

**Rev. Kristie Webb Finley**  
**First Presbyterian Church of Lake Forest**  
**July 11, 2021**  
**Sermon on “The Prayer of Hannah”**

To appreciate the significance of Hannah’s Prayer we need to back up to the first chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Samuel. Hannah travels to Shiloh with her husband Elkanah and his second wife, the one who torments Hannah for being barren, to worship the Lord. After their meal, Hannah goes and presents herself to the Lord and prays. As she prays she makes this vow, ‘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.’ Now Eli, the priest, heard her and thought she was drunk. Hannah spoke up to him and said she was not drunk, that she was a woman deeply troubled and was pouring out her soul before the Lord.

Hannah goes back to her husband, conceives, and has a son, Samuel. After she had weaned him, she took him to Shiloh, being true to her pledge, and said to Eli – the priest, “Oh, my lord! As you live, my lord, I am the woman who was standing here in your presence, praying to the LORD. <sup>27</sup>For this child I prayed; and the LORD has granted me the petition that I made to him. <sup>28</sup>Therefore I have lent him to the LORD; as long as he lives, he is given to the LORD.’

She left him there for the LORD...

Hear now Hannah’s prayer:

Hannah prayed and said,  
 ‘My heart exults in the LORD;  
   my strength is exalted in my God.  
 My mouth derides my enemies,  
   because I rejoice in my victory.

‘There is no Holy One like the LORD,  
   no one besides you;  
   there is no Rock like our God.  
 Talk no more so very proudly,  
   let not arrogance come from your mouth;  
 for the LORD is a God of knowledge,  
   and by him actions are weighed.

The bows of the mighty are broken,  
   but the feeble gird on strength.  
 Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,  
   but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.

The barren has borne seven,  
 but she who has many children is forlorn.  
 The LORD kills and brings to life;  
 he brings down to Sheol and raises up.  
 The LORD makes poor and makes rich;  
 he brings low, he also exalts.  
 He raises up the poor from the dust;  
 he lifts the needy from the ash heap,  
 to make them sit with princes  
 and inherit a seat of honor.  
 For the pillars of the earth are the LORD's,  
 and on them he has set the world.

'He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,  
 but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;  
 for not by might does one prevail.  
 The LORD! His adversaries shall be shattered;  
 the Most High will thunder in heaven.  
 The LORD will judge the ends of the earth;  
 he will give strength to his king,  
 and exalt the power of his anointed.'

This is the word of the Lord.

### **Thanks be to God.**

It is important to hear of Hannah's first cry to God at Shiloh. She is a lowly woman, a barren woman at that. She is ridiculed in her own home, and she continued to pray to God even after years of seemingly unanswered prayers. She did not give up on God. In her prayer, if she is blessed to have a son, she will give him over to serve the Lord.

She fulfills that vow, which must have been excruciating, for she had held him in her arms and nursed him, held him close to her heart. She would have prayed over him as she held him, and kissed his head. This sacrifice is enormous – all her life she had prayed for a child, and then she gives him over to God. Even with this sacrifice, she sings praises and exalts God.

In this prayer, she brings her joy and thanksgiving. She brings the hope and promise that God offers to all, especially those who are considered lowly and worthless in the eyes of man. These are beloved and valued by God. The people like her, people like us.

We hear the echo of Mary's Magnificat when we read Hannah's Prayer. Both are prayers of thanksgiving for miraculous births that extol the glory of God, and God's steadfast love, God's promise and presence. God bringing life in unexpected ways, to unexpected people who both answer in prayer.

As we begin this Summer Series of Prayers of the Bible, our hope is to energize our prayer life, both personally and corporately. We might look at the prayer and sacrifice of Hannah as alien to us, an odd one to begin with. Her sacrifice is unimaginable. But, sacrifice comes in a vast variety of offerings. We are emerging from 17 months of sacrifice. We each have sacrificed. Just as with Hannah, we have needed endurance, perseverance, patience, and hope. What things did we pray to God for? What vows did we make? What sacrifices are we willing to make? Hope and new beginnings are leading us forward too.

Prayers, big or small, for ourselves or others, for those we love or those we do not know, these will lead us forward. Hannah prayed to God about what was on her heart. About her pain, what she endured. God knew Hannah deeper through her prayers. God knows us deeper through ours. I believe that is how we can truly know what is on another's heart. When we pray aloud with others, we hear what is on their hearts, we hear why they are crying to God, and they hear our cries, we get to know each other.

We build relationships where we had no connection before, and we continue to connect when we pray. I pray the Lord's Prayer most often with those with dementia. When no other words are remembered these remain. We can still pray together.

We are a people called to pray. We have prayers before meetings, prayers throughout our worship services, and prayers have been created by members of the congregation that were used to connect us.

Prayer, which should connect us can often separates us. Our fear to pray aloud can paralyze us. There are those we claim are good prayers, and we look to them instead of ourselves. Prayer can be gut wrenching, and painful, but also playful and fun. All the emotions God gifted us with are found in prayer. We are called to use them.

A wise woman once gave me great advice about praying. She said, just pray as if you were in a conversation with God. That is what God wants. A conversation with us. When you talk with a beloved friend, do you feel the need for fancy words? Or do you pour your heart out not thinking about the words. Do you listen to their prayers with a critical ear? I think not.

There have been studies on the science of prayer. It is believed to lower anxiety, to be calming, much like meditating. Those of us on the contemplative spectrum are aware of the mental benefits of prayer.

Until the early 2000s I was plagued with anxiety. Fortunately or unfortunately, it was never apparent to others. Anxiety would descend on me most often in the middle of the night, and I would try to pray, but my mind would always return to ruminate on whatever issue I was worried about.

Until, until I discovered the songs of Taize. They are short repetitive songs, prayers actually, that are to be song over and over. As I sang these prayers my tension was released, and I was able to sleep, so that in the morning I was able to pray. Sleep deprivation makes it difficult to be present and address any problem, difficult to connect to God and each other. These songs have become a part of my prayer life and I use them throughout the day.

The benefit did not happen overnight, but it became a way that I could pray to God, and get myself out of in the way. For you musicians in the house, or at home, you are well aware of the prayers that are our hymns. Here we lift up our prayers together in song, unabashedly. I feel this is why not being able to sing during the pandemic was so devastating to even us non-singers. One of our prayer patterns was missing. How many of us sang that first Sunday with a lump in our throat and a tear in our eye?

If you are afraid you don't have the right words to pray out loud (know that there are truly no wrong words,) start collecting prayers or poetry that speak the words that ring true for you. There are so many beautiful prayers, meaningful words written, start there. The prayers we are using in worship this summer are only a handful. Read the Psalms – they are our prayer book. Really, reading the scriptures is a prayer practice. God knows we need help, and supplies it. You might then venture forth to confidently write your own.

If we think of prayer as leading us forward, now is a great time to practice. As you walk, you can put in your ear buds and pray out loud, people will think you are on the phone, and won't pay attention to your words. Say a prayer over God's creation as you experience its wonder. Teach a child a prayer. There are a multitude of prayers found in children's books – for all of us.

Along with our sermon series on the Prayers of the Bible, we are offering up some tools to inspire you. Jim Cochrane, Sarah Seccombe, and I were inspired by Whitney Simpson's Holy Listening: with breath, body, and spirit. We weekly post creative ways to engage your body, mind, and soul – even your nose – in spiritual practices that can enrich your prayer life.

Looking at these three beloved children we welcome into the church today, I can't but be awestruck by the prayers that have been said for them, and the prayers that will be said. We can always take direction from children. The little ones at Wednesday night Suppers clamor to say the blessing. Standing on a chair, with a microphone in hand, praying to a room full of adults. May we have such courage and confidence.

So, now let us pray...

God, hold us close. Let Hannah be our model as we live into hope for the future. Hear our fearful whispering. Calm our hearts and strengthen us to be sent out again. Open to the unexpected, praying all the way. Amen.