

1 Samuel 2:1-10  
When Mama Prayed  
Rev. Jonathan Cornell  
4-24-16

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This morning, we're beginning a new series of sermons I've entitled "Mind, Body, and Soul: The Earthy and Everyday Faith of David." Throughout these summer months, we are going to be looking each week at the stories of one of the most beloved people of the Christian family. In fact, the only person who receives more attention in all of the Scriptures than Jesus is the one in whose footsteps Jesus followed: King David.

Last week, I began with a question: does anyone here have a past? The answer, all of us. What binds us to each other, in this life, is the fact that we all have checkered, complicated pasts. Eugene Peterson writes: Life isn't an accumulation of abstractions such as love and truth, sin and salvation, atonement and holiness; life is the realization of details that all connect organically, personally, specifically. God reveals himself to us not in a metaphysical formulation or a cosmic firework display but in the stories we tell our children and our friends who we are and what it means to be human.

And of all the humans depicted in the Old Testament narratives, there's perhaps none *humaner* than David. His experiences, his gifts, his deep flaws, his devotion, are what make him so relatable to us.

So each week as we look at the stories of this earthy and everyday hero of our faith, we're going to see our stories entwined in his. And my prayer is that David would be a lens through which we all can glean strength, encouragement, and wisdom.

But like any man or woman, David is not an island. His story begins before he is anointed to be King over Israel. David's story begins with a people who struggle with what it means to belong to God. His story begins in a time when all they wanted was to be like everyone else. His story begins like many others: with a hope that seemed like a longshot, a woman who wanted nothing more than to be a mom.

But before I begin, let's join our hearts together in prayer. Heavenly Father, as we begin this series together, looking at the life of David, I pray that each person here would be able to place themselves in his story, and in so doing experience the ceaseless love and mercy of God—the one who never lets us go and simply wants us to rest in the shelter of his wing. So Lord, be our teacher, and may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer.

### **One Courageous Woman**

The book of First Samuel opens with an unforgettable story. There is a man from the Hill Country of Ephraim named Elkannah who had two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. Peninnah was the mother of many children, while Hannah had none.

Polygamy was common in this day, especially in the case of a woman unable to bear children, since she had very little power and no one to take care of her without a husband or male son.

Now the Bible says that Peninnah taunted Hannah for her inability to conceive. For those who struggle with childlessness, we know how cutting words and careless actions can be. But Hannah is a beacon of strength. The Bible says that Elkannah loved Hannah with a special love. Year after year, he gave her a double portion of offerings every time the family traveled to the temple to worship God.

Hannah prayed and worshipped and prayed and worshipped and prayed and worshipped, pleading with God for a son. Few in this world understand the power of persistent prayer better than a woman who prays for her family. Country music singer Randy Travis has a song called “When Mama Prayed” about a wayward son who comes home to hear his mama praying. As he listened, he realized that his days of carousing were over, because mama prayed. Women, when you pray, God gives special attention.

Now poor Elkannah, he doesn’t know how to comfort his wife. He even tries to console his wife by saying, “There, there, honey, at least you’ve got me. Aren’t I better than ten sons?” Guys, do you see how feeble our efforts can be?

But then in the midst of her grief, where she could have chosen resentment or anger, Hannah does the most remarkable thing. In faith, Hannah promises her first-born back to God, to live a life of service, as her act of bold and fearless worship: I will worship you in my childlessness as much as in the bearing of children. The integrity and virtue of Hannah comes shining through when she is in her most difficult moment says, “If you will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a Nazirite,” I will give him back to you.

Now, while she is silently praying, Hannah is confronted by Eli the priest, who actually thinks Hannah is drunk. So she tells him everything. Seeing her persistence in faith he recognizes that God is going to reward her commitment of faith and give her a son. Soon enough, the miraculous happens, and she names him Samuel, because as it says, “**for this child I prayed,**” and Yahweh listened.

### **Courage and Fear Paradoxical Friends**

Women, you know better than any the fact that courage comes by facing fear and uncertainty head on. Courage and fear often go side by side, anxiety and excitement are two sides of the same coin. God’s people are time and again led into new horizons by being asked by God to simply go, and only then is courage supplied. We have a saying in our house that goes like this, “Do it afraid.” We admire Hannah for the way that her fear and sadness leads to courage. Hannah doubles down on faith.

The 19th century author George MacDonald wrote a wonderful little story called the “Princess and the Goblin.” In it, the young princess called Irene lives not with her father, the king, in a castle, but in a large house that sits on a mountain side. Beneath the house live a race of scary Goblins. In the top floor of the house lives Princess Irene’s great-

grandmother, whom only she can see and no others. Grandmother begins to teach Irene about courage and fear.

“I don’t think you are ever afraid,” exclaims Irene one day. “Not for long, at least, my child. Perhaps by the time I am two-thousand years of age, I shall never be afraid of anything.” But the difference that Irene sees in her grandmother is that while she does have moments of fear for others, she no longer fears for herself. Did any of you have a mom like this, one who never gave a care for herself, but as it seemed, cared only for the needs of her family? This is a precious gift.

One day, Irene has to do something very courageous. She has to rescue her friend Curdie, who has been captured by the Goblins who live in the mountain. Before she sets out to find him, she remembers the instructions given by grandma. If you’re ever in danger, take off your ring and put it under your pillow, and with that same hand feel for the gossamer thread and follow wherever it leads.

What Irene didn’t expect was that following the thread would lead her straight into the mountain, along a dark and narrow path toward the Goblins’ hall where Curdie was held. Down the passage she walked, and darker the way became, but she remembered what her grandmother told her, “Never doubt the thread.” Irene overcame her fear with courage by remembering and trusting what her grandmother told her.

The fear of not being able to have a child was discouraging to Hannah, but it was her fear of God—not a hopeless or disparaging fear, but a holy reverence for Go—that was to change her. When Hannah approached God, as the only one who could change her situation, she learned that, above all else, God loves Hannah. It was her reverence and awe for God that gave way to unflinching trust. First John 4:18 puts it so perfectly when it says: **There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.**

The courage of Hannah is the willingness to put on a brave face and do it afraid, follow the thread of faith, even when the way is dark. But as it so often happens, when we trust God with everything we have, God returns in kind with everything he’s got. And blessings come down upon us from places we never expected. Even though Hannah gave her precious and beloved son to God, God wasn’t through with her yet.

Jason and Cassie have a 6-year-old son named Avram who was born with swelling in the brain and regular seizures that required a shunt to be inserted in the back of his head. For the first 2 years of his life, he spent as much time in the hospital as he did at home with his family. To both of his parents Cassie and Jason, Avram’s was a life of very special significance but a life that was also fragile—requiring extra special care.

When Avram began school, attending a program in Fort Wayne designed to work specifically with his needs, part of that new beginning meant taking his first ride on the school bus. This was especially difficult, not for him, but for Cassie. For the first time, mama wasn’t sitting by his side. I asked Cassie once about what God was teaching her. She said:

“God showed me something very early on his life that has helped me through a lot of the tough situations: having to hand him over at 4 days old to be kept in the NICU while I went home, handing him over for brain surgery at 10 days old, having people come in to our home every week to work with him, and now sending him off to school. I felt a lot like Moses’ or Samuel’s mom. As much as I want to take care of and protect and raise Avram on my own, I don't have everything I need to do it. I have to send him down the river, trusting that the Lord will guide the currents, that He will put the right people on the banks of the river to shape and encourage and challenge Avram. If I would keep him just here with me, all the time, and never let anyone else in, he may always be safe but he will never be all that he could be. It's definitely hard to send him to school, with school shootings, but I have to choose courage and faith over fear, I have to believe that my God is the One who goes before Avram and prepares a way for him.

I feel like I've fought the Lord on literally every decision, every situation that called for me to "let go" in Avram's life: therapy, leg braces, preschool, the school bus. And every time, as I've just relented to trust that the Lord is guiding the currents, it has been nothing but blessing and growth in Avram's life.

I still tear up every time he walks in to school without turning back to look for me, and I pause every time I'm about to pull out of the school parking lot. But in letting go of Moses or letting go of Samuel, their moms had him returned to her. I have to choose to believe that as I let Avram go to be challenged and strengthened, he is being returned to me to love even more. I can have the time at home with him to just love on him. I don't have the pressure of trying to make him do his exercises all day or to stress over if I'm not teaching him enough: I know he's getting challenged and taught at school, so I just get to be his mom for the first time: not his physical therapist, not his doctor. It's been a gift back to me.”

Moms, you, above all others, remind us that sending that child off to the temple, or down the stream, or off on a school bus takes great courage. But there is none who knows more fully the joy of welcoming that child back or seeing him or her flourish in life than you. The story of Hannah reminds us that it is God who holds the power over her situation, but it is Hannah who gets to experience the joy of seeing her son flourish.

The wonderful irony of the story of Hannah: in giving the most precious thing she had to God, came the reward of five other children from her womb. Reminds me of another parent who had a child, a hoped for, sought after, precious child. And he, like Hannah, offered that child, so that in return whole world of children might come to know the gift of everlasting life.

I know it's not Mother's Day, but this morning, women, we remember your faith, all the sacrifices you make, all the trips to the grocery store, the meals provided, taxi service to school or to practice, piano lessons and PTA meetings, baby showers and sleepless nights stayed in prayer for those you love. God works through you.

You know the picture of Atlas holding up the world on bended knee? I think they got that one wrong. Verse 8 makes me believe that it's you moms whom God calls “**the pillars of**

**the earth...and on them he has set the world.”** For the many ways that you hold up this church and your families with your love, remember what’s really happening is you’re living into your true identity as daughter of the Almighty King of Heaven, Jesus Christ our Lord.