

Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25, I Sam. 1:4-20 26th Sunday after Pentecost, Nov. 18, 2018
Sermon Title: "Out of Trouble, Hope" The Rev. Dr. Betsey Crimmins

2018 has been quite a year. Remember the Kitchen Renovation project? It consumed the first three months of this year, but doesn't it seem like that happened ages ago? But then yet, what would our church do without a major project every few years? We had that project in 2018 and it was a good one – a lot of work, but a good project. And given the number of lunches and dinners we've put on since then, what would we do without that kitchen?

Yet the year hasn't been marked just by a major project – there have been other programs and major events too, like Trunk and Treat, Habitat work, VBS, and more. In addition, there have been things about 2018 that have been tough on all of us ... I'm thinking about all the major illnesses that several of our dear First Presbyterians have had to endure this year. I'm also thinking about the number of our dear First Presbyterians who have died this past year. Yes it's been quite a year so far.

My inspiration for today's sermon title is the tag line for Presbyterian Disaster Assistance – their tag line is "Out of Chaos, Hope." I modified it a bit to become "Out of Trouble, Hope." The sub-line for PDA works for both titles: "God did not intend for us to face life's hardships, [challenges and opportunities] alone. That's why God gave us the gift of community."

I want you to hold that thought while we look at today's lessons. Today's lessons are a mixture of struggles, troubles and miracles. The times in which Elkanah and Hannah lived were rough times. At the end of the book of Judges, we hear that "there was no king in Israel; all the people did what was right in their own eyes." (Judges 21:25) With no ruler to hold people accountable to commonly agreed-upon laws and to God's laws, we can easily envision a wild-west kind of a place where people just did their own thing even if it hurt someone else. Clearly the nation had fallen away from God.

The judge and priest of Shiloh by the name of Eli provided one bright spot in the middle of a dismal situation. Although Hannah didn't know it initially, God put Eli in the right place and at the right time for her and for the nation Israel.

Let's talk about Hannah: Hannah was an ordinary woman. Like Sarah before her and Elizabeth much later, Hannah is barren, putting her at the mercy of a man in this patriarchal society. Like Rachel before her, Hannah also seems to be the better-loved wife of Elkanah's two wives. Nevertheless, the primary and really only function of a woman was to produce a child. That wasn't happening for her. She might as well be a nobody.

The theme of barrenness recurs in the Old Testament in the text that we looked at two weeks ago – the story of Ruth and Naomi . One of the commentators

that I read gave a whole new perspective on this for me, asking was it really barrenness or was it just hidden life that will emerge in God's time?

That made me think: we often get stuck on one perspective on a situation, one point of view on our troubles, challenges and opportunities. I think it is instructive to ask ourselves, what other perspectives can we take on this situation? What might be God's perspective on this situation? Elkanah's other wife looked at Hannah and concluded that she was a pitiful, ordinary woman who spent too much time crying in her soup, so to speak, and who was getting too much of her husband's attention. I suspect that Elkanah's other wife would have wanted very much to have dismissed her as a nothing, nobody –tossed her to the curb, so to speak. Instead of seeing Hannah and her situation as pitiful and just another situation of barrenness, what about a taking a different perspective – hidden life that will emerge in God's time?

William Wilberforce reminds us that “things great have small beginnings. Every downpour is just a raindrop; every fire is just a spark; every harvest is just a seed; every journey is just a step because without that step there will be no journey; without that raindrop there can be no shower; without that seed there can be no harvest.” To me this is a great reminder that when we look at our troubles, challenges and opportunities, we shouldn't discount the small things that in God's hands and with God's power can serve to make a big difference. This is another biblical narrative that serves to remind us that great things seem to come from what looks like nothing, from humbleness, from what appears small or unpromising. It is also a reminder to stop and take a second look - consider some additional possible perspectives - something like barrenness may just be hidden life waiting to emerge in God's time. Trouble just might be a great opportunity waiting to be realized in God's time.

Well, indeed, God was using an ordinary, barren woman as key to bringing Israel back to right living and faithfulness, which will happen eventually on her son's watch. That started when Hannah prayed.

You've got to picture the scene: on the one hand you've got Eli, the dutiful priest who is “sitting on a chair by the doorpost of the Lord's temple.” (I Sam. 1:9) You can imagine him sitting quietly, looking reverent, and at the same time, keeping the temple at Shiloh in decent order for the Lord, so that his highly ritualized, liturgical worship can carry on without a hitch. Then there's Hannah: you can picture her rushing into the temple at Shiloh, tears streaming down her face, her robes flying as she runs in. Rather than reverently reciting a prayer handed to her by the priestly tradition, she's just pouring her heart out to God. She's just a desperate woman bringing her case directly to God. Eugene Peterson notes that the rabbis would have called her a model of authentic prayer – ironically, Eli thinks she's a drunk. Once she tells Eli what she is doing, he changes his tune, and gives her a lovely benediction: “Go in peace, and may the God of Israel grant you what you have asked of him.”

In Hebrews 10:22, it says, "Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart full of the assurance of faith ... Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." You can almost think that was written about Hannah. But it wasn't. The context is different – the context is sin and talk about how through Christ we are assured of forgiveness for sin. Nevertheless, whether we are confessing a sin or shortcoming to God, or pouring our heart out in anguish or gushing over in gratitude to God, we learn from Hannah to hang onto the hope we profess, just like it says in Hebrews. Not only has God promised to be faithful, we are assured that God keeps God's promises because of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

Well, this story has a happy ending. Hannah gets pregnant and gives birth to Samuel. But in yet another twist in the story, she vows to give her son back to God. And in spite of so much anguish and waiting so long for the child, she does not go back on her promise. Hannah's prayer and her selfless act remind us that all things on earth and in heaven are God's gift to us.

You know, Thanksgiving is coming up. It is time that we thank God for all God's gifts. Hannah's heart felt prayer in which she didn't stand on ceremony, so to speak, is a challenge to us to examine our prayer life – are we going to give thanks in a perfunctory way simply because it's Thanksgiving? Are we going to give thanks just for what we perceive to be our blessings, without digging deep to consider before God what might be our more complicated blessings? Are we going to skip the spiritual work of digging down into our deepest needs? Hannah dug deep into her deepest needs and shamelessly poured them out before God. Will we? I find it moving to think that Hannah felt that the God of creation would listen to her and have mercy on her. God will listen to you too.

There's an old story that circulates periodically about a father who knocks on his son's door and yells, 'Jamie, wake up!' Jamie answers, "I do not want to get up Papa." This father shouts, "Get up, you have to go to school!" Jamie says, "I do not want to go to school." "Why not?" asks the father. "Three reasons," says Jamie. "First, because it is so dull. Second, the kids are mean, and third, I hate school." The father responds, "Well, I am going to give you three reasons you must go to school. First, because it is your duty. Second because you are forty-five years old and third, because you are the headmaster."

Trouble comes and we might just want to hide under the covers like Jamie, do nothing and hope that it goes away. Hannah serves as a model for us of what it means to live faithfully in days and situations that may seem godforsaken. That passage from Hebrews gives us further instruction as to what to do after we've drawn near to God and poured out our hearts in prayer. It says, "Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together ... let us encourage one another." For as I said at the beginning: God did not intend for us to face life's hardships and troubles, challenges and opportunities alone. That's why God gave us the gift of prayer. That's why God gave us Jesus and the Holy Spirit. And that's why God gave us the gift of community.

