

I Sam 1:4-20

I Sam 2:1-10

Mark 13:1-8

November 11, 2009

### The Heart's Desire

Have you ever wanted something so badly that you'd give away the things you love most in the world if you could only have it? I don't mean a new pair of shoes or your first car. I mean something life changing; maybe even life giving—say like getting into Duke and then having the money to come here, one way or another. Or maybe Duke wasn't your first choice and you had to settle for us. If so, I hope it's turning out OK and you're learning you can live without your heart's desire.

Lots of people live without their heart's desire. Hannah, the mother of Samuel, could not. She wanted a child so badly that she promised God if she could just have a baby, she wouldn't keep him. Think about the logic of that for just a minute.

- I want to go to Duke so badly that if I get in, I promise I won't go.
- I want a car so badly that if I get one, I promise I won't drive it.
- I want to fall in love so much that if I meet the love of my life, I promise I won't marry him.

This logic doesn't make sense, at least it doesn't make sense to those of us who are used to operating in a world where we get what we deserve and we earn for what we want. When we get what we deserve and earn, we assume it's ours to use however we want to use it. Hannah knew that all the really best things in life are not what we deserve or earn, but are the gifts that come to us, the things that we have no right to demand. If you are going to demand one of those things then you also have to be prepared to let it go.

Hannah wants a baby, particularly a boy for reasons that I can get into Thursday night at women's small group. For our purposes today, it's enough to know that boys inherit everything and girls have to marry somebody who did. So, Hannah's not sexist for wanting a boy; she's practical. Boys can take care of their mothers in their old age because the boys have everything.

Only Hannah gives all that away because she promises that her boy will spend his life taking care of God. "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 your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death."

Not only does she determine Samuel's vocation; she also determines his social life. To set him as a nazirite is not simply to say, "I'll make sure he goes to Divinity School; it is to say, as Hannah does, "He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head." Samson was a nazirite, not to be confused with a Nazarene—someone from Nazareth. Jesus was from Nazareth; he was a Nazarene. A nazirite has nothing to do with where you're from. It has to do with how you live. If you want to know all about a nazirite, it's in Ch. 6, Book of Numbers. For my purposes today, you need to know a nazirite lives as one completely devoted to the Lord, consecrated and set apart for service. The pledge not to get a haircut makes the person easy to spot. We can look across and the crowd and know: there's a nazirite. The pledge not to consume alcohol symbolizes a desire to focus completely on God. It's hard to focus on anything when you're drunk and it can be hard to concentrate fully after a couple of beers, depending on your tolerance level. A nazirite doesn't have to worry about his tolerance level because he'll never find himself in a compromised position.

Imagine if your mother had decided all those things for you before you were even conceived. It really would take a monumental adjustment in how we think about our lives, how we think about our right to make the decisions we want to make. We would need to see life itself as a gift and understand that all of our decisions flow from complete dependence on God, not on what we deserve and earn.

Hannah realized her complete dependence on God and she embodied it completely. She embodied it in the way she prayed—so much so that Eli, the local priest, thought she was drunk. This is not a person who comes to God with a tame petition—help us to be more loving, la-de-da; or a traditional refrain—give us this day our daily bread, la-de-da. No, this woman is consumed by her prayer, she embodies her prayer because the prayer takes over her body. I've only prayed like that once in my life and I got to tell you, I hope I never do again.

Eli thinks she is drunk; she explains herself to him; and he is so moved by what he has seen that he can say to her, "Go in peace; the God of Israel grant the petition that you have made." Eli doesn't grant the petition, but Eli knows God well enough to know that God will do it. Eli is right.

Because God grants her petition, she now embodies her dependence on God, literally, in her body. She carries and births the baby who will usher in a monarchy for Israel. Baby Samuel, who grew up not with his mother by his side, but serving in the temple "in the presence of the lord." Nazirite Samuel, priest, prophet, judge of all Israel, anoints the first king, King Saul, and the greatest king, King David.

Hannah's dependence on God, first embodied in her prayer, then in her body, is now embodied in the life of her heart's desire. Samuel is Hannah's heart's desire. That thing in life that we have no right to demand. The gift that when given to us we can only offer back to God. That kind of offer to God never represents loss or sacrifice—what we give up—because God already embodies for us all that we have and all that we are. Thanks be to God. Amen.