

*“Thanksgiving Through Tears”*

*1 Samuel: 4-20*

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This year’s calendar is an unusual one. Most years, the Sunday after Thanksgiving marks the beginning of the church year: the season of Advent when we prepare our hearts and minds for the coming of the baby Jesus. But this year, all four Sundays of Advent are in the month of December, so we have this particular Sunday to continue our Thanksgiving celebration—despite the fact that we might have already eaten turkey and pumpkin pie, and also started the Christmas shopping. Some of you already may be completely finished shopping and decorating; and we’re looking forward to the traditional and modern delights of the Advent season. But today, we continue Thanksgiving week-end and pause to remember our blessings. Let us pray together.

***Lord, we are amazed by all of the ways that you bless each of us. And we know that one week-end of gratitude and thanksgiving just doesn’t compare to your continual and constant love. So this morning we offer you our hearts of thanksgiving and praise in all of our daily experiences in life. Help us to change our outlooks and attitudes into those of joyful contentment, despite our present circumstances. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.***

On South River Road, three miles west of West Lafayette, Indiana, there is a replica of the very first fortified European settlement in Indiana. Fort Ouiatenon was originally built in 1717 as a French trading post on the Wabash river. Its location made it an important center of trade for fur trappers, and in the fall of every year, there was a gathering of both French and Native Americans who were eager to trade with each other. For the past 51 years, the Tippecanoe County Historical Society has remembered those gatherings with an annual event called “Feast of the Hunters’ Moon.” On the site of the replica fort, there is a modern re-enactment of mid-18<sup>th</sup> century life. There are continuous programming activities, including military drills and demonstrations, as well as fashion shows. And, of course, there is the chance to purchase authentic goods and foods from various vendors. It is a sensory treat that is designed to help us 21<sup>st</sup> century people experience the life and culture of another era.

Those original festivals were a time for trading tall tales; a time for meeting new folks and becoming reacquainted with others; and a time for eating and drinking more in a singular setting than in the whole year. The technical purpose of those early gatherings had nothing to do with thanksgiving; it was the chance to do business and make money. But life in the wilderness of this country during Colonial Times was treacherous. By the time someone made it to the Fort Ouiatenon gathering, they likely had seen some terrible things. They might have been missing a limb. They might have seen too much death, and perhaps had lost loved ones. But they had survived to see the annual gathering, and were grateful, even if that gratitude was mixed with tears. And that’s the very same situation that Hannah finds herself in during our scripture lesson today.

The books of 1 and 2 Samuel record Israel’s transition from a loose system of judges to one of a unified monarchy; it’s the account of Saul and Jonathon and King David. Right at the beginning of this saga is Hannah’s story, which is somewhat unusual since there are not that

many women's stories that are highlighted in the Old Testament, given the patriarchal system of that time. So right away we as readers are put on notice that Hannah, through her son, will be significantly impacting Israel for generations to come.

In the opening verses of 1 Samuel, in a culture in which polygamy was considered to be appropriate, we are introduced to Elkanah. He has two wives, Hannah and Peninnah, and we are told only one detail about them: their status as parents. Only Peninnah has children. Hannah was barren, or without a child. In the ancient world, women acquired their worth and value through their ability to bear children. Barrenness was considered to be a curse, and some also thought that it reflected God's specific action towards a particular woman, as reflected in verse five: "the Lord had closed her womb." Year after year, Elkanah's family made an annual pilgrimage to Shiloh to make sacrifices to God. Elkanah loved Hannah, and he always gave her a double portion of the sacrifice, but I can imagine that the trip was still a difficult one for her. Peninnah unrelentingly teased Hannah about her inadequacy, and the words must have hurt even more during that time.

Infertility, then or now, is a heart-breaking situation. The inability of a couple to conceive and to carry a child to term provokes feelings of inadequacy, guilt, and more. But our text for this morning reminds us that Elkanah loves Hannah for Hannah, not for any other reason. "Am I not more to you than 10 sons?" he asks her in verse eight. If you have been, or are right now, in a difficult situation related to fertility, know this this morning: God loves you, just like Elkanah loved Hannah. Right in the midst of that despair, God loves you. None of us are defined by any physical ability, including our ability to procreate. We are all defined, and are all valuable, because we are each a child of the Living God.

Because of her own situation, Hannah was in agony. She had an ache in her heart that would not go away, even under the best of conditions. Many of us can understand that feeling, and some of us even share it. Author Tony Evans describes that feeling as an "unsettled ache": when you can't seem to live with yourself, or when your own personal pain or regret eats you up. This type of emotion affects not only specific life circumstances, but one's sense of self as well. This is the type of hurt that Hannah endured, and that turmoil within her own soul that could only be ameliorated by the birth of her own child. In our day, that type of hurt can lead to unhealthy addictions or emotional disorders or more. Hannah chose to pour her heart out to the Lord at Shiloh. She asked God for a son, and then promised to dedicate him to the Lord for a life of service.

But even while praying, Hannah was misunderstood. The priest Eli saw her lips moving, and chastised her for being drunk. Even though it was not a usual practice in ancient times to pray silently, still, Eli's immediate judgement seems a bit harsh, and it probably took Hannah off guard. That bit of the story made me think: do you know anyone whose actions have been misunderstood at any church? Have yours ever been misunderstood? Hannah corrects Eli, denies her drunkenness, and declares her request to God. After being corrected, Eli blesses Hannah and sends her on her way.

And then, we find the most remarkable verse, for me, of this entire scripture passage, verse 18b: "Then the woman went to her quarters, ate and drank with her husband, and her countenance was sad no longer." Other translations of the phrase are "Then she went her way and ate something, and her face was no longer downcast" or "her face wasn't sad any longer". Many of us already know the end of this story. Hannah did conceive, give birth to a son, and kept

her own promise to God. Because we know the ending, it is easy to overlook verse 18. But in that small little verse, Hannah set a huge example for us today. Even though she had no idea if her prayer would be answered, she was no longer sad. She was able, somehow, to give thanksgiving to God, despite the fact that she was downcast. I don't think it is that simple, nor is it easy. Hannah left that year without a child, just as she had come.

Especially this time of year, we are reminded that being thankful is physically good for our bodies. Studies have proven that thankfulness facilitates improved sleep and better heart health. There are many other measurable beneficial effects on the mood neurotransmitters serotonin, and dopamine, , immune function,<sup>9</sup> [blood pressure](#), blood sugar, cortisol, and more. It is a testament to the great Creator, our God, that he our bodies are healthier when we are being obedient to the life that he has taught us to live; in this case, being thankful. But we all really know that it is more than being thankful once a year as we eat turkey and dressing, then snooze while watching football games afterward. We are to cultivate a life of gratitude, which is much more than simply being thankful on one long week end a year. But let's be honest: it is much easy to live a life of gratitude when everything is going our way. Problem is, we all encounter, eventually, some nasty experiences. Yet living a life of gratitude means trusting the Lord. All the time.

Bart Millard is the leader of a Christian band named *MercyMe*. Their most famous song, *I Can Only Imagine*, broke records when it was released in 1999, and it eventually became the first Christian song to go double platinum in the digital world. This year, Bart released an autobiography that details the events of his life that eventually led to the origin of the song. Without revealing too many details, since some of you might want to read the book, I can say that Bart's early years were difficult, and he had a strained relationship with both of his parents. But he started the band—and all of the original members are still part of it. *MercyMe* has been wildly successful, and Bart himself has received much acclaim as a singer. He eventually married his childhood sweetheart, Shannon, and they now have five children. Ah...happy endings.

In 2017, *MercyMe* released a single entitled, 'Even If.' Part of the lyrics of the song are:

*It's easy to sing  
When there's nothing to bring me down  
But what will I say  
When I'm held to the flame  
Like I am right now*

*I know You're able and I know You can  
Save through the fire with Your mighty hand  
But even if You don't  
My hope is You alone*

Bart and Shannon's fifteen year old son, Sam, was diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes at the age of 2. The Millards estimate that they have given their son over 37,000 shots of insulin. Their lives as parents revolve around the management of Sam's chronic disease, and despite their best efforts, some days are crummy. The future is uncertain. It was on one of the not so great days that Bart first got the idea for the song 'Even If'.

There is pain and frustration and difficulty in the situation of being a parent of a child with a chronic illness...or living with infertility...or cancer. We all know from personal experience that life's journey can be heartbreaking at times, and such is the case with Sam's diabetes. Yet we still have our hope in the God who created the universe; the God who cared so much that he sent his very own family to die for us. God did those things out of love, and that love does not change based on our own personal circumstances. The very end line of the song is "It is Well with my Soul." Bart conveys his deep gratitude for God, and what God has already done, despite the earthly heartaches. Will Sam ever be healed? Maybe. But Maybe not. But God and God's love for Sam—for Bart and Shannon—for us is the same no matter what happens.

This month's book club selection was the book *Grateful*. I admit, I did not read the book, so I don't have the ability to spoil the ending for you. During the discussion about the book, the group discussed an interesting concept. As I understand it, the group was asked a questions about their own experiences. Which experiences in your life, if any, was terrible at the time, but you are grateful for now? Looking back, many of us might be able to see that some of our worst times actually turned out okay in the long run. And while not every horrible experience is that way, some really are. The point is that God is with us, through all times, good and bad, and it is enough to be grateful for that. It is enough to be able to trust the One who loves us, no matter what we can see and feel right in the moment. When we worship the Lord, and proclaim him to be King with our lives at all times in our lives—that is gratitude. It is a lifestyle choice that is much easier to talk about than it is to live it out. It involves submission and trust. It requires a focus not on our earthly lives, but on God.

When Hannah left the Temple that day, she had no way of knowing that her son would become a great man of God who played a significant role in the development of Israel as a monarchy. I can only speculate on her thoughts about her situation, but I do think that she really was like each of us. Each of us here this morning has reasons to be thankful, and many of us have reasons to be disappointed or angry or sad. But that day, somehow, Hannah was able to see through her tears. Her attitude changed, and I think she realized that God loved her. Despite her heartbreak, and despite her human flaws, God loved her—just like God loves each of us. And I think that she also realized that she still had God's gift of life. We are the same: our gift from God is today; now. We live one day at a time, with no ability to see into the future. Our lives of gratitude come simply because of the knowledge of that gift of daily life.

The English mystic Julian of Norwich put it this way: "The greatest honor we can give almighty God is to live gladly because of the knowledge of his love." May that be true for each of us this week, and as we head into the Advent season. Amen.