

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Anne Miner-Pearson
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Trinity Episcopal Church, Excelsior

Good morning. I'm not sure we've met. I'm Hannah, one of Elkanah's wives. My story is in the Bible but not very many people have read it. Of course, if you live in my village, you certainly know my story. Everyone does. Is that always the way it is - everyone knows the gossip about people whose lives don't measure up to the standards out there? And in my lifetime, there was no more important standard than to bear children, especially male children. And I lived a lot of years unable to attain that status. Believe me, I heard about this failing constantly. And if it slipped my mind or heart for even a second, Elkanah's other wife, Peninnah, was always quick to mention it. Then, she'd rub it in by dramatically counting off all her sons and daughters — 1,2,3...as if I didn't know. "So it went on year by year...". And believe me, at my old age, that's a lot of years!

Elkanah tried to make it up to me. He loved me - just as I was, childless. I wasn't less in his eyes and he'd give me double portions. I knew he meant to be kind, but honestly, it only made it worse. The other wives resented me and shunned me more for that special treatment. And double portions didn't solve the problem anyway "because the Lord had closed my womb." Elkanah didn't get it. When you feel closed off from God and new life, changing things on the outside doesn't really work. Oh, maybe for a little bit, but attention to externals can't create the path to God, as tempting as they might be.

I knew I had to find my own path to God. It couldn't come from male authorities or accepting privileges not given to others. I had to find my own path. This inner wisdom drew me to seek God. This inner sense of truth give me the courage and patience to keep searching.

Of course, you need to understand that, for me, in my life, family and village, that path always leads to the temple of the Lord. I went often. Usually, that's where I felt safe to cry. After enough times crying there in the temple, it occurred to me that being deeply honest with God was part of finding my own path. It wasn't being stuffed with more food or being told I'm okay by others which would help me find my path. No, the path to experiencing God is the same as the path experiencing myself. People around me believed that God had closed my womb because I hadn't borne children. But that was only true by outward appearances, judging me by what could be seen by only one standard. There was more going on inside me.

So, all the times I kept opening myself to God, seeking time and space to be quiet and still the voices in my head, a path to God was being created. Believe me, it didn't usually feel like it! Most of the times, I felt as dried up and barren as my womb. But, something in me stayed the course. I kept "praying silently; only my lips moved, but my voice wasn't heard." Somehow, I believed that a change was happening where all change really happens: inside. Somehow, I believed that God's new life happens inside first and that the new life God gives is more than about just a baby.

Now, you won't know my whole story until I tell you about a particular encounter I had in the temple of the Lord - the time Eli and I talked. Eli was the priest on duty that day and he noticed me. Honestly, I wasn't surprised I caught his eye. I already knew that praying to God without speaking, resting quietly

and settling into silence were not the usual ways people in the temple prayed. I knew I looked a little odd. Even as a woman, I knew I was outside the established rituals. I knew how tempting it was to judge one's relationship with God on what could be seen and measured, counted. I knew that doing prayer differently could be misunderstood, labeled as, like, well, like being drunk.

Still, I decided to trust that there was an inner space in me, preparing for God's new life. So, I kept showing up in the silence, praying no words. I just kept letting go and being open. And in time, over time, something shifted. The Lord "remembered me. In due time, I conceived and bore a son. I named him Samuel, for I said, "I have asked him of the Lord."

So, finally, in my old age, I have my son. Of course, you can imagine Elkanah's and my joy. The empty, barren space has been filled with new life. Yet, through the suffering and shunning, I have gained more than a son. I have found a path to God, my own path. This path will always belong to me long after Samuel is grown and on his own path with God.

Oh, my goodness. I've gone on too long with my story and I hear Samuel crying to be nursed. Sorry, I don't have time to hear the story of your path to God, your times in silence and honest openness. And I didn't even learn your name, but I know you'll remember mine. I'm Hannah and that's the root of the name "Anne". I know you know that name and even someone with that name who's close to Jesus..... You know, she's Anne, Jesus' grandmother and mother of Mary. Amen.