

Trusting Scripture

Proper 28B: 1 Samuel 1.4-20

November 14, 2021

The Rev. Scott Walters

Finding yourself, or some aspect of yourself, in a good story is one way stories change us, even when the self we see is one we'd rather not dwell on. For instance, I recognize all too well the simmering resentment of an older brother in one of Jesus's stories, even if my own younger sibling's rebellions were vanishingly mild, and we've never had illusions about the size of the inheritance at stake.

But I'm coming to believe that the characters I don't understand, the ones with distorted and even offensive views about God, who live among even stranger social norms and codes, in landscapes that are more than just foreign ... I'm coming to believe that characters I do not understand, but whose stories I am somehow expected to trust, may be the ones I need to listen to even more closely than those I find more familiar. Hannah is one of these people for me.

As First Samuel opens, we meet Elkanah and Hannah and Penniah, a husband and two wives. So, it's already a world I have qualms about, polygamy not being one of humanity's wiser institutions, by my lights. But it gets stranger. What we soon learn is that Elkanah has only been able to have children with Penniah, even though he loved his wife Hannah much more.

All this is stated pretty matter-of-factly. It's just the way things were for these people. We're also told, more by way of his actions than explanation, that Elkanah was a good and faithful Jew. He would go up every year from his town to worship God and make sacrifices at Shiloh, where Eli and his two sons were priests. What we'll soon learn is that Eli's sons were scoundrels (that's the actual word to describe them over in chapter two) who used to stab the meat from a sacrifice with a three-pronged fork and make a meal of it. I'm thinking these guys are who gave PKs such a bad name, since most of the pastor's kids I've known have been pretty delightful human beings.

I mention these sons by way of contrast. Because Hannah and Elkanah were clearly in a tender, loving relationship, in spite of there being an extra wife in the house. And they were faithful, prayerful people as well. Which makes it only stranger to read, not that Hannah and Elkanah struggled with infertility. But that "the Lord had closed Hannah's womb." The narrator tells us this was so. And it's clear that Hannah and Elkanah believe it too, as year after year they return to Shiloh, where Hannah begs God to give her a child, breaking her husband's heart. "Hannah, why do you weep?" he asks. "Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" Is there a more tender exchange between two lovers in all the Bible?

But these good, faithful people are a problem for those of us who see the Bible as holy scripture. Because it seems to describe a universe in which God attends even to details as small as one ordinary couple's fertility. But it is also a universe in which Penniah gets exactly what she desires even while she mocks and bullies and belittles her husband's less fortunate wife. Even while brokenhearted Hannah comes to the temple year after year to pray for the simple gift of a child. Just one.

Now, I'd like to say something clearly that some of you will think should be obvious and others might find offensive. I don't believe God opens and closes the wombs of women like doors to little rooms. That may sound like saying that I don't believe the Bible is true. But I want to caution anyone who believes that the Bible's truthfulness means you can drop your finger down in it, find a description of God, and accept that this is just the way the Bible says God is. The Bible isn't God's Wikipedia page. What we learn of God in scripture unfolds across many generations, in all sorts of settings and situations, through the eyes of enslaved people and free ones, prophets and prostitutes, queens and fishermen and children and poets, Hebrews and Egyptians and Moabites and Greeks. What we learn of God we learn in this rich accumulation, not in a process of reduction to a statement, no matter how theologically sound or strange you think it might be.

But I think it's just as true that I don't get to simply say, "God's not like that," and dismiss this part of the story out of hand as the naive view of a primitive, prescientific people. Trusting the truth of scripture might also mean trusting that there is some aspect of God and of ourselves that we will only be able to apprehend through these people who *did* believe that God opens and closes the wombs of women. Trusting the Bible means trusting them. And listening to their lives, maybe not in spite of what seem like impossible differences from ours, but because of them.

The same can be true of lives much closer to ours and times not so many centuries removed. Listening to Hannah and Elkanah suddenly brought the Rev. Dr. Kate Sonderegger to mind for me. Kate is a professor of systematic theology at Virginia Seminary. Imagine a tidy Presbyterian nun, if such a thing existed, in a crisp blue suit and clerical collar, crossing herself and smiling as she steps into a church. That's Kate Sonderegger. She stands about five feet tall, but her intellect is towering. And, over the course of three years, this remarkable woman sweetly but thoroughly dismantled what I thought a Calvinist Christian was supposed to be.

One day we were leaving the chapel after Morning Prayer, having just heard the news that a classmate in his mid twenties named Adam had died suddenly of a heart attack in the night. We were stunned and saddened and confused and all the things one feels when the unthinkable happens and you can't think about anything else for a while. Kate walked next to me on the sidewalk in silence, and then she slipped her arm into the crook of my elbow and said, "Scott, it is so difficult to receive this from the hand of the Lord."

It's not an overstatement to say that, had I heard such a thing from anyone else on the planet that day, it would have struck me as theological nonsense and as a cruel view of God. But Kate is as much a woman of prayer as she is a scholar, which is part of what made anything she saw or said impossible, at least for this Christian, to dismiss. I trusted her. Which doesn't mean I think she's never been wrong. But it does mean that when she said, "It is so difficult to receive this from the hand of the Lord," I sensed that her words for this heartbreak were somehow anything but foolish. That somehow they encompassed more of both the horror of this young lost life *and* the fact that even Adam's life was held, even then, in a goodness so much vaster than any of my little sense making systems could make room for.

And so it is with Hannah. This woman who suffered so much, but who loved so much and so beautifully as well. I can't dismiss her either. This woman who propped her heart and her hopes wide open to God, year after year. This woman who didn't dial back her expectations but persisted in her prayers, believing that the God who opens and closes the

wombs of women might hear her one day. Or might not. But in her persistence I see a spiritual courage I can only aspire to in my life and faith.

Yes, she will conceive and Samuel will be born to her soon. But when I'm dropped into this moment in this story and this view of how God works in the world, what I also see is a woman who will love God and reach out to God even when she believes that God *could* but *is not* giving her the one thing her heart most desires: a child. Hannah's love for God does not wait for her prayers to be answered. There's something unconditional about her love, as it continues to risk the pain and disappointment, without hedging its bets or pulling back, but keeps offering all of who Hannah is to the God whose ways she cannot understand.

I no longer believe that taking the people and the stories and even the various theologies in scripture ... yes, *theologies*. The Bible is far too vast to include only one system or perspective, you know ... I no longer believe that taking the Bible at face value or dismissing anything or anyone within it out of hand is how we're meant to approach it. In fact, trusting the Bible may be a lot like trusting another person. The person you trust most is not the one you're willing to bring only your best self and your unquestioning loyalty, but the one you'll entrust with all of your complicated self. To trust someone deeply is to trust her not just with your hopes and joys, but with your doubts and your fears, your anxieties and vexations. So it is with the Bible.

Maybe what's required for the kind of trust that can change us for the better to grow, is that we reserve judgment for just a little longer, and, as American theologian Ted Lasso put it, "stay curious." When we encounter a Hannah or an Elkanah or a Calvinist or a cat lover or a teenager or a teetotaler or a ... fill in the blank for yourself. When we encounter a person or a way of talking about God or understanding the death of a friend or the birth of a child that confuses or offends us, maybe we could put off the impulse to dismiss the scripture or the person or the understanding, as if there couldn't possibly be anything about them that our snap judgments haven't taken into account. Stay curious a little longer. Trust them with your truthful confusion and even with the offense you've just taken, but trust them with enough curiosity to discover something in them that you did not go to their story looking for.

Like the fierce, uncompromising, unconditional love of a barren woman for the very God who would not give her a child. Right up to the day when God did. And, what do you know, but that here we are looking at her life and her God with wonder across languages and oceans and so many generations? Maybe even wondering curiously whether something in us could grow to be a little more like something we've seen in her.