

## ***“Holding On to What Holds Us”***

First Sermon in the Six-Week Series: Hold On! – Hold On To Our Identity

***1 Samuel 1:9-11, 19-20; 2:1-10***

New Revised Standard Version

What is your favorite song? Whatever it is, chances are it's your favorite NOT because it's a perfect specimen of musical genius but because it evokes a memory or a feeling. Maybe it's a song that was played at a significant event in your life; a first date or a funeral. Maybe it's a song that came out during a formative era in your life and when you hear it, it takes you back there instantly. Maybe you love it because the words are exactly what you need to hear. Maybe you love it because of the haunting cello line that echoes your melancholy or the danceability of the beat that just makes you wanna move.

One of my favorite songs is *Free Fallin'* by Tom Petty and the Heartbreakers. In high school I had a used two door black Saturn with a CD player and a sunroof. I have such a vivid memory of driving around in that car with a close friend the day after school was out in late May, blasting Tom Petty as we sang at the top of

our lungs, “*And I’m Free, Free Fallin.*” Exams were over. End of year recitals and concerts were finished. Final papers were in. It felt like an endless summer was before us as we drove – “*Into the great wide open / Under them skies of blue*” (to quote another Tom Petty song).

Everything about the song *Free Fallin'* evokes a feeling that I long to return to...the feeling of freedom from responsibility. Freedom from expectations. Freedom from time restraints and performance pressures. *Free Fallin'* is one of my favorite songs NOT because of its profound theological significance, but because it reminds me of a really important feeling in my life – relaxation, abundance, joy, living in the present moment. It speaks to a part of my identity that I don't live into enough; that feeling of being celebrated just for who I am and not for what I do.

Even back in bible times, songs were important reminders of identity too.

Miriam – dancer, choreographer, and tambourine player; sister to Moses and Aaron; Miriam sang a song of praise to the Lord, celebrating her people’s liberation from slavery after crossing the Red Sea. (Exodus 15)

Deborah – prophet, military heroine, the only female judge of Israel; Deborah sang a song of praise to the Lord, a victory hymn about defeating her adversaries in battle. (Judges 5)

Hannah – beloved yet barren wife of Elkanah; Hannah at the dedication of her miracle-son Samuel, sang a song of praise to the Lord, expressing gratitude to the God who answered her prayer of longing, and who hears the longing prayers of others. (1 Samuel 2)

Mary – young teen betrothed to Joseph, cousin to Elizabeth, the one who would become the Mother of Jesus: Mary sang a song of praise to the Lord after

being visited by the angel Gabriel, glorifying God for mercy and great deeds such as bringing down the rich, proud, and powerful. (Luke 1)

The songs of these women are powerful reminders of who God is and why we worship. God is our Liberator, our Strength and Deliverer, our Provider; God is the One who Blesses, the One who Calls, the One who overturns Power and Hierarchy for Peace and Healing.

The songs of these women remind us of who we are because they ground us in the identity of Whose we are – God’s. Our identity as God’s beloved people is central to everything else about us. But while we might hear some preacher tell us that we are a beloved child of God – for most of us, it’s not something we actively work to internalize each and every day. The presence of guilt and shame and blame and “othering” in our culture proves this to be true. Because if we truly understood our identity as God’s people,

God's beloveds, we would also understand that everyone else is God's beloved too and we'd treat them as such. Instead we focus almost every other kind of identity as a way to classify one another, as a way to differentiate ourselves from others rather than seek to understand one another.

Think about the many "identities" that we have; the roles and titles and positions we hold. For example, we are born into roles in our families and inhabit those for much of our lives. We are daughters, sons, siblings, cousins; we are partners, wives, husbands; we are fathers, mothers, grandparents, aunts, uncles. Those identities all require the presence of another person. We cannot be those things without someone else. If my brother didn't have two sons, I wouldn't be an aunt. To be a grandparent requires that your child has a child or that a child "adopts you and sees you" as their grandparent figure. (I realize not all family ties are blood ties.)

Then take professional roles as another example. Treating patients is what makes someone a practicing doctor, not just a licensed one. Having a classroom of students makes a credentialed educator a Teacher. I may always be an ordained minister, but having people to whom and with whom I minister is what makes me a pastor. A grocery bagger only has a job as long as people are coming into the story buying groceries for them to bag. You get the point.

And political parties – which feel all-consuming these days – republican or democrat, liberal or conservative – have become like identities too. They're defined by contrasting one set of values against another set of values and people defend and advocate for their party even more than they do the values they are supposed represent. They are almost like brands. So it's no wonder we have a political "identity" crisis of sorts. Am I democrat if the person who defines that party right now doesn't fully represent my values? Does it

change my republican values if I vote democrat in one election? If I stand up and speak out against someone in my party and hold them accountable, does that reflect poorly on me since they are in MY party? Do I defend them because they are an elected leader who I am supposed to respect or do I stand up for the values and people they are supposed to represent?

All this is to say, when you think about it, many of the ways we identify ourselves in this world are defined by people and things external to us, which means they are fluid. And because of that, when something changes – when a relationship is broken or a loved one dies, when we lose a job or change careers or retire, when our political party is not in power or is unrecognizable, then that creates stress. And in our experience of all this stress we can start to feel like we have nothing to hold on to...like nothing is certain and everything is shifting. It can feel like we are losing our grip on faith, or life, or even

ourselves: Who am I if I am not at work 24/7? Who am I if my kid is now out of the house and at college? Who am I now that I am not a caregiver anymore?

In these moments and in these times it has never been more important to look at the ONLY identity we hold that can never change – no matter what: You are a beloved child of God, created by God in love, with purpose and intentionality. You are never NOT God's child. You are never NOT loved by God. When everything else around you feels uncertain, God's got you. And God will never let you go.

Hannah understands this. She understands that she is God's, first and last. That doesn't mean her life is easy, by any means. But it means that as she lives her hard and stressful life, she knows she's not alone.

I'm preaching this sermon in the nursery here at Calvary because Hannah longed for a child, and she was surrounded by reminders of what she did not have all the time every day.

She was surrounded by kids, that were not her own. Remember as we discussed a few weeks ago with Abram and Sarai, children meant there were people to farm your land and take care of you in your old age. Children represented blessing by God. The inability to have children was always seen as the women's fault back in those days, and in Hannah's case the longing was intensified by the fact that her husband Elkanah's OTHER wife could have kids and did. Lots of them. Yep, that's right. We didn't read that part of the story, but Hannah's husband had another wife. Peninnah was her name, which literally means "fertile" or "prolific." Talk about rubbing salt in an open wound!

Peninnah had nurseries full of children and she often reminded Hannah of her closed womb. We have reason to believe that Peninnah was so cruel to Hannah because she was actually jealous of how Elkanah treated Hannah. He

showered her with more affection and attention than Peninnah. The text makes it clear that Hannah was Elkanah's favorite; Hannah's name itself suggests as much, as it means "favored" or "gracious."<sup>1</sup>

So from what we know of Hannah when we meet her in today's text, she has three pretty notable identities. In Elkanah's adoring eyes, she is the beloved, favored wife. In Peninnah's jealous eyes, she is the hated "other woman." And in the judging, nosy, none-of-your-business eyes of everyone else in the community, she is the pitied and looked down upon barren woman.

That's a lot for Hannah to be carrying around and processing. Plus, she is also grappling very deeply with her own longing for a child. So deep was her grief, she had stopped eating. And Elkanah, trying to comfort her, asks her just before today's text: "*Hannah, why do you weep? Why do you not eat?*"

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<sup>1</sup> Sara Koenig, "Commentary on 1 Samuel 1:9-11, 19-20; 2:1-10," *Working Preacher* (16 Oct. 2016), accessed on 16 Oct. 2020 at

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=2985](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2985).

*Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?"* (1:8) Elkanah, like any earnest friend or loved one who says “not-so-helpful” things to us with the intention of “trying-to-be-helpful,” is trying to find a solution for Hannah. Elkanah doesn’t understand that she can get all of her husband’s love and more and still grieve the love she does not have from a child. His love cannot fix her longing. His goodness cannot heal her grief.

But even in this low place, Hannah’s faith and strength is remarkable. She knows in her depths that her identity is first and foremost as God’s child. And so, she goes to the Temple. She does not turn to her husband. She does not turn to her pastor (she actually walks right by Eli, the priest, who’s on the Temple steps). Hannah turns to God.

Hannah prays with earnestness and honesty and as our biblical friends often do, she bargains with God. Hannah prays, “*Look*

*God, if you just grant me this one thing, a son, I will dedicate him to you completely, I will not hold on to him, I will turn him over to you to serve you.”*

You may or may not remember from your favorite book of the Bible, Numbers, that a nazirite was a person who vows to abstain from three things: partaking of grapes or any of its by-products, cutting one’s hair, and touching corpses (Numbers 6:3–9). That last one’s not so bad, and really, the first two aren’t either in the grand scheme of life. Nazirite is from the Hebrew root *nazir*, נָזִיר, which means “to separate or dedicate oneself.” This classification is part of the Priestly Code (Num. 6:1–21) and gives any layman who abides by these tenets a status resembling that of a priest, without actually being a priest (since priesthood was a lineage one was born into back then and could not choose). Essentially, to be a nazirite is to take a vow to be “holy to the Lord.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Encyclopedia Judaica. © 2008 The Gale Group.  
Information accessed on 16 Oct. 2020 at  
<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/nazirite>.

Now that's all fine and good, but if you stop and think about it, what Hannah is doing is quite powerful. She longs to have a son, she longs to be a mother. And yet what she is saying to God is that if God answers her prayer, if God gives her a son, she will give BACK to God the VERY thing that would change her status in her community and in her home. To dedicate her son in this way means she would not be raising him in the home, she would not get to shape his learnings and leanings, she would not get to see and share in all his accomplishments, she would not get to be seen with a son out in public – with the man who would give her life purpose and value according to society. The very thing that would have changed her “status” or “identity” in the eyes of others – having a child – is ultimately not what Hannah was longing for...at least, it doesn't seem that way.

Her example reminds us of what we say to parents at child dedications, *“This child does*

*not belong to you. This child is God's gift to you for a season. You are stewards of their life.”*

This child, for Hannah, was not about “holding on to an identity” to filling a gap or wound in her life or trying to find a purpose for herself by being a mother, it was about “letting go” and trusting in faith that no matter whether she had a child or not, the child was to first and foremost be God's. Just as she herself was God's.

In fact, I wonder if Hannah's longing and prayer was really about learning to accept her *own* identity as God's child and that being enough, even more than about having a child to give her that sense of identity and purpose as a mother. It's probably a mix of both. Our most fervent prayers are often full of so many complex emotions.

It turns out that God answered Hannah's prayer in a very concrete and specific way, and Hannah was true to her word. Hannah returned the answer to her prayer back to God. Her son was God's child first. And

maybe in that act of letting go of her son, she was able to finally really hold on and believe in her own identity as God's daughter. Who knows.

Hannah names her son, Samuel, which means "God heard," because she felt God heard her prayers. Of course this text brings up many emotions for those of us who also pray with earnest longings to God and yet it seems as though God does not answer our prayers with the same direct result that we ask for. I wish I knew why that was the case. I don't. But I believe that God does hear our longings and our prayers even when they are not answered as we would want them to be answered. And that's what Samuel's name reminds us of – not that God answers, but that God hears.

The heart of this text is Hannah's song to God as she dedicates Samuel to the Lord's service in the Temple. We would expect her song to center around the concrete miracle of the birth of Samuel, HER son.

But interestingly, Hannah does not even mention Samuel as she sings. Instead, she focuses her praise on the identity and character of God, "*There is no Holy One like the LORD, no one besides you; there is no Rock like our God*" (1 Samuel 2:2). Because she doesn't make it about herself, even if inspired by events in her own life, Hannah's song becomes an anthem for EVERYONE who finds themselves in despair and hopelessness. She sings on behalf of the people. Not on behalf of the people whose prayers are answered or whose identities have placed them in positions of power or privilege, rather Hannah sings on behalf of the feeble, the hungry, the barren, the poor, the low, and the needy,<sup>3</sup> (vs 4-8).

Her song reaches a culmination with the bold proclamation in verse 8: "*The Lord raises up the poor from the dust; he lifts the needy from the ash heap, to inherit a seat of honor. For the pillars of the earth are the Lord's, and on them he has set*

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<sup>3</sup> Roger Nam, "Commentary on 1 Samuel 1:9-11, 19-20; 2:1-10," *Working Preacher* (14 Oct. 2012), accessed on 16 Oct. 2020 at

[https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=1447](https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1447).



*the world.*” This is God’s world. It is how God sees us that defines us.

Hannah’s song reveals that for her, divine power triumphs over the social circumstances of her time that marginalize barren women.<sup>4</sup> Not only does God reach out to the powerless, but God elevates them. The poor, barren, and desperate can hope in the power of God when the powers of the world betray them, ignore them, forget them, or oppress them. By reading and singing Hannah’s prayer, we join a community of people throughout history who have seen and experienced despair, only to be lifted up by God in ways that the world does not.<sup>5</sup>

The world Hannah sings about is not the reality she knows or that we know, but it is the vision in which we all hope nonetheless, and it is the vision for which we all work our whole lives long. Until it is “on earth as it is in heaven.”

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<sup>4</sup> Nam, *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Nam, *ibid.*

Young Samuel grows up to emerge as Israel’s next leader; he’s the hinge between the era of judges and the era of kings. He prepares the way for the institution of monarchy which will follow. As scholar Roger Nam notes, “*Royal origins of Mesopotamia and Egypt typically begin with kings descending from the heavenly deities, placed on the thrones of earth to steward the will of the gods. But for ancient Israel, the beginnings of monarchy emerge with the earnest, desperate prayer of a powerless second wife. But of course, this will not be the last time when greatness begins with a birth narrative of humility.*”<sup>6</sup>

It is fitting that Hannah’s song, which reminds us of God’s identity as One who loves all people and is always near to those who are suffering the most, is the song that births the era that culminates in the coming of a king like no other, a humble servant. Jesus came to earth to teach us what God’s love looks like lived out day to

<sup>6</sup> Nam, *ibid.*

day. And Jesus' ministry reveals to us that God's image and identity is most acutely mirrored by those on the margins. By those who have deep and unfulfilled longings.

It is a time of deep uncertainty and struggle. We all long for the world to be different than it is. Truly, God only knows what is to come tomorrow and so in the coming weeks and months, so Calvary, we need to continue to do what people of faith have done for generations – through many an answered prayer and many, many more UNANSWERED prayers: we need to “*Hold On!*” Today, and week after week, as we worship through screens and smart phones, we say thank you to Hannah, who reminds us to *Hold On to What Holds Us: Our Identity as God's Beloved Children.*

You are God's child, first and last. You are loved. When everything else is stripped away – that remains. And if YOU are loved by God, that means everyone else is loved by God too. That's a truth that will

change every single interaction we have each and every day if we let it. It's the kind of change we ourselves need, the kind of change our world needs. It's the kind of change that brings about the kin-dom of God. It's the kind of change that we are about here at Calvary. It's why we need one another, why we need our church, our people, our community.

I know it's rough right now Calvary. Hold On. Not to your fear. Not to who the world tells you you are. Not to who you tell yourself you need to be. Hold on to the One Who Holds You. Who you are to God is the most true thing about you. You are loved. Just as you are. You are God's child. And God never leaves God's children to journey alone. The good news doesn't get much better than that. Now we just have to believe it.

Amen.