

## Season after Pentecost - Hannah's Prayer

October 16, 2016

Haven Lutheran Church Hagerstown MD

Readings: Luke: 47-55; 1 Samuel 1: 9-11, 19-20; 2: 1-10

*Lord, May the words I speak be those You want spoken,  
may the words we hear be those You want heard. Amen*

*"What About My Prayer, Lord?"*

Johnny, a very bright 5 year old, told his daddy he'd like to have a baby brother and, along with his request, offered to do whatever he could to help. His dad, a very bright 35 year old, paused for a moment and then replied, "I'll tell you what, Johnny, if you pray every day for two months for a baby brother, I guarantee that God will give you one!"

Johnny responded eagerly to his dad's challenge and went to his bedroom early that night to start praying for a baby brother. He prayed every night for a whole month, but after that time, he began to get skeptical. He checked around and found out that what he thought was going to happen, had never occurred in the history of the neighborhood. You just don't pray for two months and then, whammo- a new baby brother. So, Johnny quit praying.

After another month, Johnny's mother went to the hospital. When she came back home, Johnny's parents called him into the bedroom. He cautiously walked into the room, not expecting to find anything, and there was a bundle lying right next to his mother. His dad pulled back the blanket and there was -- not one baby brother, but two! His mother had twins!

Johnny's dad looked down at him and said, "Now aren't you glad you prayed?"

Johnny hesitated a little and then looked up at his dad and said, "Yeah, but aren't you glad I quit when I did?"

Kidding aside, I don't think Johnny's father offered him a very helpful or true understanding about prayer. Take your needs and wants to God —yes. "Guarantee" his request would be answered? Well, it worked in this case since Johnny hadn't caught on to why his mother was getting a bit bigger in her mid-section for the last seven months. But we who have turned to God in prayer throughout our lives know that prayers are not always answered in the fashion or timetable we requested. Jesus taught us to boldly knock on heaven's doors in prayer and believe they are heard by a responsive, loving God. Jesus himself had been raised with the songs and prayers of the Hebrew psalms, which model prayer that is very human and honest — brutally honest, at times, raising fists, accusations, despair, tears and taunts to God in circumstances that seemed unjust or unloving. There is likely no one in this room who hasn't prayed to God for something and thought their prayer went unanswered. Corrie Ten Boom, holocaust survivor, would certainly understand that

experience. Still Ten Boon writes, “Is prayer your steering wheel or your spare tire?” Is prayer our last resort or the coin we put in the divine vending machine so you can pull the handle or push the button by your desired selection? Or is prayer a turning of our selves in trust toward God to guide and direct our lives? Don’t get me wrong. There is nothing bad or unfaithful about asking God for help or making specific requests or crying out for help to the Lord. What I ask us to consider is whether we pray in trust and openness to God’s mysterious ways and transforming power.

Hannah had long prayed to have children. I gather that from the number of children Elkanah’s other wife had already born and the delights she took in making Hannah feel less of a woman, wife or person because of her barrenness. We are not told why Hannah wanted children. We do know that in the time she lived, barrenness would have been seen as a kind of divine judgement upon her or her ancestors. It would have been just cause for divorce by her husband, though Elkanah had no desire to separate from his beloved Hannah. It would mean feeling outside the circle of women in her town as they talked about their children. But we also know that at this moment in time, a son would serve as a safety net for her in old age. Without a son of her own, when Elkanah died, she could be destitute. Women could not inherit property — only her son could. What were Hannah’s reasons for so wanting a child? It could have been for all these reasons and more. What I do think we see in today’s story, is that Hannah’s prayer changed or perhaps, prayer had changed her.

Hannah goes alone to the temple to pray again for a son. But this time it’s not to satisfy her maternal desires to have and raise a child:

“O LORD of hosts, if only you will look on the misery of your servant, and remember me, and not forget your servant, but will give to your servant a male child, then I will set him before you as a nazirite until the day of his death. He shall drink neither wine nor intoxicants, and no razor shall touch his head.”

This time Hannah asks that she be able to have a child who will serve the Lord in the temple. She expresses a longing for “a child not to safeguard her own future but to offer him back to God.”<sup>1</sup> In this remarkable act of sacrifice Hannah’s longing has shifted from “increasing herself to bringing something out of herself to minister to the world” — to serve God’s will and purpose.<sup>2</sup> I don’t read Hannah as one trying to manipulate God, as many of us do — “Just let me pass this test, just let me get this next promotion, just let me get out of this mess and I promise to study, work hard, be better, not ask another thing ever.” I don’t think that’s Hannah’s prayer. It is praying itself ---- bringing the fullness of her feelings, desires, frustrations and thoughts honestly and fervently to God — that has changed Hannah and what she wants. Praying has move Hannah toward God. She may not understand why her womb is closed but she can’t understand why she has been blessed

with a husband who loves her, child or no child. There is blessing where she has only been seeing curse and hopelessness. Out of that deepening relationship with God, there seems to be a growing trust and love for this Lord who has shown love to her even in her barrenness. Perhaps it is that her eyes and heart have been opened to God's ways that are not ours but, none the less, trustworthy. So Hannah's prayer changes. Yes, she still asks for a son but now her heart's desire is for a son to honor God, a son who will serve God in the temple, in whatever ways God calls him to serve.

Did you notice that when Hannah leaves the temple after her new prayer, it says, "her countenance was sad no longer." In surrendering her wishes and seeking God's will instead, she had found a peace. She still doesn't know if she will or will not have a son, but she is no longer a prisoner of despair, or the judgement of others or thinking God doesn't love her. She has thrown her trust and life onto the Lord and waits to see what God will do — trusting it will be life-giving and she will know God's foible, mercy and bounty somehow, though it's not clear how.

We may wonder how Hannah could ever have given up her son, Samuel to the temple and its priest Eli. All those years she longed for this child and she entrusted him to God's service. I'm sure most parents can't even fathom doing such a thing. Yet despite the loss and sacrifice, Hannah's heart is full of praise and song for God's goodness. We'll hear echoes of Hannah's prayer in one of David's victory songs, in psalm 113 and, as we did today, in Mary's song as she ponders God's choice to bring forth a Son through a simple, ordinary woman like herself. Hannah sings of God who has the power and desire to reverse situations, to uplift the humble, hungry, and powerless, and to stand steadfastly by those that others discard, discount or devalue. Never in her praises does she mention having her prayer answered or seeking to renegotiate with God for another prayer request. It is simply a song of trust in God in all circumstances — in the same manner that even the darkest and angriest of lament psalms end with words of trust in God's ability to make some thing good out the messiness of human follies and foibles.

Pray often and honestly. Pray knowing God hears and answers. Pray knowing God cares deeply. Pray knowing God responds. Pray knowing prayer isn't just a spare tire but a steering wheel that leads us to God. Pray knowing prayers are not bargains, tests of God, or rubbing a genie bottle. Prayers draw us to God. Prayer that earnestly seeks God, not just our desires, will change us, so, like Hannah, we can find peace in all circumstances. The peace of God that will fortify us to keep hoping and seeking and believing that God is faithfully at work no matter how it may seem. Amen. Linda M Alessandri 10/15/16

ENDNOTES

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1. Anna Shirey, "Hannah's Story: When Good Enough Is Just Not Enough" Nov. 9, 2015 as posted on <http://thelabyrinthway.net>

2. Anna Shirey, "Hannah's Story: When Good Enough Is Just Not Enough" Nov. 9, 2015 as posted on <http://thelabyrinthway.net>