

Prayers of the OT—Hannah's Prayer of Praise  
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I Samuel 1 & 2, Psalm 113  
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Doctors told Marsha Mark and her husband they needed to accept the fact that they would never have biological children. Amid the discouragement, Marsha took encouragement from the words of a friend:

“Somehow Marsha, God is going to use your struggle with infertility for God's glory.” Given that ray of hope, Marsha began to pray for a glimpse of that glory.

In an interview, she said: “I asked everyone I knew to pray. One five-year-old gave God suggestions:

‘ Dear God: please send Marsha a baby. Maybe someone could give her one, or she could just find one on the street. Amen.’”

Her scientist husband stopped praying, because they came to the realization that Marsha was pre-menopausal, and he'd never seen prayer change facts.

Six months passed, while Marsha and friends prayed. Marsha underwent some medical tests, including one more pregnancy test. The medical personnel looked at her with pity and said: “No, you haven't had any cycles for months. Asking for another pregnancy test indicates you are *not* accepting things as they are.”

Marsha finally persuaded them. The pregnancy test came back positive!

Over the next two weeks, she had four more pregnancy tests, and three sonograms. This time, Marsha said, it seemed the *doctors* were having trouble accepting the facts! Eight months later, Amanda Joy was born, otherwise known as “Miracle Mandy”! (Marsha Marks, “Special Delivery”, Christian Reader (Sept/Oct 2000) p.15-17)

During Advent, we were reminded of the stories of women of faith, women who became mothers under miraculous circumstances: Sarah in the OT who gave birth to Laughter/Isaac, Elizabeth, who gave birth to John the Baptist, and of course Mary, who while not barren like the previous two, was a virgin who gave birth to Jesus. Today we are considering the prayers of Hannah; before she could pray her prayer of Praise, she prayed a prayer of petition. She asked God for a son.

In Chapter 1 of I Samuel we learn that Hannah is one of Elkanah's wives, the other being Penninah. They lived in a time and culture when plural marriage was common, however it was not without its problems. Even their names are telling as Penninah means "fertile or prolific" and Hannah means "charming or attractive". Penninah has numerous children; Hannah has none.

This is a devout family. Elkanah goes annually—with his family-- to the tabernacle at Shiloh to worship and celebrate religious feast. On these occasions, Penninah makes the most of this opportunity to harass Hannah. To put a fine point on it: Penninah is a bully. She rubs it in royally and seems pleased to publicly humiliate Hannah. Elkanah sincerely loves Hannah, but appears to be clueless about this dynamic between his two wives.

So Hannah escapes into the temple to find a quiet spot to pray. Tearfully, she pours out her heart and soul to God, only a small portion of it is recorded for us:

<sup>11</sup> And she made a vow, saying, "LORD Almighty, if you will only look on your servant's misery and remember me, and not forget your servant but give her a son, then I will give him to the LORD for all the days of his life, and no razor will ever be used on his head."

Meanwhile, as she prays Eli the chief priest observes her and believes that Hannah is drunk! On the day of Pentecost, the apostles are filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and began to speak in multiple languages. Observers marvel that at 9 a.m. they are intoxicated! Trust me, having in another time and place, had worshippers who actually were inebriated come to church—their behavior, and the behavior of Hannah and the apostles—bore no similarity!

Hannah explains to Eli how her heart is broken and her request of the Lord. Eli assures her that God will answer her petition.

Hannah makes a bargain with God: Give me a son and I will give him back to you as your servant.

How many of us had attempted bargains with God:

“If you get me out of this mess, God, I promise I’ll never do “x” again...”

“Lord if only you do “x”, I promise you, I’ll always and ever after do “x” for you.”

Generally, bargaining with God is not recommended. Why? Because for one thing, it feels a bit like manipulation. But the truth is, we are often hard pressed to keep our part of the bargain! Furthermore, I wonder if bargaining with God is a substitute for truly trusting God.

Listen to this translation of Jesus’ own words ( in Matthew 7:7-11 from The Message):

7-11 “Don’t bargain with God. Be direct. Ask for what you need. This isn’t a cat-and-mouse, hide-and-seek game we’re in. If your child asks for bread, do you trick him with sawdust? If he asks for fish, do you scare him with a live snake on his plate? As bad as you are, you wouldn’t think of such a thing. You’re at least decent to your own children. So don’t you think the God who conceived you in love will be even better?

In this instance, God fulfills his end of the bargain, and amazingly, Hannah keeps hers too. She returns home, and yes, she gives conceives and gives birth to Samuel, whose name is a play on the Hebrew word for “ask”.

When Samuel is weaned and no longer technically dependent on his mother, Hannah takes him to Shiloh and releases him to the Lord’s service and the care of Eli, the chief priest.

It is at that point that Hannah sings or prays her Prayer of Praise, recorded in I Samuel 2:1-10.

This prayer may well have existed as a part of the liturgy of Israel. Given that this is centuries before the print press, this culture has a very strong oral tradition. The word of God is committed to memory. Frequent repetition both in worship, and in the home, means

that someone as devoted as Hannah may well have committed this prayer to memory, just as you and I have, the Lord's prayer. It might well have been sung as a song!

In this moment of exuberant joy, Hannah adopts this prayer of Israel as her own.

In v. 1 Yahweh is acknowledged as the source of empowerment and strength over enemies and foes; One who gives victory.

V. 2-8 the prayer gives voice to the preeminence of Yahweh over all other gods—utilizing a “formula of incomparability”—a frequently repeated claim (here and elsewhere) that Yahweh is unique in power and compassion and cannot be compared to any other god because Yahweh is vastly superior. This is an expression of complete confidence in God's reliability and holiness.

God is praiseworthy, and the prayer tells us why: We give praise where praise is due, because of God's actions and attributes.

V. 3b-8 constitute an inventory of the wonders that evoke and deserve our whole-hearted praise:

First: God is recognized as the all-knowing, all-judging Creator. Nothing happens that is beyond the knowledge and awareness of Yahweh.

Secondly: In v. 4-5 specific examples are given (and repeated in v.7-8a), noting that God is aware of the imbalances between the rich and the poor, the mighty and the feeble, the full and the hungry, the fruitful and the barren.

v.6 makes the most sweeping claim: Yahweh has unlimited power over life and death, including resurrection!

The poor and needy are those who are disadvantaged: powerless, helpless, without resources. These are regularly diminished, humiliated, and degraded. However, this prayer anticipates that these poor/needy will not remain in such a state, because the God who sees and knows will take action on their behalf!

Just how will this happen and what will it look like?

Since all of creation comes under the influence of Yahweh, therefore the Creator intends for the inequities of society to be reversed: God will act on behalf of the poor and needy. Human power structures will be inverted: those who were at the bottom will gain new status in Yahweh's new social order.

In v. 9 the subject changes—Yahweh will act on behalf of the “faithful servants” vs. the “wicked”—in other words--those who keep the covenant will benefit vs. those who do not.

Finally v. 10 Yahweh is praised again as One who will prevail and the faithful will benefit. Then the language shifts to the king, the anointed, a reference to the human King David, who will be empowered to do the work of Yahweh.

This prayer, now on the lips of Hannah, functions to announce a new future...for Hannah personally, but also for Israel...and eventually, centuries later, for us, through Christ.

Hannah's prayer of praise functions prophetically, in two aspects:

First, Hannah was seeing beyond the circumstance of Samuel's birth to something of its significance: it would be Samuel who would anoint David--‘the man after God's own heart’--to be king.

Secondly, Hannah's prayer of praise goes one step further, in expectation of the ultimate exaltation of one of David's line, in the Anointed One which is the meaning of the word “Messiah”. Some scholars see in this verse a foreshadowing of the coming of Christ. Christ's earthly life and ministry expressed concern for these groups of people but this radical reversal is yet to be realized. We can anticipate this new order when Christ returns again, this time, to establish his Kingdom!

Psalms 72 and Psalm 113 (which Cheri read for us) are both psalms which echo these same themes, as is Mary's Song of Praise, the Magnificat, recorded in Luke 1. It too is a song of praise over a son whose birth will make an impact in the world, one whose birth will change the order of things.

Hannah's is quite a prayer of praise!

When were you last “wow”-ed? When did you last offer a prayer of praise?

There are countless reasons to give God praise: We praise God for keeping His promises, being faithful to the covenant, for God's steadfast love, for being a source of strength and empowerment. For the beauty of creation and the wonders of the world and the life that we enjoy as God's children.

Hannah's prayer of praise is offered in response to an answer to a specific prayer request. God heard her prayer. God “remembered” her. God answered her prayer.

When did you last experience an “answer” to a prayer? I'd really enjoy hearing some of your experiences, and I am thankful to Amy for sharing hers with us this morning.

The Psalmist says “Your praise shall continually be on my lips”. May it be so with us.

When we praise God, we give credit where credit is due, and we point others to the God who is incomparable, completely unlike any other. The One who alone is able to create, redeem, forgive, save, and give us life abundant and eternal. And that One alone is worthy of praise!

So let us Sing...with Israel, with Hannah, with Mary. Let us Praise the Lord!

1 Samuel 2 NIV

Then Hannah prayed and said:

“My heart rejoices in the LORD;  
in the LORD my horn<sup>[a]</sup> is lifted high.

My mouth boasts over my enemies,  
for I delight in your deliverance.

<sup>2</sup> “There is no one holy like the LORD;  
there is no one besides you;  
there is no Rock like our God.

<sup>3</sup> “Do not keep talking so proudly  
or let your mouth speak such arrogance,

for the LORD is a God who knows,  
and by him deeds are weighed.

<sup>4</sup> “The bows of the warriors are broken,  
but those who stumbled are armed with strength.

<sup>5</sup> Those who were full hire themselves out for food,  
but those who were hungry are hungry no more.

She who was barren has borne seven children,  
but she who has had many sons pines away.

<sup>6</sup> “The LORD brings death and makes alive;  
he brings down to the grave and raises up.

<sup>7</sup> The LORD sends poverty and wealth;  
he humbles and he exalts.

<sup>8</sup> He raises the poor from the dust  
and lifts the needy from the ash heap;

he seats them with princes  
and has them inherit a throne of honor.

“For the foundations of the earth are the LORD’s;  
on them he has set the world.

<sup>9</sup> He will guard the feet of his faithful servants,  
but the wicked will be silenced in the place of darkness.

“It is not by strength that one prevails;

<sup>10</sup> those who oppose the LORD will be broken.

The Most High will thunder from heaven;  
the LORD will judge the ends of the earth.

“He will give strength to his king  
and exalt the horn of his anointed.”