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Hannah's prayer in the temple. Learning from Israel's negative example in the wilderness.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

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Transcript

1 Samuel chapter 1 There was a certain man of Ramathaim-Zophim, of the hill country of Ephraim, whose name was Alcana the son of Jeroham, son of Elihu, son of Tohu, son of Zeph, an Ephrathite. He had two wives. The name of the one was Hannah, and the name of the other Peninnah.

And Peninnah had children, but Hannah had no children. Now this man used to go up year by year from his city to worship and to sacrifice to the Lord of Hosts at Shiloh, where the two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, were priests of the Lord. On the day when Alcana sacrificed, he would give portions to Peninnah his wife, and to all her sons and daughters.

But to Hannah he gave a double portion, because he loved her, though the Lord had closed her womb. And her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her, because

the Lord had closed her womb. So it went on year by year.

As often as she went up to the house of the Lord, she used to provoke her. Therefore Hannah wept and would not eat. And Elkanah her husband said to her, Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons? After they had eaten and drunk in Shiloh, Hannah rose.

Now Eli the priest was sitting on the seat beside the doorpost of the temple of the Lord. She was deeply distressed, and prayed to the Lord and wept bitterly. And she vowed a vow and said, O Lord of hosts, if you will indeed look on the affliction of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a son, then I will give him to the Lord all the days of his life, and no razor shall touch his head.

As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was speaking in her heart, only her lips moved, and her voice was not heard. Therefore Eli took her to be a drunken woman.

And Eli said to her, How long will you go on being drunk? Put your wine away from you. But Hannah answered, No, my lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk neither wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the Lord.

Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for all the long I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation. Then Eli answered, Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him. And she said, Let your servant find favour in your eyes.

Then the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad. They rose early in the morning and worshipped before the Lord. Then they went back to their house at Ramah.

And Elkanah knew Hannah his wife, and the Lord remembered her. And in due time Hannah conceived and bore a son, and she called his name Samuel. For she said, I have asked for him from the Lord.

The man Elkanah and all his house went up to offer to the Lord the yearly sacrifice and to pay his vow. But Hannah did not go up, for she said to her husband, As soon as the child is weaned I will bring him, so that he may appear in the presence of the Lord and dwell there forever. Elkanah her husband said to her, Do what seems best to you, wait until you have weaned him, only may the Lord establish his word.

So the woman remained and nursed her son until she weaned him. And when she had weaned him she took him up with her, along with a three-year-old bull, an ephor of flour and a skin of wine. And she brought him to the house of the Lord at Shiloh.

And the child was young. Then they slaughtered the bull, and they brought the child to

Eli. And she said, O my Lord, as you live, my Lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence praying to the Lord.

For this child I prayed, and the Lord has granted me my petition that I made to him. Therefore I have lent him to the Lord. As long as he lives he is lent to the Lord.

And he worshipped the Lord there. The story of 1 Samuel begins in an unexpected way and with a surprising person. If we were telling the story of the rise of the kingdom, we would not tell the story this way.

Perhaps we would begin with the battle of Aphek, or maybe we'd jump to Israel's demand of a king in chapter 8. Yet it begins with Hannah, a woman who is barren, and a woman who's in rivalry with a fruitful wife, Peninnah. In the situation of Hannah, it is as if the whole story and situation of Israel is condensed. The oppressors are fruitful, yet the faithful are barren.

As a barren wife, Hannah should remind us of the wives of the patriarchs. Sarah, Rebecca, and Rachel were all barren also, and the opening of the barren womb is a crucial theme throughout the scripture. As the barren and oppressed wife who calls out to the Lord, Hannah represents the entire nation.

The nation waiting for the promised seed of the woman to deliver them from their condition. And the fact that the narrative of Samuel begins at this point, rather than many years later when Samuel reaches maturity, gives us insight into the priorities of the Lord and the way that he works and views the world. As in the story of the Exodus and in the story of Ruth, covenant history seems to have broken down irreparably.

And it's through the prayers and the courage of faithful women that a new future becomes possible. In the midst of this gathering gloom of history, God plants the seeds of his future in unexpected places. In praying for a son, Hannah promises that if the Lord hears her request, she will dedicate him to the Lord and he will be a Nazarite all of his life.

Like Samson and John the Baptist, Hannah's son would be a dedicated servant, bound by a vow of special service for all of his life, and a daughter of a barren woman whose womb was opened. The Nazarite was a person who exercised a priest-like task within the wider world, with many of the same limitations that the priests were under in their service. And Hannah's son would be set apart for a lifelong special mission, a form of holy war, preparing the way for the establishment of the kingdom to come.

At the beginning of 1 Samuel, Israel languishes under wicked and spiritually dull rulers. We can see something of this in chapter 3. There's a threefold parallelism. We're informed that the word of the Lord was not heard in those days, that Eli the high priest was losing his sight, and that the lamp of God would soon be extinguished.

It's a world without light, without the light of revelation and prophetic vision, without the light of spiritual and physical perception in the high priest, and without the symbolic light of God's presence. And the little light that remains is guttering, is about to be snuffed out, and the world of the tabernacle will fall back into darkness in the story of the battle of Aphek, as the ark of God is captured. The two sons of Eli, Hophni and Phinehas, are wicked and corrupt priests who despise the offering of the Lord and violate the women at the tabernacle door, the virgins who were to represent Israel's holiness as the Lord's betrothed bride.

Eli himself is very old, and the woman Hannah, with whom the story begins, has a closed womb and is sorely provoked by a fruitful counterpart, Peninnah. The story is then framed in terms of themes of hopelessness, social decay, corrupt power, and bitter struggle with oppressive and ascendant rivals. During their yearly visit to Shiloh for worship and sacrifice, Hannah leaves the festivities in order to cry out to the Lord at the tabernacle, weeping in her anguish.

She vows to the Lord that if he gives her a son, she will dedicate him to the Lord, and that he will be a lifelong Nazarite. Eli, the high priest, mistakes the fasting Hannah's pouring out of her soul to the Lord for drunkenness. This is suggestive of his lack of spiritual perception, and this lack of perception may be a sign of things to come, that he is about to be toppled from his perch, quite literally later on, and then going to be replaced by a faithful leader of the people.

The Lord remembers Hannah in verse 19 and grants her a request. He opens her womb and gives her a son whom she names Samuel. The Lord's remembering and hearing of the woman who cries out might recall the Exodus for us, where the Lord heard the groaning of his people, remembered them, and opened the womb of Egypt for the birth of his firstborn son that was dedicated to him.

Hannah names her son for the fact that she asked him from the Lord, Samuel's name suggesting herd of God. A strange aspect of this, however, is that the explanation that she gives would fit better with the name Saul than with the name Samuel. This perhaps sets us up for the juxtaposition between Samuel and Saul later on in the story, perhaps also juxtaposing Hannah's asking for a son and Israel's asking for a king.

When Samuel was weaned, Hannah brought him up to Shiloh to give him to the Lord. Samuel was adopted as a son of Eli. Although, as we'll see later on, Samuel is the one who's dedicated to the Lord.

He sleeps in the tent of the Lord, is primarily the son of the Lord, with Eli as his guardian. And the theme of adoption is very important in 1 Samuel. Peter Lightheart writes, And much of the account of David's reign in 2 Samuel is taken up with the recording of David's difficulties with his sons.

In each of these cases, biological sons were replaced by an adopted son, just as Eli and his sons lost the priesthood and were supplanted by Samuel, so Samuel's sons were supplanted by Saul, and Saul's son by David. In contrast to Genesis, the true son in 1 and 2 Samuel is not a younger biological son, but an adopted son who comes from outside the genealogy. 1 and 2 Samuel thus makes the typology of Genesis more precise by showing that the seed would not come through the normal channels of fleshly descent, but would be pre-eminently the one born according to the Spirit.

In 1 Samuel chapter 1, rather than focusing upon the corridors of power, the first moves of God's great national and cosmic purposes in history appear in the unwitnessed intimacy of domestic and personal struggles, and in the persevering faith of an obscure person without political power or public influence. In this and a number of other stories like it, special attention is given to women. The struggle of childbearing and rearing is not consigned to a largely sentimental private realm, but is rendered integral to the great drama of salvation history.

The stories of the matriarchs of Israel and of women such as Ruth and Hannah are not romanticised. They are stories with much suffering and oppression and bravery and significance, but their stories are persevering and overcoming faith in dark places, of quiet and unsung victories whose fruit will one day erupt into public consciousness. Whereas most people would tell the story beginning at the point where the plant first broke the surface of the soil, God tells the story in a way that begins with the first germination of the seed.

These are stories of unrecognised turning points in the tide of history, not least because God is a God who remembers and who attends to the people that others may ignore. God answers the prayers provoked by the personal struggles of faithful women such as Hannah, in a manner that affects more public and radical social turnarounds through them. The many biblical accounts of women struggling to give birth and being answered by God cast childbearing as a profoundly active calling requiring stubborn and persevering faith, and the frequency and prominence of these accounts, their priority in books such as Genesis, Exodus, Ruth, 1 Samuel and Luke, also makes clear that despite the hiddenness of their labour, God regards and honours these women as prominent actors on the stage of his history, and never disconnects the dramatic sociopolitical harvest of his purpose from the unseen work in sowing and nurturing its seeds.

There is a great danger of neglecting or denying the significance of the obscure and personal struggles and victories of the faithful, those struggles and victories that do not assert themselves on the grand public stage of society and history. When our eyes scan for the signs of social and political reversal, we wouldn't think about looking at the agonised prayer of a barren woman like Hannah, like Eli the high priest who lacked spiritual perception, we can fail to recognise the importance of people and actions we've grown accustomed to ignoring perhaps. We can give people the false message that the

capacity to make great social and political difference is something that belongs to the rich and the prominent public figures alone.

We can deny the value, the necessity and the potential of quiet and private callings. We can push people into worldly moulds of influence. But yet we serve a God who attends to the weak and the vulnerable, who remembers the forgotten and the ignored, and who hears the silenced and the oppressed.

The greatest of social earthquakes confine their unseen epicenters in the most unexpected of places. A question to consider, if 1 Samuel chapter 1 gives us a window into the way that history really works, the way that things are actually turned around, in what ways might it inform and change the ways that we seek to make a difference in our society? 1 Corinthians chapter 10 Now these things took place as examples for us, that we may not desire evil as they did. Do not be idolaters as some of them were.

As it is written, the people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play. We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in a single day. We must not put Christ to the test as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents, nor grumble as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer.

Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore, let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man.

God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your ability. But with the temptation he will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it. Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry.

I speak as to sensible people. Judge for yourselves what I say. The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.

Consider the people of Israel. Are not those who eat the sacrifices participants in the altar? What do I imply then? That food offered to idols is anything? Or that an idol is anything? No, I imply that what pagans sacrifice they offer to demons, and not to God. I do not want you to be participants with demons.

You cannot drink the cup of the Lord and the cup of demons. You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons. Shall we provoke the Lord to jealousy? Are we stronger than he? All things are lawful, but not all things are helpful.

All things are lawful, but not all things build up. Let no one seek his own good, but the good of his neighbor. Eat whatever is sold in the meat market, without raising any

question on the ground of conscience.

For the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof. If one of the unbelievers invites you to dinner, and you are disposed to go, eat whatever is set before you, without raising any question on the ground of conscience. But if someone says to you, this has been offered in sacrifice, then do not eat it, for the sake of the one who informed you, and for the sake of conscience.

I do not mean your conscience, but his. For why should my liberty be determined by someone else's conscience? If I partake with thankfulness, why am I denounced because of that for which I give thanks? So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews, or to Greeks, or to the Church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

Although it is easy to miss when we read the chapters as detached units, 1 Corinthians chapter 10 continues the argument that has been going on since chapter 8 of Corinthians. This is all Paul's discussion of eating food sacrificed to idols, and that might surprise us when we read these verses ahead, but yet, as we look back, it should make more sense. It is in the background of the beginning of the chapter, and will come back to the foreground by the end.

Paul has just been talking about his own example, his example in earning his own keep, rather than placing a burden upon the Corinthians, as he was entitled to do. Now it seems Paul's argument takes a sharp turn, and goes into seemingly unrelated territory. He talks about the experience of Israel in the wilderness.

He begins by talking about all our fathers. The story of Israel is the story of the Church. He's writing this to Gentiles in Corinth, not just to Jews.

As the people of Christ, we are the children of Abraham. We're also, perhaps more surprisingly, people who stand in the same line of history as those who failed in the wilderness, as the unfaithful ones who perished and were judged. All of our fathers were under the cloud.

All of them passed through the sea. The cloud was God's visible presence with them, the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. The sea was the Red Sea through which they passed and were delivered from the Egyptians.

They were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. Baptism into Moses is a strange way of talking about the Red Sea, yet Paul seems to be using this in a rather strong sense. What could he mean by baptism into Moses? If we look at the beginning of the story of Exodus, Moses himself is drawn out of the water.

He's named for being drawn out of the water. He's drawn out from among the reeds, and

Israel is later drawn out from the reed sea. His deliverance is connected with his birth narrative, and Israel is brought out of the sea as part of its event of birth, as the firstborn of the Lord.

What happens first to Moses happens to his people. In the crossing of the Red Sea, the people are brought into Moses's experience, the experience that Moses had before them. Moses had previously gone to Mount Sinai, experienced and met with the Lord there.

And then he's going to lead the flock of the people to the mountain, and then he's going to meet with the Lord there again. They're going to enter into his experience. In the same way, when we are baptized, we are baptized into Christ.

His story becomes our story. We are baptized into his baptism in the Jordan, declared to be God's beloved sons and daughters, set apart for mission. We are baptized into the baptism of his death.

We are buried with him in order that we might be raised with him in the future. His spirit baptizes the church at Pentecost, so that as we are baptized with his spirit, we can share in the blessings of his ascension. In the crossing of the Red Sea, Israel also came under the leadership of Moses in a new way.

At the end of chapter 14 of Exodus, we're told that they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses. That was the consequence of the experience of the Red Sea. And Moses here is implicitly functioning as a Christ figure, as a type of Christ to come.

They were baptized into Moses. They also ate the same spiritual food, referring to the manna. In speaking of spiritual food, Paul might have in mind things such as Psalm 78 verses 23 to 25.

Yet he commanded the skies above and opened the doors of heaven, and he rained down on the manna to eat and gave them the grain of heaven. Man ate of the bread of the angels. He sent them food in abundance.

They also drank the same spiritual drink. Here he's referring to the water from the rock mentioned in Exodus chapter 17 and Numbers chapter 20. And the rock that followed them, he says, was Christ.

Now, this is a very strange claim to make. In this passage, Paul might be alluding to intertestamental traditions of reading the story of the Exodus and joining some of the dots and filling in some of the gaps. Yet when we look at the original text, there are legitimate connections to make.

The Lord is described as the rock. In the Song of Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 32, this language occurs on several occasions. In the original account of striking the rock, the Lord is associated with the rock in a very powerful way.

In Exodus chapter 17 verses 5 to 7. Putting these things together, it is not inappropriate to speak of the rock that followed them. In Numbers chapter 20, there is again the rock that is struck, albeit now in a different location. Rather than thinking of a literal rock that's moving around, we should think about the Lord as symbolically associated with the rock, communicating himself to his people at very specific rocks that all represent him as the one rock.

What is the point of all of this section? Paul is telling the story of Israel in a way that shows clear connections between their story and the story of the church at Corinth. The children of Israel had a baptism, the baptism of the crossing of the Red Sea. They had the presence of the Spirit in the cloud that accompanied and led them, and they had the supper in the spiritual food that they ate of the manna and the spiritual drink of the rock.

Paul is showing deep correspondences between events across history here, and he's making a strong claim. He's not merely drawing parallels in form between an Old Testament fleshly deliverance and a New Testament spiritual deliverance. He's making a far stronger claim than that.

He's arguing that the Old Testament deliverance was a spiritual deliverance. The problem, however, was that the people were fleshly. If the Corinthians think of themselves as spiritual people, they should learn a lesson or two from the Israelites, who had all these spiritual blessings and yet made nothing of them.

Now, from enumerating the spiritual blessings received by the Israelites, Paul turns to speak of the ways in which they failed. They sinned with the golden calf. The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play.

They sinned with Baal of Peor, and a very great number of them died. There were fiery serpents in Numbers chapter 21, and they put Christ to the test. This is perhaps one of the more arresting claims made here.

They weren't just testing the Lord, they were testing Christ himself. The Corinthians might think themselves spiritually above the Israelites, but yet the Old Testament Israelites had Christ in their midst too. Christ was the angel that led them on the way.

Paul also refers to the grumbling of the people. This could refer to a number of different events, such as the terrible litany of events of grumbling that we have in Numbers chapter 11 and following. Many of those who grumbled were destroyed by the destroyer.

The destroyer is referred to in Exodus chapter 12 verse 23 as the one who slew the firstborn of Israel in the Passover. And all of this is an example for us. The connections between the two stories, the fact that Christ was with them, the spirit was with them, they had all these spiritual blessings, sets them up as examples that we can learn from, in this case as cautionary examples.

There is a similarity between the Corinthians situation and that of the wilderness generation. They are both awaiting salvation. In the new covenant, Christ has brought his people out, but he has not yet brought them in.

Christ has inaugurated the last days, but the Corinthians must faithfully follow him into the promised land of the age to come. And they must beware of being presumptuous or overconfident. Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall.

The Corinthians are acting as if they reign like kings already, as if they had already attained all these blessings, as if they had already arrived at their destination. But they are compromising in exactly the same areas as the Israelites in the wilderness. They are compromising with sexual immorality, they are desiring evil, they are testing Christ by their disobedience, they are grumbling and engaging in dissension, and they are compromising with idolatry.

God can test his people, but when he does, he provides ways of escape and doesn't overwhelm them. Being tested by God does not pose the same sorts of dangers as testing God does. When God tests us, he does not test us to destroy us, but to prove us, to bring us into a greater maturity and into a fuller possession of his good gifts.

Having retold the story of Israel in the wilderness in this way, Paul brings his argument back to its primary point in verses 14 to 22. He presents three different types of meal in parallel. The Lord's Supper, Jewish sacrificial meals, and pagan sacrificial meals.

And all of these meals are about forging bonds of participation. The celebration of the Lord's Supper is a participation in the body and blood of Christ. It's a means by which we are made one with him and with each other in his body.

The celebration of the sacrificial meals of Israel was a way of participating in the sacrifice of the altar, and enjoying fellowship with God. Paul, while he does not believe that the idols are anything, the idols aren't real gods, there is only one true God, and all other so-called gods are either imaginary or created beings. However, even though the idols aren't real gods, this doesn't mean that there is nothing there at all.

Rather, the pagans are sacrificing to demons. They are participating in the table of the devil himself. Here Paul is alluding once again to the song of Moses in Deuteronomy chapter 32.

Here to verses 16 and 17. This clinches Paul's point. In referring to this, the story of Israel that he has just retold makes a lot more sense.

Israel had all these spiritual blessings, but they entered into participation with false gods. And suffered as a result. And the proud Corinthians, who despite all their boasts, have a lot more in common with the children of Israel than they might suppose, are in very great danger of doing the same thing.

He concludes this section by asking, are we stronger than he? You Corinthians, you think that you are strong. You think that you can eat of the food of idol feasts with impunity. But yet, are you stronger than God? The God who judged Israel for the very same thing? Seen in this light, the supposed strength of the Corinthians is ridiculous.

Why does Paul argue as he does? Why does he present this argument, which seems to be the clincher at this point, rather than leading with it in chapter 8? Partly because idol food could be encountered in a number of different contexts. Idol food could be encountered in the meat market, where you might eat food that had previously been part of a pagan ritual. Idol food could also be encountered in an actual pagan celebration or in a meal dedicated to some idol.

It seems as though the so-called strong Corinthians were involved in both practices. And Paul speaks in different ways to these different situations. In verses 23 until the first verse of chapter 11, Paul brings his argument into land.

He returns to the Corinthian statement, all things are lawful, that slogan which we previously saw in the second half of chapter 6. And he moves now from an emphasis upon our own rights to one of helping and building up our neighbor. All things may be lawful, but not all things are helpful. All things may be lawful, but not all things build up.

And he presents a principle by which we can enjoy freedom. Eat anything in the meat market without asking questions. As the psalm declares, the earth and everything in it belong to the Lord.

While purposefully participating in pagan meals is wrong, the idol is nothing. The food offered to the idol is still a blessing from the Lord's hand. As Paul argues elsewhere, nothing is unclean in itself.

Abstracted from the end of idol worship, the food of the marketplace is good. And there's a break with kosher laws here as well. Eating marketplace food and eating with gentiles, these were not things that the Jews would have done.

Paul, however, now makes clear that there are occasions when, although we might otherwise be at liberty to eat, we must refrain from eating for the sake of another person's conscience, presumably that of a weaker Christian. Rather than acting in a way that would lead the weaker Christian into sinning against his or her conscience, his or her moral confidence, the stronger Christian should refrain. They should give up their rights for that time, just as Christ gave up his rights and prerogatives for us.

Paul is not denying that the strong have freedom to eat idol meat in these settings, but he is arguing that there is a principle that is more important than that of freedom. They must refrain when the greater concern of the weaker brother's spiritual well-being comes into view. The emphasis in 1 Corinthians is on the responsibilities of the strong, who

seem to have been the more assertive party in Corinth.

In Romans chapter 14-15, both the weak and the strong are given responsibilities towards each other. The weak should not judge the strong in their exercise of their freedom. Paul's earlier treatment of the all things are lawful statement in chapter 6 ended with the positive injunction to glorify God in your body.

And here he concludes with the duty to do all to the glory of God. The principle is not all things are lawful, but do all to the glory of God. And this will be achieved by taking constant consideration for others and their well-being, prioritizing their salvation and their up-building over your own freedom.

A question to consider, how might Paul's use of the example of Israel in this chapter be instructive for us in our reading of the Old Testament?