

Val Fisk, 11/18/2018

Manuscript

I am a MASSIVE Harry Potter fan. Absolutely nuts for it. Seriously, I have a Harry Potter themed dream-catcher tattooed on this arm. My cats are named Neville and Minerva after two of the bravest characters in the series. But when I was a kid, I wasn't allowed to read the books at first, because I attended this super conservative Christian school where all the other parents had convinced my mother that Halloween was evil and Harry Potter was about worshipping Satan and if I participated in either one, I would end up being "left behind" and then burn up in the fires that would consume earth.

The winter of 2001, when I was 11, I went away for a weekend Girl Scout trip. Me, about 4 or 5 other girls my age, and a couple of volunteer leaders drove from rural Illinois to the great metropolis of Indianapolis, Indiana. I have no idea what we were there for, can't remember a single detail about the event we attended, but I do very distinctly remember that on our first evening there, us girls went into a little gift shop with a book section, and there in that gift shop, I used my own money to purchase the first two Harry Potter paperbacks.

In this act of rebellion and independence, which probably should have been a signal to my mother about how the rest of my teenage years were going to go, but in this single act of rebellion, I found the greatest literary love of my life. The world that J. K. Rowling created has always captivated me in my deepest heart. I don't think I felt so captured and enthralled by anything else in my life until after I experienced my call to ministry and started studying the Old Testament.

Now, as an adult, I can recognize why it is that I fell so deeply in love with the Wizarding World. I grew up with a semi-absent father, and there was a lot of abuse in my home. I felt a deep kinship with Harry because of that. As a child, when I didn't have any way to express that pain myself, the words of Harry's story did it for me. That and I'm a great big nerd like Hermione.

In chapter 12 of the Philosopher's Stone, the first book, Harry wakes up on Christmas morning to find his deceased father's invisibility cloak has been gifted back to him. So on Christmas night, Harry, in his own first major act of rebellion, goes out wandering the castle. He stumbles across the Mirror of Erised, an enchanted mirror that according to Professor Dumbledore, shows the "deepest, most desperate desire of our hearts." Because Harry hopes for family, he sees himself in the mirror, surrounded by his deceased parents and grandparents and all his magical relatives. When he brings his friend Ron to see the mirror, Ron sees himself as the most celebrated of his brothers, surpassing the success of the five elder Weasley sons.

What do you hope for? If you stood in front of the Mirror of Erised, what is it that the mirror would show you? What is it that you desire that sits inside of you, buried deep down within your soul, leaving its imprint on everything you touch?

At the beginning of First Samuel, we meet Hannah, and the deepest desire of her heart is for a child. If Hannah stood to look into the Mirror of Erised, she would see herself holding a baby. I have to take this moment to acknowledge that I do not share Hannah's desire. In this present age and in our culture, motherhood is optional, and at this point in my life, I've chosen the "no kids" option. But Hannah didn't have that luxury. Hannah's whole existence as a woman in ancient Israel was dependent upon her being able to bear children. In most ancient Near Eastern law codes, it is legal to divorce your wife after ten years if she does not bear you a child, or to take a second or a third wife if your first wife does not bear a child for you after just a couple years.

Hannah wanted a child so badly, and her pain and her grief was increased by the fact that her husband did take on a second wife, and that second wife fulfilled her expected role by having sons and daughters. And her grief was increased even more by the insensitive words of her husband – "Am I not more to you than ten sons?" The words he says seem like they were meant to be generous and an attempt at comforting Hannah, but really all they manage to do is wound her more deeply by proving that he can only see himself. He cannot relate to Hannah's pain, because he has children.

But friends, I see hope all over this passage, and not just in Hannah's hope for a child. About two weeks ago, I had to preach a sermon in one of my classes at Truett, and in the weeks leading up to that, I chose Luke 1:5-25 as my text for class, the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth when they find out they will be the parents of John the Baptizer. Earlier this morning we heard the words of Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2. Many scholars will point to Hannah's song in 1 Samuel 2 and connect it to Mary's Magnificat in Luke 1, but reading these two passages together over the last several weeks, I see so many connections between the life of Elizabeth and the life of Hannah. They're both married to righteous men. They follow the customs of sacrifice and worship. And they're both barren.

And friends, *there is the hope*. When the Bible tells us that a woman is barren, especially if that woman happens to be old and barren, God is basically turning to the angels to say, "Hold my beer, watch this." I mean seriously, when the Bible tells us that a woman is barren, that's a sign that it is time to knit a blankie!

COUNT TO SEVEN

I want to be sensitive to the fact that there are probably people among us today who have dealt with or are currently dealing with the pain of infertility. Please hear me say this: I know that hearing this story may be painful for you, and if it is, I am so sorry. And you are so loved. But this is the most common sign of fulfillment that God uses to prove that God keeps promises, and I think that is because this is a pain like no other.

Throughout the work of the prophets, God uses the images of marriage and motherhood to describe the relationship between God and God's people. There is a sacred fidelity found in the covenant of marriage, and a sacred love found in the love of a mother for her child, whether biological, adopted, or short term foster placement. By fulfilling the hope that Hannah held to

receive a child, God shows us a sacred example of the love that She holds for each individual person; the love of our Eternal Mother, as well as the love that She holds for the whole church as the bride of Christ.

COUNT TO SEVEN

I would like to look into the Mirror of Erised and see what it reflects back to me. Because I'm not certain what the deepest desire of my heart is right now. Maybe it will show me standing in an office surrounded by books and college students, gainfully employed in a church and doing good ministry with students. I've been working hard at a journey of physical fitness over the last two years, so maybe the mirror would show me doing pull-ups like it's nothing. But I'm also a afraid of what the mirror will show me, because I'm not certain it would reflect a deep desire for God and for the fulfillment that only God gives in my life.

Hannah took the deep desire of her heart and turned herself and her desire over to God. Hannah knew what she was hoping for, and as a servant of the Eternal God, she approached the tabernacle and prayed with such fervor that the priest sitting nearby thought she was drunk.

I love the word "pray" in Hebrew. The verb for praying is always written in a reflexive voice, meaning that when verse 10 says that Hannah prayed to the Lord, it literally means "she prayed herself to the Lord." When Hannah came to the Tabernacle to pray for God's favor and for fulfillment of her hope for a child, Hannah literally presented her whole self to God in prayer. Nothing was held back.

To be quite honest, I've struggled to pray for the past few months. I had a couple really hard experiences right at the end of the summer - my grandmother died, and then right after that a really important friendship ended in a really painful way. My anxiety and mental health have not been doing well over the last couple months. I've struggled to continue working at my best level in classes and in my jobs.

So I finally came to this point a few weeks ago when I stopped trying to force my own words for prayer. I realized that the words just weren't coming. I needed to pray my whole self to God, but I needed someone else to give me the words to do so. I spoke to my friend Jamie and he recommended I try reading *A Diary of Private Prayer* by John Baillie. The third evening prayer in the book opens with these words:

"O Lord, you are most wise, most great, and most holy. In wisdom and power and tender mercy you created me in your own image. You have given me this life, you have given me all I have, and you know where and how I live. You have surrounded me with gracious gifts and situations. You have written your law within my heart. And in my heart's most secret chamber, you are waiting to meet and speak with me, freely offering your fellowship in spite of all I have done wrong. Help me to take this open road to peace of mind."

COUNT TO SEVEN

I have to wonder, if after coming to the tabernacle with her husband for so many years, if after spending so many nights begging God for fulfillment, whether Hannah was praying herself to God using her own words, or if she was reciting words she had been taught as a child or taught during worship. Perhaps she was repeating the words of Psalm 16: "Protect me, O God, for in you I take refuge. I say to the Lord, "You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you." Or maybe the words of Psalm 79: "Help me, O God of my salvation, for the glory of your name. Deliver me, and forgive my sins for your name's sake."

Or maybe she repeated those darkest words of despair found in Psalm 88: "You have caused my companions to shun me; you have made me a thing of horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape; my eye grows dim through sorrow. Every day I call on you, O Lord, I spread out my hands to you. O Lord, why do you cast me off? Why do you hide your face from me?"

See, I don't think that the words we pray matter quite so much as the fact that we are praying. Hannah's prayer here is for a child, but more than that, Hannah's prayer is for God to see her, to understand her misery, to fulfill her hopes and fill her heart with something beautiful.

No matter what we are hoping for, God desires that we bring our hope to God in prayer. Sometimes your fulfillment will be found in the act of prayer, because the act of prayer will draw your heart closer to God. Sometimes the act of prayer will fill you with the patience needed to wait for an answer.

In Hannah's case, fulfillment did come. She received a son, she named him Samuel, and she kept her word to return him back to the life-long service of God. And by receiving her fulfillment and immediately turning him back over to God's service, Hannah was even more blessed. Chapter 2 verse 21 tells us that Hannah received another three sons and two daughters. Hannah's hope and her devotion to the service of God fulfilled her in ways that I am sure she never expected. Hannah waited and waited, and she received a gift in return.

I don't want to push us ahead in the church calendar too quickly, but it is hard to think of Hannah waiting for fulfillment without thinking also of the season of advent, in which we as a church wait in anticipation of the arrival of the infant Christ at Christmas. It's a kind of divine dress rehearsal or miniaturized season of anticipation that points toward the great season of waiting for Christ's return to the world. When I read the story of Hannah and recognize that her fulfillment was greater and more beautiful than she imagined, I wonder at the fact that God's fulfillment for us at the return of Christ will be greater and more beautiful than we imagine. But I also remember that God's fulfillment in my life has already been greater and more beautiful than I could imagine, because when I rehearse the story of Christ's coming, I am reminded that Christ has indeed come, and Christ has fulfilled my deepest need by offering me salvation and redemption and justice in this life. When we as the church participate in the waiting, we remember what has already been fulfilled.

COUNT TO SEVEN.

So, what is it that you hope for? How is it that you posture yourself during your period of waiting? Are you finding ways to pray your whole self to God, laying out your pain and longing and desires before God, opening up the deepest chambers of your soul for God to examine?

As we look toward the rehearsal of waiting in Advent, I would like to challenge all of us, myself included, to examine the ways in which we wait. Is our anticipation *holy*? Is our anticipation *pure*? And do our hopes align with what God has for us as a part of God's kingdom on earth? When you look at the things you desire, would receiving fulfillment of that desire teach you something about how God loves you?

Brothers and sisters and non-cis siblings, my prayer for us today is that we learn to be like Hannah, allowing the deep fulfillment of our deep hopes to draw us closer to God, teaching us how wide and long and high the love of Christ is for us all, and reminding us that fulfillment beyond our wildest dreams has already come.

Amen.

BENEDICTION

May the hope of God fill you. May the peace of Christ sustain you while you wait for fulfillment. May you find companions to act as mirrors, showing you what it is you really hope for. May you learn to pray your whole self to God. And as you rehearse the waiting, I pray that you are able to love God, to embrace beauty, and to live life to the fullest. Amen.