

“Empathy”

1 Samuel 1:4-20

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My sermon hasn't gone through the careful editing it usually does. I brainstormed and researched and sketched out a message earlier this week, but it's not the one that needs to be preached today. There are days and moments that feel too raw, when we are still reeling from the news of mass violence and senseless tragedy, when a well composed reflection, no matter how poignant, just doesn't feel authentic to the moment.

Like many of you, I am stunned by the events that unfolded in Paris this weekend. I am stunned that I am once again standing in front of you, struggling to find the right words when really there are no words that are adequate enough. Paris is a beloved city for many of us. It is a place that very often feels closer and more connected than even some cities across our own country. It is a place we dream of vacationing, it is a place of romantic honeymoons. It is a place where I have walked down the narrow streets, prayed in gothic Cathedrals, sat in cafes, literally rubbing elbows and knees with local Parisians.

For some of us, it is a place where we have sent our children – to study abroad or to backpack through. Some of us today have family and friends living in Paris, or near Paris, because as we know too well from 9/11 and Newtown, a tragedy that happens nearby has a ripple effect into the surrounding communities. Paris is a city that is more familiar than foreign. A city that many of us care deeply about. And so, this morning we are still stunned and still processing all that we have seen and heard. We are still struggling to make sense, and we are still mourning alongside the Parisians, aware of the feelings of fear and despair that have crept up within us.

And as those events unfolded, our wounds became deeper as we learned too of deadly blasts in

Beirut, Lebanon, of dozens of more innocent lives lost. For two years my best friend Ruth was a missionary in Beirut. So even though I have not been there myself, even though it does not feel as familiar or close as Paris, I remember Ruth's stories. Stories of bombs lighting up the night sky, of the fear as she was evacuated from her home, of the uncertainty for what would happen to the friends she had to leave behind. I carry Beirut with me, I carry Paris with me. We carry the places that shape our lives with us, and when they are torn apart by pain, we weep for their pain. We weep for their children. We weep because this is too familiar, too painful to watch unfold yet again.

On mornings like this, I am grateful for Scripture. I am grateful for the accounting of so many people who have traveled the road of heartache, suffering, and war. I am grateful that they give us a lens through which to better understand our own despair and to understand the things which we have born witness to. On mornings like this, I am grateful for Hannah.

Hannah was a woman who intimately knew what it was to suffer. Hannah's one desire was to give birth to a child, a baby boy, but she was unable to. The story goes that her womb was closed. Her one hope was to bring life into this world, and to her, the absence of this new life felt like a death. For this pain that she carried with her, she was mocked. She was treated poorly by her husband's other wife, which deserves a whole other sermon. She was dismissed by her husband who condescendingly told her, "Why are you so sad? You have me! What else do you need?" Hannah was alone with her heartache, with no one to comfort her, no one to empathize with her pain.

And so, as so many of us do when we have nowhere else to turn, Hannah turns to God. She prays to God from her wounds – naming her struggle, bargaining with God, saying anything that might result in new life. When questioned by the priest as to what she was doing, she explains, "I have been pouring out my soul before God." Pouring out her soul. It is one of the most intimate descriptions of pray in the entire Bible, and it could only come from one who was desperate to be heard, desperate to heal her pain, desperate to know that new life was possible. God met Hannah in her despair, and God created new life within her.

Now, too often, when Hannah's story is shared, the interpretation goes something like this, “See, if you just pray hard enough like Hannah did, your prayers will will be answered. And if you don't get what you asked for, then you must not believe enough or want it enough.” Nope, nope, nope. That's not what this story is about.

Hannah's story is a reminder that God meets us in our despair. That God hears our cries and our pain, and it is through that pain that God responds. When we pour out our soul to God, God scoops up our fears and our heartaches and our grief, and cup them in her hands. Hannah is a reminder that when we lose hope, when we think that all we are surrounded by is death, God will create new life to remind us that death does not get the last word, to remind us that God is the restorer of hope and the maker of life. Through God, a womb that is closed will be opened. Through God, a woman who is alone in her misery will find solace. Through God, cities that mourn will find comfort. Through God, a world that knows only violence will know peace.

I want to leave you this morning with another story. It's not from Scripture, it's my own story. Almost ten years ago, a friend and I boarded a train in Frankfurt, Germany. It was a night train, and I slept fitfully on a too-short, extra hard bed. When the train finally reached its destination, it was 5:00am and we were in the outskirts of Paris. We couldn't check into our hostel for several more hours so with nothing to do and nowhere to go, we took the subway to the center of the city. When we emerged from the underground, the sky was still pitch black.

As we wandered in the dark, not entirely sure where we were or where we were going, the first strains of sunlight started to appear in the night sky. As the sun slowly rose over the horizon, we found ourselves atop the steps of the Trocadero, staring across the Seine River, right at the Eiffel Tower. As the sun rose, the Tower was illuminated, reflecting its light across Paris. Around us, the city slept. There were no signs of life. No traffic. No pedestrians. No noise of any kind. The city could have been dead. But it wasn't.

There was light. A light that promised to return day after day after day, no matter how dark the

night seemed, no matter how long the night seemed to last. The sun rose. The light returned. Once again, the city came back to life, ready to say goodbye to the darkness and begin a new day, one full of light and the promise of new life.