



## Reading Hannah: Faithfulness Among Fear

*TEXT*  
*1 Samuel 1:1–18*

June 30, 2019 — Sermon by Rev. Sally Wright

Scripture introduces us today to Hannah. The primary things we know about her are — she is married — and she is childless. If hearing she is childless doesn't make you shudder, it should. In Hannah's own time and in her cultural context, childlessness indicates a life fraught with insecurity. Hannah's childlessness is not simply that she has chosen to live without children.

Hannah most likely outlives her husband, and the responsibility of caring for Hannah falls to the oldest son. Without a son, Hannah has no one to support her, and her life would end in extreme poverty. Being married and having a son are the only ways Hannah ensures life filled with care and security.

It might be hard for our modern ears to fully comprehend Hannah's social and cultural context. It might be difficult for us to grasp the depth of Hannah's desperation. As you know, in our society with modern health insurance (for some), Medicare and Social Security, we have built a level of security that would be unattainable to our Biblical Hannah. In addition, we have a society that allows women and men to choose if they want chil-

dren or not through the invention of birth control, family planning and reproductive assistance.

In today's world, having children may help us feel more emotionally, spiritually, biologically complete/secure. We do not depend on children physically, but some desire and struggle to achieve having children. And, we have many women and men who intimately understand the struggles of Hannah and her husband — the struggles to conceive and bear children.

Hannah not only wanted a future filled with security, she also wanted to feel a tiny hand holding hers. She wanted to feel the joy of feeling tiny human life growing inside her womb. Hannah's need to have children didn't only represent her lack of place in her society. Hannah felt what some people feel — the need to reproduce and to bear children. And she can't. The text tells us over many years her body will not cooperate with her desires to conceive and bear a child. The story of Hannah so clearly illustrates infertility struggle.

Our Biblical narrative is full of stories of infertility — one commenter even suggests the story of God's people is built on the story of infertility. She suggests from the stories of Abraham

and Sarah, Rebekah, Rachel and Hannah — and even Elizabeth in the gospel of Luke. Although this might be a bit too narrow a reading, it is one that says this topic is important to the people of God. It supports the idea that if the predominately male writers of the Bible included many stories and references to infertility in the Bible, perhaps infertility is a topic with which God is deeply concerned. And we, too, need to pay attention. One commenter suggests that the inclusion of such a detailed account of Hannah's infertility journey suggests that fertility and childbirth are of equal importance to God. They are issues that are worthy, deeply worthy of God's attention.

For some of you, simply hearing the term "infertility" in the pulpit will cause you to pause. For others of you, you may have never even heard the term "infertility." To get us all on the same page, I will define infertility as the desire for a person to attempt to conceive and bear a child over at least a year without success. Some of you might be wondering what the prevalence of infertility is — 13 percent. Look around the room. The numbers tell us about one in every 10 couples have experienced or are currently experiencing infertility.

As we read about Biblical Hannah, it can be easy to see how infertility was an issue falling solely on women's shoulders. Hannah bears the burden of being unable to get pregnant. What modern science tells us today is that infertility is about a third due to issues with the woman, a third about issues with the man, and a third somewhere else. As much as this story is about a female, Hannah, and as much as the larger infertility conversation focuses on women, the infertility journey is a journey of all of us.

What I am certain of is that you know Hannah — even if you do not know that you know Hannah. There are Hannahs living life while bearing the sadness of our Biblical Hannah. There are Hannahs who have begged God, pleaded with God to give them a child, and the answer is no. There are Hannahs whose longing is met with the absence of the cries of a baby.

I have been a modern Hannah. I have begged God, pleaded with my body and sought counsel with incredible doctors for almost two years trying to get pregnant. After each cycle that the test came up negative, I questioned: What is wrong with my body? Why is God not giving me life? What is my purpose if not to bear children? All I could feel was this deep sadness that was placed like a pall over my world. And only five days after a failed test, we were back at it, full of hope, full of promise, full of asking God to grant life within me. Each time we went in for another round with the fertility medical

team, I wondered is this time going to be it? And at the same time, I would wonder: I wonder if God was going to grant me this prayer. I know and have walked with countless women and men who have longed to be with child and yet have found themselves in a seemingly endless cycle of attempting to create life.

What strikes me about our Biblical Hannah is that she continually goes to God about her wanting a son. Over the course of years, the text tells us, in the midst of severe ridicule, Hannah goes to the temple and prays. This story shows us that in the midst of her deep discontentment, she goes to the temple, she prays, she cries to God, she even makes a deal with God. Hannah's story shows us that her infertility journey is not separate from her faith journey.

She keeps asking, she keeps praying, she keeps going to temple — year after year after year. If our Biblical Hannah lived today, she would be consulting doctors, learning to give herself shots and be very concerned with hormone levels in her urine. Just as Hannah is weeping on the temple floor, so Hannah would be weeping on doctors' tables.

I wonder, though, if we as church, as a faith community, do not know how to walk with all the Hannahs out there. How do we pray with those who are discovering it can be hard to get pregnant? How do we pray with those who are in the midst of the endless cycles? How do we keep praying with those who have had to say, "We have tried and God has told us no?"

One Christmas Eve, in the midst of my fertility treatments, I sat in church. I had a miscarriage about three months earlier. I watched families gather in their Christmas Eve attire. I heard the familiar story about baby Jesus. I sang familiar Christmas carols — all with words talking about baby Jesus. These words carried the anticipation of a baby coupled with the sadness that I would not get to experience that. Perhaps it was my own insecurity, perhaps it was my fear, perhaps it was the tension of talking about infertility during the season celebrating Mary's baby. But what I wanted was to feel like I belonged in the conversations the moms were having. Yet, I felt so far from them.

In order to be super clear, I am going to tell you what I am not saying. I am not saying that coming to church and praying will result in a baby or will result in an end to your struggle. God is not Santa Claus. I am not saying that a baby will complete your life or fill up your emptiness. I am not even saying that there is inherent wholeness in having children. I am not saying that prayer is more important than going to doctors. I am saying that the topic of having children, not having children, when to have children and ability to have children is one that is deeply tied up in our own faith journey.

Hannah's faithfulness is really an example to which I look — because if the truth be known, after two years of trying to conceive, I was done. I was on my last cycle. I do not think I could have tried for years and

years to get pregnant. In many ways, Hannah shows us an audacious faith. She knows that she is asking God to grant her a child. And she persistently prays this to God. God hears Hannah's prayers. God receives all the prayers that Hannah prays, even those prayers perceived as drunken ones. God takes that prayer and answers it — not just with a child, but with Samuel, who will go on to anoint kings of Israel. Hannah did not know she was praying to be part of God's salvation history. For her, she simply wants God's no to turn into a yes.

The fertility and infertility journey is worthy of our attention too. With so many Hannahs among us, can we open our eyes? Can we see the Hannahs, embrace them, walk with them, pray with them?

Guide of what not to do: Guide towards understanding of how to support. Open this conversation to those experiencing it to share it with those wanting to support you. Elkanah wonders why he is not enough of a partner to satisfy her need to bear a child. Eli mistook Hannah's prayers for her being drunk. Peninnah would provoke Hannah severely, irritate her.

In the end, Hannah did become pregnant with Samuel, who leads us on the continued path of God's covenant with the Israelite people. In the end, I became pregnant with Sarah and Lucas, but not every infertility journey ends with a child.

Each of us has struggles. We all have places where we desperately want God to show up and

to turn a no into a yes. So where are those places for you? Where do you need some of Hannah's audacious faith? We are a people of audacious faith. We believe in a God who can give the barren woman a child, a God who can breathe life into dry bones and a God who can roll the stone away.

We pray all of this in the name of the God who grants us wholeness; grants us hope; grants us peace. Amen.

**This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.**

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermon-sermon-archives.html>.