This week as we discuss people talking to God in the Bible, we shall look at a woman named Hannah. We meet Hannah in 1 Samuel 1. The two Books of Samuel (which is really one book that couldn’t fit on one piece of vellum or animal skin because no one could create one long enough) recount the history of the Israelites from the time they lived as a loose confederation of tribes, continually attacked by the Philistines, to when they demanded, and received, a king to lead and protect them from the Philistines to the end of King David’s life and reign.

By not only being named, but by being discussed at the very beginning of a very significant book of the Bible, Hannah is clearly marked as an extremely important woman. We know that she will play an important role in Israel’s history.

Hannah is a woman in the long line of women in the Tanakh¹ who suffer the pain of childlessness. This situation began with Sarah, the

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¹ The Tanakh is the Hebrew Bible. The word “Tanakh” is an acronym: “T” for “Torah,” the first five books of the Bible; “N” for “Nevi’im” or the “Prophets,” and “Kh” for “Khetuvim,” or the “Writings.”
first Matriarch of Israel, and continued through Rebecca, second Matriarch, Rachel, who with her sister Leah, gave birth to the Twelve Tribes of Israel as well as the unnamed mother of Samson. Elizabeth, mother of John the Baptist in the New Testament is the final woman in this group. All ultimately experience the miraculous gift of children after the intervention of God.

Childlessness was a serious situation for women in the Ancient Near East. Among the Israelites, a woman who was barren was a huge scandal. She failed in her main duty to her husband as she could not provide him with an heir. If she was his first/primary wife, he was free to bring on a secondary wife to provide him with an heir. He also was free to cast her away, and it was doubtful another man would marry her. Everyone considered her to be a sinner, punished by God. She was shamed before her community and was an object of ridicule.

Even worse, the early Israelites did not believe in an afterlife.² One’s immortality lay in one’s descendants. If a person had none, then that person had no immortality. For this reason,

² The Israelites believed in a place called “Sheol,” a sort of shadowland similar to the Greek Hades (a shadowland where the dead lived a kind of half-life, feeling neither pain nor joy nor much of anything)
Rachel, wife of Jacob/Israel told him, “Give me children or else I shall die!” (Genesis 30:1). Rachel does not mean this statement only figuratively, she means it literally. If she has no descendents, she will have no immortality. She will die, going down to Sheol into an unhappy half-existence with no one to remember her. She will be gone.

The Israelites did not come to believe in an afterlife until sometime after the return from the Babylonian Exile in 587 BCE. We can see that at least some Jews believed in an afterlife and a resurrection. In 2 Maccabees 7:13-14, (part of the Deuterocanonical Books3) the fourth of the Maccabean martyrs says, “It is my choice to die at the hands of mortals with the hope that God will restore me to life; but for you, there will be no resurrection to life.”

Hannah, as her infertile ancestresses before her, is in despair because she is childless. Her

3 The Deuterocanonical Books are 7 books (Tobit, Judith, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, the Book of Wisdom, Sirach, and Baruch) as well as portions of Daniel and Esther. These Books are not included in the Tanakh although they have always been present in Catholic Bibles. They appeared in the original King James Bible in 1611 and were only removed in 1885. The Deuterocanonical Books are present in the Septuagint, the Jewish translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek which was written around 250 BCE. Protestant scholars finally noticed that the Gospel writers quoted the Septuagint when they quoted the Tanakh, rather than the Hebrew version of the texts. Therefore, the Gospel writers had the Deuterocanonical Books as part of their sacred texts; no self-respecting serious scholar could justify leaving them out. Now, only the most hardcore anti-Catholic bibles (such as the NIV, NASB, and the NKJV) refuse to include them.
husband’s second wife has given birth to “sons and daughters” (1 Samuel 1:4). Like Rebecca and Rachel, she is beloved by her husband nonetheless. Indeed, her husband tells her, “Why are you weeping? Why are you not eating? Why are you miserable? Am I not better for you than ten sons?” (1 Samuel 1:8). However, her co-wife, in accordance with how their society felt about childless women as well as her place as a second wife - which is assumed to always be that of rival to the primary wife - “tormented her” deliberately (1 Samuel 1:6).

Hannah turns to God.

On one of the yearly family trips to Shiloh, the high place where the Israelites worshipped YHWH before Solomon built the Temple, she enters the shrine of God.

Eli was priest of the shrine at the time. Although it is not explicitly stated, Eli is considered a direct descendant of Moses, granting him great privilege and prestige. He was someone everyone listened to.

Eli was positioned at his usual place of honor, sitting beside the doorpost of YHWH’s shrine, ensuring that all respect was maintained.

4 See http://www.altriocchi.com/H_ENG/pen5/moses_family/ancestor_eli.html accessed 03/04/2020
Hannah has not approached God with faith, love, or even humility. Rather, she comes in bitterness. Many of us have been trained to never question God’s ways, to never be angry with God, never to be impatient; we are taught to pray out of faith and trust. To pray out of bitterness is unthinkable. Indeed, we would probably consider bitterness to be the worst emotion to hold in our hearts while approaching God. How could we possibly think that God would respond to our prayers if we came to God bitterly?

And yet, that’s exactly what Hannah does. She chides God for leaving her childless and without immortality. Bitterness is what she feels. As we discussed last week, God knows how we feel, so pretending we don’t feel what we feel doesn’t do any good.

Hannah feels close enough to God that she pours out her bitterness to God in God’s holy shrine, the place where she knows she is closest to God. The shrine at Shiloh is now the permanent home of the Ark of the Covenant, the specially constructed container which holds the tablets of the Ten Commandments and the scrolls of the Laws of Moses. According to the Israelites, this was the place where God was most present. During the wandering of the Israelites in the
wilderness after their release from slavery in Egypt, God would come to the Tent of Meeting where the Ark of the Covenant was placed. There, Moses would enter and speak to God directly (see Exodus 40:1-15).

Hannah is beside herself. She sobs and promises God that if God gives her a son, she will give the boy back to God and, “no razor will touch his head” (1 Samuel 1:11). This last promise, that “no razor will touch his head,” is a reference to what is called a Nazarite vow.

A Nazarite vow was a special vow that Israelite and Jewish people took which could either last for a lifetime or a set period of time. Either men or women could take a Nazarite vow and these vows were taken either to receive a special blessing or in thanksgiving for a special blessing. Nazarite vows not only involved not cutting the hair, but also avoiding alcohol. Samson clearly lived his entire life under a Nazarite vow (hence the loss of his power after the cutting of his hair). In the New Testament, Paul took a temporary Nazarite vow (Acts 18:18).

We might think that bribing God isn’t very appropriate, although people still make vows to God when they pray. Some people promise to never do anything bad again if God will save them
or their loved one. Some promise to give up drinking, drugs, sex, whatever, if only, if only... Whether or not their loved one is saved or their prayers are answered, most of us would doubt that this is because they bargained with God.

But, some type of prayers like these do have a powerful effect. My son is a Starbucks barista, and one day he told me this story. A young man in his thirties came to the counter and ordered a black coffee. The man didn’t look my son in his eyes and kind of fidgeted for a little while; then he asked my son if he could tell him his testimony. There wasn’t a line, so my son said, sure. The man said, “I used to be a terrible heroin addict. One night I had this horrible nightmare, the worse I’d ever had. I saw the Grim Reaper coming closer and closer and I knew I was going to die. I cried out, ‘God please save me! If you do, I’ll stop taking heroin and tell everyone I meet this story.’” And suddenly, he woke up and he was in a hospital. He had been there in a coma for four days because he had OD’d. He told my son that after that, he stopped taking heroin and he told everyone he could that story. Then he looked my son in the eyes and said, “That’s my testimony. Thanks for listening.” My son considers himself an atheist,
but when he told me that story, he looked at me and said, “You just never know, Mom, do you?”

At the time of the Israelites, people such behavior was much more common. Hannah promised that if God would give her a son back to God. It also seems rather terrible that a mother would decide her child’s future without his consent. However, in ancient times, and even in certain societies today, each person is born into his or her station in life and there was no way to change this fact. So simply because a mother is deciding her future son’s fate here shouldn’t shock us; patriarchs decided their clan member’s fates throughout Israelite history, choosing chores, spouses, and even what the parents should name their baby.

Thus, in anger and despair, Hannah calls out to God at God’s holy shrine.

During the time of the Israelites, a person prayed out loud, exactly the opposite of how we pray in public, as a general rule. Today, at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, the last portion of the Second Temple to survive, some men can be seen praying out loud in this tradition. However, if we were to go into St. Augustine’s or the Chapel at St. Elizabeth Seton and start praying out loud, people
would wonder what was wrong with us. Or at the very least, they would give us looks.

Hannah, however, is so overcome with emotion, that she cannot speak, she cannot pray out loud. Instead, she can only move her lips.

Eli notices that her lips are moving but that she is not speaking out loud, and he believes she is drunk. He is outraged and proceeds to scold her. He tells her she is making a spectacle of herself and that she needs to sober up!

But Hannah defends herself, explaining that she is not drunk but rather, desperately unhappy and has been pouring her heart out to YHWH. 

Eli immediately shows her compassion and blesses her.

She returns to her husband, now happy. I’ve always found this response to be wonderful. She has prayed in earnest to God, letting God see her open, suffering. She has bargained with God, which was considered acceptable in her time, but has no idea if God has accepted this bargain. And yet, the mere act of prayer, of speaking to God in open relationship, has been healing.

Her reaction reveals to us how important friendship with God is to our lives. Even when we are in the depths of despair, even when we feel angry with God, telling God off if we have to,
speaking to God rather than ignoring God, we can feel better afterwards. We are not told that Hannah feels assured that God will answer her prayer; we just know that Hannah feels better after praying.

Hannah and her husband pray the next morning at the shrine and return home. They sleep together as husband and wife. And we are told that YHWH remembered her.

Remembering has always been so important. In an oral society such as the Israelites, remembering was how family histories were passed down, how knowledge was passed down, how traditions were passed down. The Israelites believed they received their immortality because their descendants remembered them. We have learned about God’s earliest actions in the world for the salvation of humanity from the stories the Israelites remembered and passed down.

To this day, we value remembrance. From birthdays to anniversaries to days honoring important historical figures to Mother’s and Father’s Days and even Arbor Day, we remember. We remember wonderful events like the Fourth of July and awful events like 9/11 and the Shoah. To

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5 Shoah, a Hebrew word that means “Catastrophe” is now the preferred word to refer to the Holocaust.
be forgotten, to run into an old friend and have them not recognize us, to be left out of an event because none of our family or friends thought to invite us, to be left alone in a retirement home with no friends or family ever visiting us, are awful events. Being forgotten is worse than being despised.

And certainly nothing sounds worse than being forgotten by God. Many noted mystics, saints, and holy people have felt forgotten by God. This situation is usually called “the dark night of the soul.” It is described specifically in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, #2731. St. Paul of the Cross (1542-1591) experienced a 45-year dark night of the soul, that finally ended gradually five years before his death;⁶ St. Therese of Lisieux experienced a dark night of the soul as she lay dying of tuberculosis which fortunately was lifted before she died;⁷ and the saint with the dubious distinction of suffering from the longest dark night of the soul is St. Mother Teresa, who

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suffered this torment for nearly fifty years. Their examples of perseverance remind us not to allow despair to overcome us, even when we feel that God has forsaken us.

Jesus, himself, on the Cross, had his dark night of the soul moment, crying out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

But God never forgets us, whether or not we feel God’s presence beside us. God is always Emmanuel: God-with-us.

Hannah’s dark night of the soul finally comes to an end. She is “remembered” by God. She becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son.

As promised, after she has weaned her son, Samuel, she returns to Shiloh with her husband and child. She reminds Eli who she is - another significant remembrance - and leaves the boy at the shrine in service to God, as she has promised.

She then prays a beautiful prayer of praise in honor of the God who remembers. This prayer is echoed by Mary in Luke 1:46-55, when she, pregnant with Jesus, visits her relative, Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist. Mary’s prayer is known to us as “The Magnificat.”

Hannah begins her prayer with praise for God, describing how her heart is exultant because God has restored her pride before those who tormented her - namely her co-wife who mocked her because she had no children. She praises God abundantly, and encourages everyone else to be humble before God as well, for God is Wisdom and measures all deeds. So, not only does she praise and thank God herself, she passes the Word about how great God is!

Mary as well praises God for lifting her up from her humble place, for being her savior,

Hannah continues with the theme of God’s activities of social justice. She says that “the bow of the mighty is broken and the stumbling are girded with strength. The well-fed hire themselves out for bread while the hungry no longer have to toil. The barren woman bears seven sons while the mother of many becomes bereft” 1 Samuel 2:4-5. The point of these phrases are not meant to imply that God’s justice involves some type of revenge where the oppressed now oppress their oppressors. Rather, the oppressors learn what the oppressed have suffered through direct experience; not as punishment, but in order to have empathy.
The remainder of Hannah’s prayer describes the power of God and how God uses this power for creation and for equality. She says that God, “raises the needy from the dust; from the ash heaps, he lifts up the destitute to seat them with nobles and endow them with a seat of honor” (1 Samuel 2:8). I love this social justice line. It emphasizes how God does not believe in recreating oppression with new players, but rather, God lifts everyone into joyful, equal, honored status.

In the final verses of her prayer, Hannah speaks prophetically.

First, she notes that “Not by strength does one prevail” (1 Samuel 2:9). This truth appears several times in the Tanakh. For example, Psalm 33:16-19 tells us “A king is not saved by his great army, nor a warrior delivered by great strength. Useless is the horse for safety; despite its great strength, it cannot be saved. Behold, the eye of YHWH is upon those who fear him, upon those who count on his mercy, to deliver their soul from death.”

Hannah reminds us all, that God is our strength, our security. We often become comfortable because we have savings, insurance, education, some sort of safety net. But we know from history that such safety nets often tear to
shreds; illness, economic collapse, down-sizing, any outside trouble can be the end of our worldly security. Goodness - who could have foreseen this Covid-19 issue!

But God never fails us. This fact does not mean that God will stand between us and personal disaster. It does mean however that God always stands with us, that God strengthens us during our trials and struggles. It is not our personal strength, but God standing with us giving us strength. We are assured that God will never abandon us. We need to remember this truth during our safe times, our good times. Being in God’s presence in prayer every day helps us with this important remembrance.

In the final line of her prayer, Hannah prophetically predicts the coming of the king, literally, the messiah. In Hebrew, the word “moshiakh” or “messiah” literally means “anointed one.” All kings of Israel were anointed with oil by the high priest. At the time of Hannah’s prayer, no king existed among the Israelites. Samuel, her son, would be the first priest to anoint a king of Israel, a messiah.

In the same way, Mary’s Magnificat praises God’s social justice, how he not only brought Mary up from her lowliness, but all who are lowly will
be brought into equality with the wealthy. When she says, “The hungry he has filled with good things, the rich he has sent away empty” (Luke 1:53), she does not mean that rich people are going to starve. Rather, the rich are sent away empty, because they don’t need anything else because they are already full - of food, of everything they need. So again, God is not creating new oppressors, but bringing everyone into equality. Mary also praises God for the coming Messiah - the baby she carries in her womb - when she says, “He [God] has helped Israel his servant, remembering his mercy, according to his promise to our fathers, to Abraham and to his descendants forever” (Luke 1:54-55).

Both Hannah and Mary are prophets. Hannah foretells the first messiah, King Saul, whom her miraculous son, Samuel, anoints into kingship; the Blessed Mother Mary foretells the return of the monarchy through her Divine Son, the Messiah Jesus.

While the young Samuel is serving at the shrine, Hannah still performs motherly service for him. Each year, she makes the growing boy a new tunic, a special linen one appropriate for a priest-in-training. When she and her husband and his other wife and children travel for their annual
worship at the shrine, she presents him with his new robe.

And each year, Eli blesses both Hannah and her husband, praying that God will present the couple with more children. And God does. Hannah gives birth to three more sons and two daughters.

We must remember here that Hannah’s happy ending is not simply children in response to answered prayers so that she will no longer be an object of pity and scorn - the type of prayers we ourselves want answered. We must focus our attention on the primary result of Hannah’s answered prayers: eternal life.

And that is the one prayer God always answers for us: eternal life.