

How Did Hannah Know?



BY NANCY COPELAND-PAYTON

discernment *D*iscernment is a “churchy” word, not heard in the grocery store, on the nightly news or in the workplace. Discernment *does* have an everyday dictionary definition, though. It can mean *perception, insight* or *recognition*. Discernment is *perceptive listening* for God’s voice amid other competing voices. Discernment is seeking *insight* into Christ’s claim on us as more important than all other claims on us. And discernment is *recognizing* the Spirit’s breath amid life’s windstorms.

Remember the story of Hannah and Samuel? This amazing narrative teaches us about discernment. Let’s imagine the first chapter of *1 Samuel*.

Elkanah’s family winds their way slowly up to Shiloh Temple. Every year, Elkanah and Hannah journey to Shiloh to worship and present their offerings. This year, Hannah enters the temple alone. Tears fall from her eyes as prayer pours from her heart. You can feel the anguish in her prayerful petition for a child, until she receives assurance through a blessing from the priest, Eli.

When Hannah conceives and bears Samuel, she’s convinced that the baby is God’s gift. When Samuel is older, Hannah takes him up to Shiloh. In an astounding act, she gives Samuel back to God, leaving the boy with Eli.

How does Hannah know to do this? How does she discern God’s movement in her life in such a



Hannah Offering Her Son Samuel to Eli’s Temple. From the Book of Hours of the Connetable Anne de Montmorency, 1549, Musée Condé, Chantilly, France.

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profound way that, astonishingly, she gives Samuel back?

It seems that Hannah lives a radical hospitality towards God. She exposes her heart’s deepest desire to God in prayer. That tearful night at Shiloh is but one act in a lifetime of welcoming the divine into her life. After years of aching barrenness, she opens herself to sacred possibility. Long ago, she said “Yes” to God. This is hospitality of a most radical nature.

A woman of prayer and worship, Hannah is practiced in listening for God’s voice. Through worship and narrative, she knows the timbre and sound of God’s voice and recognizes

divine activity. In the process of bringing annual offerings to Shiloh, she is formed in the posture of response to God’s presence. Hannah is experienced in thankfully giving back. Thus, she is able to discern God’s voice and actions in her life.

And there is one more critical piece. When Hannah prays at Shiloh, she fully expects God to hear her prayers. She believes God is present, whether or not she feels that presence, and regardless of whether or not she ever has children. This expectation is the profound posture of discernment.

In this breathtaking narrative, perhaps we can identify with Hannah’s desperate plea for a child. Maybe we can identify with her gratitude to God for Samuel. But her response to God—giving young Samuel back—truly

is astonishing.

Her action is a sobering reminder that discernment is not an academic pursuit. It is not an abstract endeavor. Discerning God’s invitation involves exposing our deepest yearnings. Discerning Christ’s claim upon us is the ultimate risk of letting go. Discerning the Spirit’s movement bares us to sacred possibility.

Discernment is radical hospitality.

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