

“Why Sam Has to Go to Church”
Rev. Melanie Oommen
Hannah’s Story from I Samuel 1
November 15, 2009

And when Hannah, who had longed so for a child, took Samuel to be educated by the prophet Eli, she sang this song of praise: (1 Samuel 2:1-10).

Hannah’s is a powerful story of a mother who offers God the very promise given her. Samuel is the fruit of Hannah’s faithful refusal to be comforted by anything less than a gift from God. Hannah’s is a poignant story: she stitches a coat for her hoped-for child, carries it to him each year when she visits her sweet, growing boy at the temple. What longing, what pride confided through these spare threads of story, Hannah’s far away child always covered by his mother’s love.

And yet, and yet though durable this Mother’s love, the song Hannah sings when she releases him to promise is not a lullaby or a song of sorrow. Hannah’s action and her song of rejoicing tap into deep hopes for the whole of Israel. Hannah’s song is large, a grander dream, a song of thanksgiving for the Holy One of Israel, who delivers God’s people from oppression, O Hope of the World. A song rooted in her lived experience of a God of mercy, a God who hears . . .

Did she know then that Samuel would become a powerful leader at a critical time in the history of Israel - one whose faithfulness to God would not waver?

Did Hannah know that Samuel would become a powerful prophet leader of Israel - wise, immortalized by his courage and strength, the one who would herald a new day for the newly born kingdom, the one who would anoint Kings Saul and David?

Is this story as much about Hannah as about the son who would become? How much of Hannah’s own story is woven into this song of joy? What did Hannah know of God that would allow her to boldly release Samuel to God?

She knew, it seems, by the spare threads of story granted us, that no greater gift could be given than this one - that her job, even greater than maternal nurture and protection, was to release Samuel to his God-given purpose in this life. That her job was to direct Samuel’s gaze up and out, not to be held by her loving face, but to look beyond into purpose, an unfolding future that her eyes would never behold, like Moses leading his people but never himself experiencing the Promised Land.

Yet I can’t help but wonder as any parent hearing this story would: how did she get him to go? To the temple, I mean. I admire her unwavering clarity, her singular memory of promise. But really, how did she get little Samuel away from the cozy house warm with the fragrance of her chicken soup, up and out of the piles of Legos, away from the shelf of Veggie Tales DVD’s and the best friend down the street?

How did she pull that off? We are spared that part of the story, but I can’t imagine that there wasn’t at least a little foot dragging, a little whining, and a little dawdling just as they were heading out the door to the temple . . .

Hannah’s devoted spiritual parenting reminds me of another Mother of another Sam: Anne Lamott, a Presbyterian writer from Marin County, California. I know, I know, it is a stretch to compare the courage and faith of Hannah to slightly neurotic, self-obsessed 21st century writer Anne Lamott. I know that hauling her boy Sam to a weekly Protestant church service is not quite comparable to live-in instruction at the temple. And yet, maybe the two mama’s, Hannah and Anne, have something in common. In her book “Traveling Mercies,”

Anne Lamott wrote an essay entitled: “Why I Make Sam Go to Church.” Not quite Hannah’s poetic song, Anne Lamott’s style is more of ironic confession.

She writes: “You might think, noting the bitterness, the resignation, that Sam was being made to sit through a six-hour Latin mass each Sunday (or for that matter, a childhood of religious boarding school). Or you might wonder why I make this strapping, exuberant boy come with me most weeks. And if you were to ask, this is what I would say. I make him because I can. I outweigh him by 75 pounds. But that is only part of it. The main reason is that I want to give him what I found in the world: which is to say a path and a little light to see by. Most of the people I know who have what I want – which is to say, purpose, heart, balance, gratitude, joy – are people with a deep sense of spirit. They are people in community, who pray and practice their faith; they are Buddhists, Jews, Christians – people banding together to work on themselves and for human rights. They follow a brighter light than the glimmer of their own candle: they are a part of something beautiful.”

At the very least, Hannah and Anne Lamott named their sons Samuel, a name that means “God hears,” and neither apparently gave their boys a choice about being a part of a faith community, though there might have been a fuss. And both Mama’s had encountered a God so faithful, so present, that it would be as if they were slamming the door in the very face of God to refuse their child to such wonder.

Last weekend, during the high school retreat, I sent the high school youth from this church into the woods with journals, poetry, prayer, and Lamott’s essay. We called their hour-long journey of silence a “Scavenger Hunt for God.” I wondered what they would find, if there would be clues enough to piece together to find, well, something sacred. At least, I hoped they would hear the beating of their own hearts and to breathe at least one surprising breath of wet pine needles. And I guess I was curious: Do you get why the grown ups mess up your life by making you go to church?

They came back, thank God, from the scavenger hunt for God. I had made grilled cheese and tomato soup while they were outside, and we ate it as we sat around the long, spacious table, dry and safe, watching the rain come down outside. And we talked, an unhurried conversation, such a rare gift anymore. Why faith we wondered aloud, and what about this anachronistic invention, the church? We all agreed that it isn’t very cool to say you go to church, even less cool to call yourself a Christian. Then one thing led to another, and since the rain kept coming down and there was no good reason to hurry away from the table, we sat some more and talked about the enduring stresses of life: the drive to succeed, both self-imposed and from other voices, our culture of competition, what it means to achieve, and being pushed to achieve some more and the heaviness, sometimes, of such expectation. At some point in the conversation, I blurted out, “And that’s it, that’s why we need church, isn’t it, because the world only gives you a sliver of the truth, really half-truths, even lies, about our purpose here and what makes the stay worth our while. At church, we get a chance to learn about and practice loving like God loves, without reservation, without condition.”

I read to them a passage by Roman Catholic writer Henri Nouwen, about life in the faith community, “Here we can slowly unmask the illusion of our possessiveness and discover in the center of our own self that we are not what we can conquer but what is given to us. We can listen to the one who spoke to us before we could speak a word, who healed us before we could make any gesture to help, who set us free long before we could free others, and who loved us long before we could give love to anyone. Here we discover that being is more important than having, and we are worth more than the results of our efforts. We discover that our life is not a possession to be defended, but a gift to be shared. To the degree that we have lost our dependencies on this world, we can form a community of faith in where there is little to defend but much to share . . . “

This week I thought a lot about our conversation around that table on a rainy Saturday. And I thought about Hannah’s gift to God, her gift to her people, her gift of hope. And I thought about why I make my own kids go to church. Why we together work so hard to make this place a welcoming place. What do we hope we give our young here? Why do we entrust our most precious ones to the care and keeping of God and this community of faith? So this is my list. Maybe you could make your own.

Why I make my kids go to church:

Because here we can make a place to share the good news of the “whole” story of human purpose. That yes, making money, accumulating possessions, excelling in school and vocation are real parts of life, but none of these are the way to abundant life. And when we forget, we turn to our scripture and the real stories of real human beings who surround us and are reminded of a God who lifts up the lowly and challenges the mighty, a God who lives in the margins, with the outsider, who sits at the table of sinners and the unlovely, and then looks into our eyes and invites us to sit down too.

Because here, we teach and show and struggle within ourselves to share first, to step aside, to invite, to live lives of compassion and service. Here we believe in the power of forgiveness, the grace of laying down the many swords we wield in this world, of metal and word and action. Here, we pay attention to the undeniable mark we each leave on this world. Here, however ungraceful and inept we may be, we are invited to learn gestures of beauty and humility and mercy, and to know that ultimately, our efforts matter. Here we learn that where our treasure is, there are hearts will be. So we consider the treasure.

I make my kids go to church because here we believe that the law of love trumps all others, and we are invited to spend a life time discovering the shape and texture and movement of love by mining the richness of our Christian spiritual traditions and teachings, by listening with hearts and minds to our spiritual ancestors, challenging the structures that oppress, by listening and making all things new for ours is a still speaking God, When we wonder if the church has lost its ability to be relevant and wonder if our children might do better to cut their losses, there is faithful, stubborn Hannah, living in a what also seemed to be a God-forsaken time, hauling Samuel to the temple.

And because this is the path that we choose, teacher Jesus who shows us the way, and along the way we learn to appreciate and honor other paths to the divine . . .

I make my kids go to church because I know that here they will always be fed, embraced, prayed for, welcomed - no matter what. Here they will find something meaningful to share with others.

So last Saturday night, the rains still coming down, we made supper together, youth leaders and youth. All of us were in the kitchen; chopping, sautéing, microwaving, stirring, singing, talking, laughing as we prepared our burrito dinner. I was putting another dish in the dishwasher when one of the youth, a 15 year old girl, spun around to face me with her hands full of seeds from the avocados she had been chopping.

“I wish we could stay longer,” she said, “long enough,” she smiled, and lifted her messy, full hands up so I could see the treasure she held, “to see these seeds sprout.”

Then she spun back around and went back to work . . .