

## For This... We Have Prayed

Sermon 144 | Greystone Baptist Church | June 19, 2022

1 Samuel 1:19-28

The summer before my 9th-grade year, my family went on a vacation. Using my dad's frequent flyer miles, Hilton honors points, and Hertz rewards, we boarded a plane and took off for the West Coast. Our plan was to land in Seattle, explore the city and then drive north into Canada, visiting the cities of Victoria and Vancouver. As was often the case, my older sister and I got to choose some of the attractions we would see. On our list were things like the *Sleepless in Seattle* house, the *Real World* warehouse, and of course, as many visits to Starbucks as we could fit into the week. But there was another place on our list, one that I was especially excited about – a very large shopping mall in Vancouver.

The day of the shopping trip, we all piled into the rental car, dad behind the wheel, mom in the front seat, baby sister in the middle of the back row, and my older sister and I seated on either side of the car seat, eager to go spend mom and dad's money on our back to school wardrobes. With great excitement, we drove down the road singing along with radio songs and dreaming about all the beautiful things that awaited us at the mall. I don't know how long we were actually in the car that day but it felt like hours. Every now and then one of us would ask, "How much longer?" "Are we getting close?" Dad wouldn't respond so mom would chime in, "Just be patient. We'll get there when we get there."

But the drive kept on getting longer.

Eventually, my mother also gave way to impatience asking, "Bill, are you sure you know where you're going?"

Dad kept on driving.

This went on for a while and all of us began to doubt that my dad really knew where this mall was, or how to get there. We'd pass a gas station and mom would suggest, "Why don't you pull in there and ask for directions? Just make sure we're on track."

Dad kept on driving.

As you can imagine, the anxiety in the car was growing by the second as all of us moved from doubt to absolute confidence that dad had no idea where he was going.

We, of course, voiced our concerns.

Dad kept on driving, quietly hearing our persistent petitions.

This is one of the classic "dad" stories that we love to tell when my family gathers. We all laugh as we remember that long drive, waiting to arrive at the mall. This time, as the story is told the overwhelming emotion, the piece that connects to the scripture is not the final outcome, it's not the end of the story, but the middle. The waiting, the pleading, the

anxiety of not knowing where we were going, and the doubt that our driver was listening to our petitions or that he really knew how to get us to our destination – these are the pieces that connect with the reading from 1 Samuel.

The larger story that is unfolding here is one about the people of Israel. The period of the judges is coming to an end and the people find themselves in a lot of trouble. They are a community in “moral chaos,” Walter Brueggemann says, “engaged in brutality and betrayed by undisciplined religion.”<sup>1</sup> As the story begins, Israel awaits a new kind of ruler, a king, to be exact. This story is not about just any king, this story, the one unfolding in the book of Samuel is a story that is ultimately about King David. But it doesn’t begin with David, it begins with the people in need. The people are floundering, they are waiting, worrying, longing, and pleading for God’s help.

So the story of David will have to wait.

Today, we start at the beginning, with a woman named Hannah and her husband, Elkanah. Elkanah was from the tribe of Levi, the priestly tribe. He had two wives, Peninnah and Hannah. In the ancient world, these women had one main purpose: to bear children, heirs to the family name, and stewards of the family legacy. Now, Peninnah had no issue here, she and Elkanah had several children; but Hannah, well, she experienced unwelcomed infertility.

Despite their challenges, the story tells us that Elkanah loved Hannah the most. Even though the odds were stacked against her, she was his favorite wife. Despite her husband’s unwavering love and affection, Hannah longed for a child. So she committed her days to prayer, begging and pleading for God to provide a child.

I can only imagine the words that poured out as she prayed to God. The raw vulnerability, the helplessness hinging on hopelessness, the pain, and the suffering all given voice in those intimate moments between Hannah and God. The scripture says that “As she continued praying before the Lord, Eli (the priest) observed her mouth and... only her lips moved, her voice was not heard.” (1 Samuel 1:12-13)

Her lips moved, but her voice was not heard.

Have you ever felt that way?

And have you ever prayed that way?

Meeting God with all of your raw emotions, with all of your desperate longings, with all of your exhaustion and grief from trying to make things work out... and still, nothing but silence lingers on the other side of that holy conversation?

Her lips moved, but her voice was not heard.

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Bruggeman. *Interpretation: 1 Samuel*. 10.

Though her prayers were not heard by Eli that day, they joined the timeless chorus of others who have stared hopelessness in the face. Hannah's prayers must have sounded like the words from the Psalms which articulate her very experience:

*Now I humbled my soul with fasting, and they reviled me.  
And I wore sackcloth as my clothing, and I became to them a byword.*

...

*Yet I make my prayer to you, the Wisdom of the Ages.*

*At a favorable time,*

*God, in the wealth of your faithful love, answer me...*

*Let not the flood waters overwhelm me,*

*let not the Deep swallow me up;*

*let not the Pit close its mouth over me.*

*Answer me, Gracious God, for your faithful love is good...<sup>2</sup>*

And even though her prayers were not heard by Eli that day, they must have been heard by the Holy Spirit because soon – Hannah didn't know it yet – but soon her prayers would be answered. Soon, the deep longing of her heart would be satisfied. Soon, Hannah would have a son. Hope and deliverance resided just ahead, just around the corner.

*Are we there yet, dad? Are you sure you know where you're going?*

As powerful as Hannah's story is on a personal, individual level, Walter Brueggemann reminds us that her story is symbolic of a much bigger story, one that involves the entire people of Israel. As we listen for God to speak to us today, I am beginning to wonder if this ancient story of waiting prayers voiced in silence might also be our story here and now?

This is, after all, a story that begins in barrenness wherein there is no hint of a future. Just as Hannah's story begins with a painful history of unanswered prayer, a painful history that has led her – and perhaps us – right up to the point of despair.

But if we keep reading, if we stay with Hannah a little longer we can see that though things didn't look good at first, and though even the priest couldn't hear the words of Hannah's heart, God was near, God was at work, and God was always listening. We are living in anxious times. Times of worry and times where hope seems to be running low. Like the Israelites who lingered between Judges and Kings, the familiarity of the past and the not-yet-realized promise of the future, we are living through a season of grief, pain, challenge, and maybe even transformation. We know that we cannot go back to the place from which we have come, we can see the challenges that the past has created: divisions, prejudice, hatred, and violence; and we do not yet see the way forward, the way through it, we do not yet see the hope that waits just up ahead.

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<sup>2</sup> Selections from Psalm 69:10-16, Wilda C. Gafney's translation in *A Women's Lectionary for the Whole Church*. (Church Publishing Inc. New York, NY: 2021) 228.

So we pray, asking God for deliverance. And if we are honest, I bet some of us question whether God is still there, whether God even hears our cries for help.

*When are we going to get there? Are you sure you know the way?*

In times like these, when I'm not sure if God is listening because I can't quite see what God is doing, I remember sitting in the back seat of that rental car driving down the road in Vancouver. Yes, it took forever. Yes, we all questioned if dad really knew where he was going. Yes, we begged him to pull over and ask for directions – multiple times. But even in the midst of all of our anxiety, he kept his cool. Sometimes he would even break his silence with a single word, "OK," as he stayed the course.

And you know what happened?

We got to that mall without a single wrong turn.

I don't know why we worried so much, we knew that dad had been there before! This was part of his territory with work. He had driven this road and he was confident that he could do it again with us in tow. But still, we doubted because the journey endured longer than we imagined it would.

Like Hannah, like Israel, and like so many throughout human history we groan and cry out for God's help, and when it doesn't arrive on our timeline we begin to question whether God even hears our prayers.

But if there is just one thing that we can remember,  
if there is one shred of hope to be found  
if there is any encouragement in the Word of God enfolded in the story of God's people  
may it be found in the words that poured forth from Hannah's lips,  
words spoken not in pain but in praise as her prayers were indeed answered:

*My lord! As you live, my lord,  
I am the woman, the one who was standing beside you in this place  
to pray to the GOD WHO HEARS.  
For this boy I have prayed; and the FAITHFUL GOD gave me my asking...*

You see at the end of this smaller story, the story of Hannah that is really just the beginning of the bigger story God was writing with and through the people of Israel, Hannah learns that God has indeed been listening, and she addresses God with a new name: GOD WHO HEARS.

So in much the same way, when we are feeling discouraged, when hope is running low and despair comes creeping in, maybe we can remember Hannah's words and maybe we can allow them to be a refrain in the story that God is writing with and through us:

For this... we have prayed

and the Faithful God,  
the God who Hears,  
has given us our asking.

It may not be on our timeline.  
It may not be the road we would have chosen.  
And we may even have our doubts along the way.

But of this one thing, we can be certain: Even when our hope is gone. Even when we cannot see how things will get better. Even when our lips move and there is no voice left to come out. Our prayers fall on the ears of the God who hears.  
And that God is forever faithful.