Springfield PCUSA November 14, 2021 Dr. Renee Mackey

Sermon Title: I Promise . . . Scriptures: 1 Samuel 2:1-8; Heb. 10:19-25

The 1924 Olympic Games were unique for many reasons but the story of Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams retold in the movie “Chariots of Fire” is one to remember. Harold Abrahams was Jewish and hired a professional trainer because he was driven to overcome prejudice. The other, Eric Liddell, ran in the hills of his home country, Scotland. He wanted to be a Christian missionary someday in China so he trained and preached on the weekends. “I believe God made me for a purpose. But he also made me fast, and when I run, I feel his pleasure.” They met at Kings College in England and that encounter changed their lives.

Both lived disciplined lives. They rose early to run while the rest of their family and friends slept. They ate healthy foods and lifted weights to train their muscles to respond. They both prayed to God for strength and the courage to keep going and not give up. They ran when they didn’t feel like running; they missed parties and college celebrations to run; they ran in all kinds of weather, on all kind of tracks, for one purpose: to be the fastest man on earth.

Their determination and focus reminds me of the spiritual discipline of prayer. Prayer takes discipline. You pray when you don’t believe; you pray no matter the situation; you pray when the body and soul are tired; you pray because your eyes are on God, the source of all power. Today we get a glimpse of Hannah’s prayer life and in doing so gain some insight for our own.

She wanted something from God and so she asked, but year after year the answer was always “no, Hannah, not yet.” Some would have cursed God but Hannah was persistent. You see Hannah had a problem. She was barren; no child had been produced from her womb. In those days, she would have been alienated from the women’s circles when they went to draw water or from the food preparations at harvest time, or from worship in the Tabernacle. Hannah lived a lonely life cut off from the faith community. She was shunned by others because she had no heir to give Elkanah. Her husband’s other wife Peninnah, provoked her severely, to irritate her because the Lord had closed her womb (1 Sam. 1: 6). Often she wept and could not eat.

This past year has certainly been a test of our prayer lives. There were times we all wanted to quit asking God one more time for a vaccine, for a cure, for the people on the front lines, and for healing for those who struggled with Covid-19. Our prayers have been heavy and full of sorrow as the number of deaths mounted and no cure was in sight. We have grieved with those who lost loved ones and wept with families torn apart. We have felt isolated and often wondered if God heard our cries. Thank God for online worship that held us together as one people.

Worship was the practice of the Elkanah’s family (1 Sam. 1: 7) as well. One day the priest Eli saw her as she worshipped (1 Sam. 1:9). She was deeply distressed and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly (1 Sam. 1: 9-10). She made a vow: “O Lord of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to our servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a Nazirite until the day of his death” (1 Sam. 1: 9-11).

This was not a bargain prayer with God; God if you give me what I want; I’ll do this for you. This was a holy oath formed in her soul. It is prayer that requires no words. We know this kind of prayer, don’t we? There are public prayers we share with our church family and our friends but there are other private longings known only to the Holy Spirit who we are told “intercedes for us with signs too deep for words” (Rm. 8: 26-27).

Hannah stayed true to her faith even in the midst of ridicule and isolation. She acknowledged God as the one with the power to solve her problem. She was very specific in her prayer. Let’s talk a closer look at her request. She asked God for two things: (1) a male child, and (2) a male child who would be set apart from the community as a Nazarite. We remember Samson (Judges 13-14) and John the Baptist (Lk. 1:15) were also a member of this brotherhood. Hannah understood the sacrifice a “yes” answer would require on her part but we tend to overlook that part of her prayer.

She knew this request followed the Law of First Fruits as understood by the Jewish people. The first born male child would be given back to God as the first fruit of their offerings but they were usually redeemed with a payment to the priests. This began after the Passover when God spared all the firstborn. But this child would not be redeemed in that way but literally separated from her to live in the Temple with the Eli, the priest.

In addition to that sacrifice, A Nazirite was governed by strict rules. A few of them are listed here. Nazirites never drank alcohol, neither wine or intoxicants (Num. 6:3-4); no razor touched their heads (1 Sam. 1: 11; Num. 6: 5). Nazirites were not to touch a dead body but remain clean with no ceremonial defilement (Num 6: 6). Her son would become an outsider like her yet with a special purpose ordained by God.

Eli thought Hannah was drunk so Eli confronted her but she denied it. “Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman” (1 Sam. 1: 16). “I have been pouring out my heart before the Lord” (1 Sam. 1: 15). She went on to share with Eli not the specific reason for her prayer only that she had been speaking to God out of her great anxiety and vexation at this time (1 Sam. 1: 16). Eli then told her to go in peace. “May the God of Israel grant the petition you have made to him” (1 Sam. 1: 17).

Notice it was in an act of worship that Hannah released her deepest anxiety. Worship helps us sort through our emotions and intellectual arguments. The prayers, the liturgy, the music all focus our souls on God. Notice Hannah was honest with God. Hannah asked God for exactly what she wanted. She didn’t blame others for her situation; she didn’t ask God to stop the bullying from Peninnah. She didn’t lash out in anger. Her hearts spoke for her mind.

Notice too her conversations with her husband, Elkanah. She had someone to support her on this journey of faith. She did not bear her burden alone. We are told her husband gave Hannah a double portion of food because he loved her (1 Sam. 1: 4)-5). He was concerned about her mental and emotional stability. “Hannah,” said her husband, “Why do you weep? Why do you not eat? Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?” (1Sam. 1: 8). There was genuine concern and love there.

In times of great stress, we need the support of someone who believes in us. We need the community of faith to stand beside us. It is in the communal aspect of prayer that each individual finds comfort. If I know you are praying for me, it is easier for me to face what I cannot face alone. If I can’t find the words or am too tired to pray, your prayer takes over for me so the prayer of intercession never ceases. James reminded the church, “Pray for one another” (Ja. 5:16).

The boy was born and she named him, “Samuel,” which means “God hears.” There came a time when Hannah did not go up to worship with the rest of the family but stayed at home until Samuel was weaned, probably around 2 years of age. Elkanah said to her, “Do what seems best to you, wait until you have weaned him; only-may the Lord establish his word” (1 Sam. 1: 23) or may the Lord fulfill his word. It was the husband’s responsibility to confirm or annul his wife’s vow (Num. 30:13). He not only confirmed her vow but acknowledged God’s answer to her prayer and encouraged her to keep her vow. Thank God for Elkanah and for others in our lives who support us instead of condemning us when we most need encouragement.

Hannah kept her vow and reminded Eli of their first meeting (1 Sam. 1: 27-28). This was not the last time Hannah would see her son. We are told every year when Elkanah and Hannah traveled to the Temple to worship, she brought Samuel a new set of clothes (1 Sam. 2: 18-20). At that time, the priest Eli would again give her and Elkanah a blessing,(1 Sam. 2: 20).

The content of one of Hannah’s prayers is given to us in 1 Samuel 2: 1-8. It reveals the nature of her faith. “My heart exults in the Lord” (2:1). She praised God and God’s character. “There is no Holy One like the Lord, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God: (2: 2). God cannot be compared. God is a God of knowledge and only God judges the actions of humanity. God sees the plight of the powerless and hears their cries. The Lord has power over life and death and raises up the poor from the dust and lifts up the needy from the ash heap” (2:8). It is God who rules the earth and has power over kings and princes. “God guards the feet of the faithful ones” (2; 9) but destroys the wicked.

This prayer is not the usually thank you God prayer we would expect. Her focus is completely on God and who God is, not on herself. It is God who makes those who are powerlessness find meaning in their lives. It is God who uses power to intervene in our lives. We have felt “barren” and helpless against the “enemies” of Covic-19, the hostility between political and religious groups, and the violence between cultures. Yet, Hannah’s prayer reminds us that the power of God is released every time we pray.

The writer of Hebrews tells us to approach the sanctuary with a true heart in full assurance of faith because we are covered with Jesus’ death and resurrection (Heb. 10: 19-22). We are to hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for God who has promised is faithful (Heb. 10: 23). He reminds us to not neglect meeting together but to encourage one another and provoke one another with love (Heb. 10: 24-25).

Interesting choice of words: provoke. We usually use that word in a negative sense. Yet in the Greek, provoke can also mean to stimulate, to excite, to stir up. Our prayer life inspires us to continue to reach out to others even in these days of trouble. We are provoked to love our world as Christ loves the church and sacrificed for her. We are reminded to approach the throne of grace with boldness so that we may receive mercy, and find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16)..

In the Chariot of Fire, Eric Liddell has a decision to make. After all those years of physical training, he chooses not run the 100 meter race he trained for because it is to be run on Sunday, the day of worship. He embraced what he believed and did not violate his own conscience. Harold Abrahams won that race for his worship was on Friday but Eric ran the 400m on Thursday after his teammate Lindsay gave him his place. He had never run the 400m but ran it he did. He won the gold medal. It was in the living out of his faith that God’s love shown. It was daring to be faithful that his discipline was rewarded. He kept his promise to God and in turn the promises of God became his reality.

Jesus reminded the disciples, “Ask and it shall be given you; seek and ye shall find; knock and the door will be opened” (Mt. 7:7). The Apostle Paul reminded the church in Thessalonica, ”Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17). And then to the church in Philippi, “Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made know to God (Phil. 4: 6-7). Oh if we really believed those promises and released our fears and worries to God, we could find peace. The promises of God will not fail. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective (Ja. 5: 16). Let us never give up our prayer discipline as the Covid19 virus continues to dominant our lives. Let our souls speak for us when words fail. Let us pray honestly and specifically like Hannah for prayer is the antidote for the sickness of our world. Amen.