

Series: Renewing Strength**Message: When Life Disappoints Us – 1 Samuel 1:12-18****By Pastor James Lambert****September 1, 2019**

Good morning Asbury United Methodist Church.

[I'm glad I get to preach to you all here at the 8:00 first, cause this is my first sermon here at Asbury, and that other room is really, really big.]

For the past several weeks we've been in a series called Renewing Strength; we've been looking at some of those times in life when our strength runs low. When life distresses us, depresses us, shames us, and makes us anxious. The common theme I've heard in each of these messages has been that "those who wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength." (Is. 40:3) There is a Source that we can go to when we find ourselves needing to be refilled. And that source is the Creator of the universe, whom we can know personally through a relationship with Jesus Christ.

Well today we are going to sort of follow that progression from distressed to depressed to ashamed to anxious... today we're asking how we can renew our strength when we are thoroughly disappointed. What do we do when life disappoints us? What do you do when you get to that place and you have to admit – this life is not what I hoped it was going to be. [We might say] "What's the deal, God? Did I do something wrong? Have I heard you wrong somewhere? Or have You just not come through like You are supposed to?"

Most of us can probably think of times in life we have been deeply disappointed, when a situation which began with great promise left us feeling empty. Try and think back: can you remember a romantic relationship that didn't work out? Or have you had a marriage that was broken? Have you ever taken an exciting new job only to have an awful experience? Do you perhaps know what it's like to do the best you can raising children, but then they go and make some terrible decisions? (Actually, the high priest Eli, one of the main characters in our text, had this very same experience. His sons Hophni and Phinehas were some very *bad* priests, corrupt and self-serving.)

Well, that was the kind of disappointing situation Hannah found herself in at the beginning of the first book of Samuel. The books of Samuel are actually named after Hannah's son, Samuel: the great prophet and leader of Israel who would anoint King Saul and later King David. That is Hannah's claim to fame, being mother of Samuel. But in our text today, none of that is known yet. Hannah has no son yet, and that is how she is introduced. Hannah is childless. Being

childless is a most unfortunate situation among ancient Israelites. It carries a great stigma in that culture and many other cultures. Perhaps some of her neighbors felt sorry for Hannah, but their assumption would be that she was not favored by God, that perhaps she had done something wrong – or her parents had done something wrong, or her husband had done something wrong – for her to fail to bear children. Hannah’s husband Elkanah had two wives, and we are told that his other wife Peninah had multiple children. Unfortunately she chose to hold this over Hannah’s head. Chapter 1 verse 6 says “her rival used to provoke her grievously to irritate her.” [I love that phrase – have you ever had someone “provoke you grievously to irritate you?” Reminds me of a couple guys I knew in junior high school.] This may have been because Peninah was jealous that Elkanah loved Hannah more. [If this sounds at all familiar it’s probably because there are echoes here of the story of Jacob and his two wives Leah and Rachel.]

Elkanah tried to comfort Hannah; he *very helpfully* said: “Why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?” On the one hand that sounds like a typical case of *a man missing the point* when trying to make a woman feel better. But on the other hand, it was actually gracious of him because he was telling her, in a somewhat counter-cultural way, that his love for her did not depend on her having children, and he wanted her to be happy. But still, her heart yearned for a child. Specifically, she yearned for a son.

So there is Hannah’s background story: bitterly disappointed that she had not been blessed with children, knowing that having a son would set her life to right. One year, Hannah’s family was in Shiloh worshiping the LORD. To fully worship in ancient Israel, one had to actually travel to where the LORD’s Tabernacle was. This story probably took place during Shavuot, or the Feast of Weeks, which marked the end of the grain harvest and commemorated God’s giving of the Law to Israel. In Greek it was later known as Pentecost. Anyway, after the family feasted together, Hannah got up and went off by herself to pray to the Lord outside the Tabernacle. The core of her prayer was a promise to give her future son up as a dedicated servant of the LORD God all the days of his life, if God would indeed grant her request.

[915/1100... Let’s stand now and read this text together:]

1 Samuel 1:12-18 (ESV)

As she continued praying before the LORD, Eli observed her mouth. Hannah was speaking in her heart; only her lips moved, and her voice was not heard. Therefore Eli took her to be a drunken woman. And Eli said to her, “How long will you go on being drunk? Put your wine away from you.” But Hannah answered, “No, my lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit. I have drunk neither

wine nor strong drink, but I have been pouring out my soul before the LORD. Do not regard your servant as a worthless woman, for all along I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation.” Then Eli answered, “Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition that you have made to him.” And she said, “Let your servant find favor in your eyes.” Then the woman went her way and ate, and her face was no longer sad.

This is the Word of God for the People of God. [Thanks be to God.] May the Lord add his blessing to the reading and hearing of his word.

It’s sometimes with trepidation that I look for examples in my own life of whatever I’m preaching about. My wife has probably heard one too many sob stories about my love life before I found her... but one more won’t hurt. Though I eventually found the woman of my dreams, 😊 it was rough going for the first 30 years or so. And at 19, I wanted it to happen tomorrow. When I think of disappointment it brings to mind a certain evening when I was walking back from Couch cafeteria at OU toward my dorm room. I had been working on memorizing some Bible verses. One of those was **John 15:7** – “If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you.” [John 15:7 – it was the ninth verse in the Navigators Topical Memory System.] Well for some reason on that particular day I chose to relate that verse to a particular girl I had a crush on – whom I had known a while and occasionally got up the nerve to talk to. On that day outside the cafeteria, with God’s word on my mind, I reasoned that I had been abiding in Christ, and Christ’s words were abiding me, and since what I wished for was for this particular girl to be my girlfriend, then it must eventually happen. Makes perfect sense, right? I didn’t know it at the time but this was actually an experiment in “name it and claim it” – that’s the idea that if you simply trust God fully and name something good that you want, you will receive that gift, end of story, simple as that. I tried to take God at His word and just trust that it was going to happen. But let me tell you, that particular experiment failed miserably. “Name it and claim it” didn’t work for me at all. At least, it didn’t work in the specific way I was naming and claiming. God’s plan for me was a complicated thing. God had a great deal of growth and blessing in store for me in the college years, but love and romance was not to be part of it.

I tell that story because our text today is about a woman who asks God for her deepest desire. She has at least one loving relationship, but other relationships are hard for her, and her deep desire is for a child. So far in life she has been disappointed.

When I read our text I can picture Hannah in my mind's eye, pouring out her heart to the Lord, not really caring who is watching or what she looks like. I went searching for a good image and had trouble finding one. This scene has been illustrated many times, mostly for Sunday school literature, but it's hard to get the postures and faces and expressions just right for both characters. Finally I found this one from the Jehovah's Witnesses, and it's close enough. I hope they don't mind the fair use on this. I think they did a pretty good job with Hannah's suffering plea and Eli looking askance at her.

Hannah's prayer is an image of deep disappointment. She is at her wit's end. Her lips were moving but no sound came out. Eli's **initial** reaction is not very compassionate. He was **sure** she was drunk. No question in his mind. "How long will you go on being drunk? No more wine for you." But then she answers him well and we can presume he was somewhat chagrined. "No, my lord, I am a woman troubled in spirit... I have been speaking out of my great anxiety and vexation." So Eli changes his tune and offers her the best words of grace he can come up with: "Go in peace, and the God of Israel grant your petition..."

Then the final verse of our reading leaves me with a burning question. ~ Why did **that** make Hannah feel better? How come "her face was no longer sad," even though at that point she couldn't really know that her request was going to be granted? I wish I could know what made Hannah feel better, because I feel like it would tell me whether I can really preach with fairness about disappointment from this text. The title of this sermon is, after all, "When Life Disappoints You," not "When you Finally Get What You've Always Wanted." The rest of the story is that God hears Hannah's request, grants her a son, she gives him up to the LORD's service, and he plays a vital role in identifying God's Anointed One and building God's Kingdom – truly a child to be proud of.

But the happy ending is not what we're focusing on here. The happy ending can't be guaranteed. Our focus today is the disappointment, and Hannah's response to it.

I'd really like to know what Hannah would have done if she **hadn't** gotten her happy ending. However, that's not something we can know. If we want to get a lesson from Hannah's story we need to look for what we can actually see in the text. A little later I will name for you a few other Bible characters who can teach us further about dealing with disappointment, but I want to start with Hannah. She is rightly remembered as a hero of our faith and there is great wisdom in her actions. These are the things I see in Hannah that I believe we would do well to imitate When Life Disappoints Us:

- First, Seek God. Know where to go.

Hannah knew where to find God. She took the opportunity given her. The appointed times of worship had actually been times of stress and heartache for her, since the text tells us it was those specific times her rival chose to provoke her. Hannah very wisely chose not just run into her own room and pout. Instead she went to the place of worship, as close as she was allowed to get to God's presence. She may have been disappointed in God, but she did not run away from God. She ran to Him. And I would urge you to do the same. If you are in a place of disappointment today, seek God. Seek him wherever you can find him. Go to those places where people generally expect to draw close to God, even if they have been hard places for you in the past. Seek God in church. Seek God in reading the Bible. Seek God in the beauty of Creation. Seek God in prayer, both on your own and with your family. Just seek God.

- Second, Be honest with God. Lay it all out.

Hannah didn't care about how she looked. She didn't mind looking silly in front of the old guy on the bench. She wasn't interested in keeping perfect decorum. She was OK with people knowing her feelings and seeing them written on her face.

If it is good to become more expressive and show our honest emotions in front of people, it is even better to be honest with God. God can take it. You aren't going to offend Him by pretty much anything you could say. [I mean, there might be a *few* exceptions to that, but think about it. What really offends God?] God may be disappointed in the things you *do,* in the bad choices you make which hurt people, hurt yourself, ignore His law, ignore His love. But he's not going to be mad at you for what you *say* to Him in prayer! Are you disappointed in the way your life has gone? Do you think God should have given you a better deal? Then talk about it with the Almighty! He's heard it all before. He can take it! You will find several such conversations in Scripture. Sometimes the Lord will point out to you where you need to grow and change your attitude. Other times the Lord might say, you know what, you're right, it is time, and provide for you a new blessing right then. And sometimes the Lord will give you your answer years later. But just know that the God loves you as He loves all his children, and He *always* wants to hear your honest prayer. Always.

In laying her burdens before the Lord, somehow Hannah was able to walk away lighter. Her anguish was replaced with comfort and assurance. As a great old hymn says – [sing it with me if you know it] – “What a Friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and griefs to bear. What a privilege to carry / everything to God in prayer.”

- Third, Know that God is going to do something. He loves you. Trust him.

The more I think through Hannah's situation, the more I imagine that Hannah most likely did leave Eli's presence believing her request would be granted. That's because she actually had more reason to believe than not. That might sound strange to us who live in a skeptical age, but Hannah knew Israel's God, and Israel's God had a certain reputation for granting just the kind of request she had made. After all, God did the same thing with Sarah, wife of Abraham and mother of Isaac, and with Rachel, wife of Jacob and mother of Joseph and Benjamin. In a way Hannah was just claiming her place in the family of Israel, claiming her place as a beloved child of God.

Hannah might have even been familiar with **Psalm 113**, which was one of our other readings in the Sermon Journal this week – unless it was written after her time, in which case her story would be part of its background. This song of worship praises God for two main reasons, and these are common themes in the Psalms: God is high and glorious, on the one hand, but then God lifts up the poor and lowly to be with Him. God is “high above all nations”, seated on his heavenly throne; and yet God reaches down and “lifts the needy from the ash heap.” The final verse of Psalm 113 speaks directly to Hannah: “He gives the barren woman a home, making her the joyous mother of children. Praise the LORD!” (**Psalm 113:9**)

So that reputation of Israel's God, combined with the blessing of the high priest, meant that Hannah probably fully expected her desire to be granted, and also fully expected to raise her child for the LORD's service.

At this point you might be thinking: well that's all well and good for Hannah, but what about for me? Why hasn't God answered *my* prayer? I certainly don't want to make this sound like an easy formula for success. I believe there is wisdom we can imitate in Hannah's actions, but long Christian experience tells us that heartfelt prayers are not always answered in the way we are looking for.

And that's why we need to take a look at some other people of faith to help form balanced Biblical teaching on this subject. So just very briefly I want to highlight a few others for you:

First, there is **Job**. If you want to get a really good and clear understanding of God's will and why bad things happen to good people... then don't read the book of Job :0 Cause it's confusing! Job is the man who had it all, and then lost it all, not because of anything he did wrong but because God had a bet with Satan. Job and his friends don't know about that deal, and spend most of the time arguing about whether there is sin in his life or whether God is being unfair. Actually I highly recommend you read Job yourself and wrestle with it. The reason I bring him up in this discussion is that Job's presence in the Bible shows us that sometimes,

there are no easy answers. Sometimes when life disappoints us there are purposes that God knows which we can never know, and which we wouldn't understand even if we could know. Job is also one of the first books of the Bible which really deals with the idea of eternity, as Job wishes to see God face to face after his death. The careful reader of Job must wrestle with the fact that some things can never actually be made right in this life, and we need eternity to balance the scales of justice, so to speak.

Then, there are **Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego**. They are the 3 young Hebrew men from **Daniel chapter 3** who refused to bow down to worship a false god. The great King Nebuchadnezzar demands that they worship a golden image, which was either the god Marduk or himself, and threatens to throw them into a fiery furnace if they refuse. They answer him boldly: "If this be so, our God whom we worship is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and He will deliver us out of your hand, O King. But [even] if [He does] not, [let] it be known to you, O King, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up." (Daniel 3:17-18)

What I love about their answer is how they show complete, 100% faith in Who God IS, even while showing not-quite-so-complete faith in what God is actually going to do for them. Maybe they've got, say, 90% faith on that when they are giving this bold answer? They know God can save them, they believe that God will save them, but even if He doesn't, they know they've got to be faithful. They won't be made to worship something that is not God.

Taking a look at those three young men helps to round out our picture of dealing with disappointment, because they acknowledge the distinct possibility that God may choose not to grant our requests. God may choose not to override the free will of those who hurt us. Sometimes God even allows us to perish unjustly in this life. In the Christian world this became known as martyrdom, or witness. When martyrs suffer unjust death for their faithfulness to Christ, they become witnesses to the fact that Jesus is Lord, and nobody else is worthy of worship; and this witness ultimately serves to bring many souls to a life-saving relationship with Jesus Christ.

And then, finally, there is **Jesus** himself. Jesus prays in the Garden of Gethsemane, knowing He is approaching his Cross, knowing He must take on death to defeat it for our sake and to secure eternal life for us who trust Him – but in His humanity desiring to avoid the suffering. The Lord prays: "Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not My will, but Yours, be done." (Luke 9:42)

Our Lord knew what it was like to pray, and pray hard, but ultimately to submit His will to the Father. While I wish that all our requests could be like that of Hannah, and be granted,

sometimes we have to be like Jesus, and take up our cross, and trust the Father to work justice in the end.

And so, my friends, if you are at a place this morning where life has disappointed you and it seems like God hasn't answered, I just want to give you one more word, which sums up the wisdom we've gleaned from the Scriptures today. That word is Abide. For some that is an unfamiliar word, but it's a good old word. To "abide" basically means "to stay," but with the idea you will someday move on. To abide means to stay in one place for a good long while, being present with other people there, listening, talking, spending time, being together. Hannah abided, or abode, with God. Job abode with God the best he could in his situation. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego abode with God faithfully. Jesus abode with the Father, pouring out His heart. The best thing you can do today is to abide in God's presence and ask for the Lord to abide with you. Then He may indeed come to save you, or He may come to comfort you, or He may come to strengthen you. But one way or another I believe He will certainly come to be with you.

There's another old hymn which says it this way – [again, feel free to sing with me] – "Abide with me, fast falls the eventide. The darkness deepens, Lord, with me abide. When other helpers fail, and comforts flee, help of the helpless, oh, abide with me."

Jesus did indeed promise that God would answer our prayers if we will abide in Him and His word abides in us – if we will make Jesus our home and allow Jesus' divine life to live in the world through us. But as in the funny story I told about myself, "name it and claim it" doesn't always work, because our understandings of what we are naming and claiming tend to be rather simplistic and selfish. Also our ideas of what it means to "abide" may start off rather shallow. God wants more of us than a few words when we are in trouble and a few hours a week of religious duties when we're not too busy to fit it in. Truly abiding with God is something deep and steady and constant, something we learn with long practice following the Master's footsteps. When we abide in Christ, little by little we become more like Jesus and we come to find our deepest satisfaction in the presence of God.

The Lord invites you this morning to abide with Him, to trust in Jesus Christ, as we prepare to approach the Lord's table in faith. The God of Israel has always been known for lifting up the lowly. He has always been known for making the barren woman a joyous mother of children. He still has that reputation. And He is still our only hope. In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.