



**“Lent to the Lord”**  
**Scripture – 1 Samuel 1:4-28**  
**Sermon Preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson**  
**Sunday, November 15, 2015**

“Therefore I have lent him to the Lord.” ... I wonder how Hannah would have said those words ... “As long as he lives, he is given to the Lord.” There is so much emotion wrapped up in this statement. If this narrative were a play, how would the actress portray all that Hannah must be feeling? Would she give her son a final hug, and willingly hand him over to the priest? Or would she cling to Samuel for so long that Elkanah finally had to step in to tear her away?

I think it’s easier for us to imagine the latter – a scene where Hannah weeps bitterly as she leaves her child before the Lord. It’s easier for us to imagine because we know what Hannah has been through. We know this moment comes after years and years of heartache and hope, as she longed and waited for this child. We’ve heard the taunts of her rival, and her husband’s words that do not comfort. We’ve watched her pick at her food, knowing that bread and meat will not fill the emptiness she feels.

And we’ve grieved with her. We’ve grieved with her as she presents herself before the Lord, because we recall the times in our own lives that we’ve uttered her prayer: “Lord, remember me.” It’s the prayer of every person who waits for God to transform despair into joy. It’s the prayer many of us have said as we wait at hospital bedsides, or for good news that never comes; as we unexpectedly pack up offices or pack up dreams. Lord, remember us. It’s the prayer we’ve raised as we hear reports of one more shooting, of one more act of terror. It’s the prayer many of us have said in the last two days ... Lord, remember us. We know this prayer. So we grieve with Hannah as she pours out her soul before the Lord.

Yes, we know what Hannah has been through ... And, yet, here she is again – back at the temple, this time to present *her son* before the Lord. It’s easy for us to imagine Hannah pouring out her soul in distress as she lends Samuel to the Lord. But she doesn’t do that; Hannah doesn’t weep bitterly like she did before. Instead, she leaves Samuel at the temple, and then pours out her soul *in praise*.

I remember visiting a friend not long after she’d had her first child. Pretty soon her baby fell asleep in my arms, so I stayed for a while ... my arm growing numb under the weight of his head. As his mother and I talked, her gaze kept drifting to that baby boy ... She couldn’t take her eyes off him ...

I asked what had surprised her the most about the first weeks of motherhood, and she said: “How much I love him. You know, I knew I would love my kid, but I didn’t realize it was possible to love him so much.”

Now this is a child who had come after months and months of heartache and hope. After struggling to get pregnant, my friend's first pregnancy had ended in a devastating miscarriage. There were many times along that way that she poured out her soul to God, to pastors, to friends. When I picture Hannah, I think of her. When I recall how my friend gazed at her baby, I imagine Hannah peering over the basket in which Samuel slept. When I remember my friend talking about the love she had for her son, I think, "How could *any* parent give a child over to God?"

But, the thing is, my friend *did* give her child over to God. A few months later, she and her husband brought that baby to be baptized. They stood at the font and promised to live the Christian faith, and to teach that faith to their son. And as the water washed over that baby's head, he was marked as God's own – forever.

Friends, *this* is what we celebrate when we present children for baptism, or when we present *ourselves* for baptism: We are all marked as God's own, forever. But this sacrament demands something of us ... We are marked as God's own *and* set apart for the priesthood of Christ. We are claimed as children of God *and* called to do Christ's work in this world. Maybe we should add Hannah's words to our liturgies of baptism: "Therefore I have lent this child to the Lord."

It seems like a lot to give, because we are talking about whatever is most precious to us ... our children ... our time, our talent, our treasure ... our *very lives*.

And yet, when we place our gifts in the hands of God, when we lend ourselves to the Lord ... we experience the joy of participating in God's work. We discover that God takes our time, our talent, our treasure, and uses us to transform this world.

I think this is why Hannah sings when she leaves Samuel at the temple. Even with the magnitude of her gift, she pours out her soul in song, saying: "My heart exults in the Lord!" You've heard these words once this morning; we used them in our Call to Worship. They are words of profound joy, and trust in God's power to transform the world:

"My heart exults in the Lord," she sings.  
     "My strength is exalted in my God! ...  
 The bows of the mighty are broken,  
     but the feeble gird on strength ...  
 God raises the poor from the dust,  
     and lifts the needy from the ash heap."

The world Hannah imagines is one where the hungry are satisfied and the barren give birth, where might does not prevail, and life overcomes death ... a world where God's justice reigns.

I think Hannah sings these words when she leaves Samuel at the temple because she knows the God whom he will serve. She sings because she trusts that God will use Samuel to turn the world around.

You see, when Samuel was born, the community of Israel was waiting. Just like us, they were waiting for God to transform chaos into order, and despair into joy. They were waiting for God to burst into their lives and turn things around.

Scripture tells us that "the word of the Lord was rare in those days." But then the Lord speaks to Samuel. You might remember the story ... While the boy is ministering in the temple where his mother left him, God calls to him in the middle of the night: "Samuel, Samuel!" And he says, "Here I am."

And God is with Samuel as he grows into a prophet. And God speaks through Samuel so that the people hear the Word of the Lord. And God uses Samuel to transform the world ... You see, Samuel is the one who anoints the first kings of Israel, ushering the nation into a new age – an age in which shepherd boys take down giants with slingshots. For a time the world starts to look a little more like that divine dream evoked in Hannah’s song, as God breaks the bows of the mighty, and lets the feeble gird on strength. As God brings about new possibilities of grace, and all people say: “Our hearts exult in the Lord!”

Hannah didn’t know how God would use Samuel when she lent him to the Lord. But she had experienced God’s gift of grace, and she trusted that grace would grow through her gift ...

And friends, we don’t know how God will use us. When we lend our children to the Lord, when we lend *ourselves* to the Lord, we can only imagine all the new possibilities of grace.

When my parents presented me for baptism at five months old, they didn’t know how God would work in my life. But, as they stood at the font, they promised to live the Christian faith, and to teach that faith to me. And as that water washed over my head, they knew I was marked as God’s own – forever.

The journey that started with my Baptism, eventually led me to India for a year of volunteer service with the Presbyterian Church. Let me tell you, this was a path my parents had never imagined. When they stood by that font in St. Louis, Missouri, they did not envision their baby girl moving halfway around the world. But, at twenty-two years old, I sensed God was calling me to India.

When my mom dropped me off at orientation – just before I left the country – she handed me a letter. In it she wrote this:

*Dearest Sudie – This is the moment when the reality of your baptism comes most into focus. I remember teaching a class to parents preparing to have their child baptized, trying to emphasize the radical nature of what they were about to do – that by baptizing that child, they recognized God’s prior claim on their child’s life, that from then on – the child’s first loyalty is to God, over family if necessary. So I feel a little like Hannah, returning to the temple to leave Samuel in God’s service, as she had promised ...*

Like Hannah, my parents could only imagine new possibilities of grace, and trust that God would be at work in my life ... But their act of faithfulness set me on a path to a place where I could experience that grace for myself.

While I was in India, I saw God at work in children who spoke with prophetic voices, and grandparents who shared the good news. I saw God at work in hot tea – freely offered – and homemade curry that satisfied my hunger ... I saw God at work in the “Untouchable Community,” raising the poor from the dust and the needy from the ash heap ... and in the church where the people poured out their souls in song, saying: “Our hearts exult in the Lord!” In India, I saw glimpses of the divine dream evoked in Hannah’s song, as – little by little – God turned the world around.

That experience transformed my life, and set me on a path to ministry – a path that has led me to you. And, God is at work here too ... In lives formed and transformed around this font and this table ... in ministries that satisfy the hungry, and help raise the poor from the dust. God is at work right here in hands and hearts lent in service, and in voices that sing: “Our hearts exult in the Lord!” And our joy bears witness to the hope we know in God, even in the midst of a chaotic world.

Friends, we don't know how God will use us when we lend ourselves to the Lord. We do not know what God will ask of us – what precious gift will be ours to give. But, as we strive to live the faith of our Baptism, we find that God *is* at work in us, bringing about new possibilities of grace beyond those we could have ever imagined. And as we continue on this journey together, I trust we will glimpse the divine dream evoked in Hannah's song, because – little by little – God is turning this world around.

### **Prayers of the People ~ Gregory Knox Jones**

Weaver of the world and Spinner of the stars, we give thanks for the precious gift of life, for the beauty of the earth, for opportunities to love, and for the guidance of Scripture showing us how to live.

Yet, God, we confess that we are not always as devoted to your ways as we intend. Our faith becomes fragile when we encounter opposition. Our joy fades when challenges mount. Our will turns timid in the face of controversy. Our hope collapses in times of crisis.

Mighty God, the scenes from Paris remind us that our world can become treacherous in an instant and that life carries no guarantees. You create us as free human beings and urge us to take paths that lead to light, but some reject your ways, and opt instead for darkness.

These deadly deeds warn us once again that combining extreme ideology with the demonization of others creates a combustible mixture that can explode with devastating consequences. We pray that all who glorify killing will be confronted by the inherent evil of their thoughts and that those who have no conscience will be stopped before they destroy others. Remind all of your children that each of us is created in your image and that terrorizing any of your creatures is violence against You.

God, we know that murders are not occurring only on distant shores, but right here in our own city the death rate is soaring. And while we may not be able to do anything about global terrorism, surely we have a responsibility to do what we can in our own community – to help low income children succeed in school, to teach usable skills, to provide incentives for older youth to stay in school, and to provide jobs.

God, help us to know in our souls that whenever we plead to you for peace, you plead with us to create a world where swords can be beaten into plowshares.

Everlasting God, we pray for the families and friends of all those struck by senseless slaughter. May they discover in you healing, comfort and hope. You have revealed yourself as a God of resurrection who brings light out of darkness and life out of death, fill us with your Spirit so that we can stand confidently against the dark powers that foment chaos, encourage violence and produce despair. Grant us the willpower to spend our days spreading the qualities of your kingdom all over the earth.

God, despite the many troubles of our world and our city, this is a special day for our church family. We are grateful for Sudie Niesen Thompson, for her keen intellect, her compassionate heart, for her devotion to you, for her gifts for ministry, and for the message she has delivered this morning. We pray for your blessing on her.

Now, hear us as we join our voices together in the prayer Jesus taught us to pray saying, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil, for thine is the kingdom, and the power and the glory forever.” Amen.