least I like to think so. One day downstairs during church, Paul ran out of juice. So he naturally handed me his sippy cup and said "juice". He did not raise his voice to ask a question, he simply told me his needs and fully expected that I be the bearer of more juice. After I looked around his diaper bag for more juice, he looked at me and said "juice" again, but this time he started walking to the kitchen and stopped halfway to turn back to me and yell "juice" again. So I followed diligently into the kitchen. I found some juice in the fridge that I poured into his sippy cup. When I handed him the cup, he smiled and waddled into the playroom gesturing me to come along. He led me over to the blocks where he sat down and looked up at me - nonverbally communicating that I should sit as well.

Hannah, like baby Paul, knew her needs and fully expected that God give her what she asked. Even when Eli, the old priest accused her of being drunk, Hannah stuck to her guns and told Eli off. See Eli represents those people who say things cannot be done. Eli represents the blinders we all place on our eyes when we can't see what God is doing. These blinders make sure that we only see a fraction of the bigger picture - only one block of a lego super structure. But after Hannah's strong reprimand of him, Eli's blinders fall off. He trusts that little gut feeling of hope. He steps back from his own assumptions and context, trusting that God is the designer. Eli has been challenged and came out a changed man. He blesses Hannah as Hannah plans to return back home with her husband.

Hannah has confidence that God heard her prayer. And she waits for God to make the next move, the proverbial ball is now in the Cosmos' proverbial court. After "knowing" her husband (which is the way biblical people talk about sex), she becomes pregnant. Her life now has purpose. But Hannah recognizes that this was not only about her. God birthed a new thing in order to help all of humanity. So she gives her son to the temple, back to God, in order to say thank you. Her gift of Samuel to the temple was not some gross distortion of what God demands - that old wives-tale that says God wants us to sacrifice our children. On the contrary, Hannah dedicates Samuel and his life to the temple because she is filled with gratitude. And Hannah knew that her child was meant for something extraordinary. In the temple, Samuel would be educated and trained - this was like the 1000bce equivalent to boarding school - the best education Israel had to offer complete with food and drink, oh and all the political connections you could ever ask for. Hannah knew that this is the best thing for a "miracle baby" that gave her purpose in life. Because God had looked out for her and gave her purpose, she gave back in gratitude, knowing that God had a bigger plan - knowing it wasn't about just her.

As I sat down with baby Paul at the blocks, he and I begin to play. We built towers and structures that Paul could knock down and laugh at. Perhaps I'm overanalyzing an encounter with a child of 18 months, but I like to think that Paul was saying "thank you" to me for the juice. The way he knew to say thank you was obviously in spending time with me. His gratitude for the juice compelled him to give back to me a fraction of the joy I gave him by placing nice cold apple juice in his sippy cup.

Not only did God do a new thing back in the day, but God is trying to do a new thing, right now, in our place. We are about to embark on a new chapter in our life at Noe Valley Ministry. Our upcoming capital campaign mirrors Hannah's vision - we here at NVM will soon have a more defined purpose. Our building will be a

place where Jews, Muslims and Christians can worship together and gain understanding into one another's faith traditions and cultures. Bill, Chris, Keenan, and the many other people I have heard speak about our new interfaith community do so with such confidence - this is not a human confidence, but confidence of something bigger than us that has a special plan. However, as much confidence and hope we have in our future, our path will not be easy.

I imagine when Hannah journeyed home with her husband after praying all day that she knew the path wouldn't be easy - I mean she had been barren for God only knows how long and maybe she was menopausal like Sarah had been. Her co-wife probably kept teasing her and calling her mad. She had time to question her every thought and move since there was quite a time period from her temple prayer until she gets pregnant. She was going through a transition.

We too will go through a transition as we start out on our capital campaign. We will have to leave this building where the walls tell our story, into an unknown worship space. We will see this building torn down, just as the Mark passage says "not a stone will be left unturned". We will be significantly down in our income since we won't be able to rent out space any more. Our ministry and our outreach to the Noe Valley community will need to be rethought since we won't actually be physically present here. And I'm sure we will doubt God and what God is doing, just as I'm sure Hannah did (and certainly Elkanah did!). We will be going through birth pangs, just as the Mark passage hints at. For something new cannot emerge from the God's uterus without some sort of pain - and I don't think we can just give epidurals all around. So we will go through the uncomfortableness of giving birth. But we will hold fast, just like Hannah. We will trust in each other and continue to support one another. We will be a church, just a church in transition.

So part of my title asks about our part. What does it mean for us when God is birthing something huge? What should our response be?

Our response is to be grateful that God has a vision and that we are part of it. Our response is to give out of our own time and resources to ensure that we remain part of God's vision.

You see, at the beginning when many of you closed your eyes and thought about what gives you meaning, I'm sure many people thought of NVM. And I know this place has given many people hope and perhaps a purpose. So let us give God our gratitude for this place - accepting God's gracious call to be part of this new thing - so let's get on board with what God is doing!